Tilt Lessons From a 5-Year-Old



When on tilt, send yourself to the corner

By Aaron B. Rochlen

here are a million psychological aspects to poker. But from my vantage point, tilt quickly rises to the top of the list.

How do we typically feel when on tilt? Of course, there are individual differ-

ences. You likely have your own unique tilt dance or tantrum. But for many of us, it could be experienced as a strange emotional cocktail of irritation, confusion, anxiety, and one big shot of desperation.

The consequences? Poor decisionmaking, a dwindling chip-stack, and an embarrassing walk to the rail. Learning how to avoid going on tilt and taking advantage of the tilted player are two of the core psychological angles of the game.

We tilt for different reasons. Typically, it is an emotional reaction triggered by a bad beat, bad luck, table talk, or being repeatedly outplayed. Players sending you to Tiltville might be genuinely better, more skilled. Alternatively, they may just have your number for that particular day. Intellectually, we realize "every fish has his day of stealing the bait." But emotionally, it's another story. When fishy or weak players hit their hands or consistently outdraw you, it hurts. Tilt and its negative consequences can result.

Yet there are other, less obvious reasons why we tilt. It may be due to a negative reaction or projection to a certain player or funky table dynamic. That woman in the eight seat who keeps humming Neil Diamond tunes and looks like your Aunt Genie might be putting you over the edge. Or maybe it's an irritating dealer who hasn't showered in days who's taking you off your "A game." Finally, we can tilt for non-card or table-related reasons. A bad day, relationship breakup, or having too many vodka tonics can send you to that angry place with tilt-colored wallpaper.

In essence, tilted life = tilted player.

Now maybe this is because I'm a Dad. But the player who is on full-blown tilt always reminds me of my 5-year-old. And when he's on tilt, all hell breaks loose. There is no reasoning with a tilted kid. And I mean no reasoning.

But there is some good news – for your 5-year-old, your life, and your poker game. There is something that works: time, space, and distance.

Without question, the best strategy for a tilt-like child tantrum is to "walk away" from the situation.

Personally, I'm a fan of "the corner." The bathroom corner seems to be the most effective in my house. But which corner is irrelevant – as long as it's not in front of me. Eventually "corner time" calms the storm. I've done experiments, and I'd say sending him to the corner works 95 percent of the time with my kid. Maybe 80 percent.

And in poker, I'll take 80 percent of

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the time, all day long.

The same holds true as adults, on and off the tables. When on tilt in life, we need time, space, and distance. Think back to the last nasty fight you got into with your boyfriend/girlfriend /spouse. You know the type, where the insults (and perhaps other things) got hurled and feelings were hurt.

It's amazing that those who are closest to us are so skilled at hurting us. They know our vulnerabilities, our weaknesses. Just like a good poker player.

Now, reflect on what eventually enabled you to move past the battle to

some type of reasonable resolution. Was it something that was said in the actual fight? Was the battle resolved in the moment? Likely not. If your fight was like mine, it was time, space, and distance that eventually calmed the storm.

The poker life lesson should be obvious at this point. When on tilt, send yourself to the corner. Walk away. Take a lap. We don't, probably can't, do our best thinking when we are overly aroused or stirred up. You need to recognize that you might be flat-out wrong to think you can calm yourself down while seated at the poker table.

Your odds of missing some big monster hand are extremely low. If you're playing in the WSOP at the Rio, buy a \$13 burrito from the Poker Kitchen or a \$2 banana. Whatever. Considering what you would be losing at the tables, it's a bargain.

Poker and relationships require our best thinking to make smart decisions. You can't do your best thinking while on tilt or in a heated atmosphere. Like the angry child, you need time and space to cool down. As our autonomic system settles, we are more likely to move into a more "thoughtful" (introspective, reflective, etc.) space.

And this is where you want to be in poker (and life).

When you get there – you will know. Then you can get back to the felt and take advantage of other tilted players. Just don't pick on me.

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