

How affected others cope with gambling-related harms: Strategies of partners and non-partners

What this research is about

Gambling can harm people who gamble but also people close to them. Affected others (AOs) may include intimate partners, parents, siblings, children, friends, and colleagues. AOs may experience emotional, financial, and social harms because of another person's gambling. However, their experiences may vary depending on the relationship with the person who gambles.

Research has demonstrated that AOs do not typically seek formal support in coping with someone else's gambling behaviour. The low uptake may be due to stigma, limited awareness of support services, affordability, and a preference to manage the concerns on their own. Instead, most AOs use self-help strategies, such as seeking advice and support from friends and family, budgeting, and talking to the person who gambles.

Most research has focused on intimate partners affected by gambling. The strategies employed by intimate partners may be different than those used by other AOs (e.g., children, friends). The current study explored strategies used by AOs to cope with gambling harms and if strategies differ between partner and non-partner AOs.

What the researchers did

This study used in-depth interview data from a broader study into AOs' experiences with gambling harms. The interviews took place between June and December 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most land-based casinos in Australia were

What you need to know

Affected others (AOs) are people negatively affected by another person's gambling, such as intimate partners, parents, siblings, children, and friends. The current study looked at the coping strategies employed by partner and non-partner AOs. A total of 44 AOs living in Australia were interviewed between June and December 2021. Three themes were identified: holding it together; pushing for change; and different needs, limited options. Partner AOs often used more direct strategies, such as financial controls, whereas non-partner AOs tended to use indirect and advisory approaches, such as recommending gambling helplines or suggesting alternative activities.

closed and online gambling increased. Participants were recruited through online advertisements.

A total of 44 Australian adults living in Victoria or New South Wales were interviewed. Most of the participants were female (71%), born in Australia (75%), employed (71%), had a post-secondary education (76%), and earned less than \$75,000 AUD (65%). The average age was 33 years old. Of these participants, 18 were partner AOs and 26 were non-partner AOs. Participants had been aware of the problem gambling for an average of 4.8 years and perceived its severity as high. Nearly all participants (97.7%) reported at least one gambling-related harm on the 68-item Harms Checklist.

The researchers interviewed participants using open-ended questions. The interviews were

transcribed and analyzed. Themes were derived from the interview data, rather than based on a pre-determined framework.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified three themes.

Holding it together

This theme reflects ways for AOs to maintain their own wellbeing. AOs commonly talked to friends and family. For partner AOs, seeking social support and practical advice was perceived as helpful. However, some avoided seeking support due to feelings of shame, stigma, and not wanting to burden others. A few partner AOs sought professional support. Non-partner AOs were more likely to distance themselves from the person who gambles emotionally and financially. Distancing could be difficult for partner AOs. Both partner and non-partner AOs described setting boundaries, prioritizing self-care, and using psychoeducation resources to understand the problem gambling and its impact.

Pushing for change

This theme reflects how relationship closeness can shape the types of strategies used by AOs to influence change. Partner AOs were often more willing and able to use direct strategies, such as leveraging shared finances or the relationship itself to set boundaries. Non-partner AOs tended to use indirect strategies, such as recommending gambling helplines and suggesting alternate activities. Many AOs initiated difficult conversations about the impacts of gambling. Over time, some AOs recognized the need to “push harder”. But direct confrontation was often met with resistance.

Different needs, limited options

This theme captures the kinds of support AOs would like to have and barriers to accessing support. AOs typically sought support to address their relationship with the person who gambles, rather than solely for their personal wellbeing. Partner AOs also expressed the need for support that addresses their role as an AO, including online and in-person peer spaces where they could share their experiences. In contrast, non-partner AOs were primarily focused on support to help the person who gambles to reduce

or stop gambling. Structural, financial, and cultural barriers all impacted the ability to access services.

How you can use this research

This research highlights the need for tailored support services for AOs, recognizing that the types of help needed differ depending on the relationship.

About the researchers

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