

A systematic review of gambling disorder in the context of couple relationships

What this research is about

Gambling disorder (GD) is associated with negative emotional, financial, and social effects. It can lead to emotional distress and interpersonal conflicts in romantic relationships. Being in a relationship can protect against the development of GD or worsen its presentation. GD has also been linked to intimate partner violence (IPV). Previous research suggests that over one-third (36.5%) of people experiencing problem gambling have perpetuated IPV, while over one-third (38.1%) are victims of IPV. Partners of people experiencing GD may be at risk of economic coercion, emotional neglect, social isolation, and mental health issues like depression and anxiety.

Considering the role of intimate partners in the development and maintenance of GD and the harms they experience, it is important to better understand how GD affects couple relationships. Additionally, research into effective treatments for both people who gamble and their partners is needed. This systematic review brings together current knowledge on couple relationships and GD.

What the researchers did

The researchers conducted a systematic review of studies examining GD and couple relationships. Five research databases (PsycInfo, PsycArticles, Scopus, PubMed, and MEDLINE) were searched for relevant studies published between 2014 and May 2024.

To be included in the review, studies must meet the following criteria:

- Empirical studies examining GD and couple relationships.

What you need to know

Gambling disorder (GD) can affect both people who gamble and their partners, as well as couple dynamics. This systematic review aimed to bring together current knowledge on GD and couple relationships, including treatment effectiveness. The review included 30 studies published between 2014 and May 2024.

Overall, treatments that include partners and families are effective in improving couple functioning and relational well-being, as well as reducing gambling behaviour. GD is consistently linked to intimate partner violence, which is often worsened by financial stress, alcohol use, and mental health concerns. People with GD are more likely to be single, separated, or divorced. Marital status can be a protective factor against the development of GD. Treatment that includes families and partners can help address GD, while providing relief to those affected by a partner's gambling.

- Original data obtained using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method designs.
- Use of validated measures, structured interviews, or qualitative methods to assess gambling behaviour and couple functioning.
- Publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

After removing duplicates, a total of 2,361 articles were identified. Of these, 155 articles were selected for a full-text review after title and abstract screening. The final analysis included 30 studies. The researchers used the Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Tools to determine the quality of the

included studies, which ranged from low to moderate. No studies were considered of high quality.

What the researchers found

Treatment assessment and effectiveness

Of the 30 studies, 12 evaluated the effectiveness of GD treatments, with some studies involving both people with GD and their partners in couple-based interventions. Most studies found improvements in couple functioning, emotional regulation, and relational well-being, along with reduced gambling behaviour, after treatment. Partners tended to report worse relationship outcomes than people with GD. Partners also reported feeling more distress, being less satisfied with the relationship, and worse adjustment.

Violence and gambling disorder

Across nine studies that looked at GD and violence, GD was consistently linked to IPV, including physical, psychological, and economic abuse. For people with GD who are victims of IPV, gambling can be a coping strategy to escape reality. For perpetrators with GD, gambling can worsen violence. This is largely due to financial and emotional stresses, with alcohol use and mental health concerns worsening the violence. Gender inequality further aggravates IPV situations, with women being more likely to be victims.

Relational and psychosocial factors

Across four studies that explored relational and psychological factors, GD was associated with poor mental health outcomes and relationship concerns. Gambling-related harms vary by gender and the type of relationship with the person who gambles. Childhood stress, work stress, other addictions, and family conflicts are some of the factors associated with increased gambling involvement.

Marital status and attachment styles

Four studies looked at the association between marital status and gambling. Being married can act as a buffer against worsening GD. People who are single or separated/divorced are more likely to report GD compared to those who are married. One study looked at attachment styles, finding that insecure

romantic attachment was common among couples where a partner had GD.

How you can use this research

This research demonstrates the need for couple- and family-based gambling treatment, with an emphasis on addressing IPV. Most studies included in this review were cross-sectional studies that collected data at only one point in time. This makes it challenging to understand how couple dynamics and gambling behaviour change over time, highlighting the need for more longitudinal studies.

About the researchers

Raffaella Abate, Mimma Tafà, and Patrizia Velotti are affiliated with the Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, and Health Studies at the University of Rome Sapienza in Rome, Italy.

MariaTeresa Tartaglione and **Denise Splaice** are affiliated with the Institute of Systemic Medicine and Psychology of Naples in Naples, Italy. **Guyonne Rogier** is affiliated with the Saint Camillus International University of Health Sciences in Rome, Italy. For more information about this study, please contact Patrizia Velotti at patrizia.velotti@uniroma1.it

Citation

Abate, R., Tartaglione, M., Splaice, D., Tafà, M., Rogier, G., & Velotti, P. (2026). Gambling disorder in the context of couple relationships: A systematic review. *BMC Psychology*, 14(1), 585.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-026-04213-1>

Study Funding

This study received no direct funding.

About Greo Evidence Insights

Greo Evidence Insights is an independent, non-profit organization specializing in research, knowledge mobilization, and evaluation in the health and well-being sectors. Greo transforms research and insights into actionable strategies to prevent and reduce harm related to gambling, gaming, technology use, and substance use. To learn more about funding for Research Snapshots visit [our website](#).

