

A systematic review of emotion regulation in gambling disorder

What this research is about

Gambling disorder (GD) is the first behavioural addiction to be included in the Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). GD involves persistent gambling despite experiencing significant psychological, social, and financial harms. GD also tends to co-occur with other psychiatric and substance use disorders.

One key mechanism in addictive behaviours is emotion regulation, which describes a person's ability to manage emotional responses. Difficulties with emotion regulation are a known risk factor for substance use and risky gambling. Moreover, people living with GD often report gambling as a way to cope with negative emotions.

The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) and the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) are two frequently used measures to assess emotion regulation. The ERQ measures cognitive reappraisal (i.e., changing how one interprets a situation to alter its emotional impact) and expressive suppression (i.e., hiding or inhibiting outward display of emotions) as two key emotion regulation strategies. The CERQ assesses nine cognitive strategies that people use in response to emotional events, distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive strategies.

At present, there is a lack of synthesis of studies on emotion regulation and GD. The aim of this study was to systematically review studies that applied the ERQ and CERQ to measure emotion regulation. The study aimed to (1) provide a summary of the key findings and study characteristics; (2) identify

What you need to know

Gambling disorder (GD) is a behavioural addiction associated with significant psychological, social, and financial harms. Research has identified various psychological factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of GD, including difficulties with emotion regulation. This study was a systematic review of the existing studies on the relationship between emotion regulation and GD. The review focused on studies using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) or Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) to measure emotion regulation.

A total of nine studies were included in the review. Across studies, people experiencing GD showed lower cognitive reappraisal, greater expressive suppression, and increased use of ineffective strategies such as self-blame. Neuroimaging evidence from one study revealed altered activation patterns of the frontal regions in people experiencing GD during cognitive reappraisal. These findings provide insight into the role of emotion regulation in GD.

emotion regulation patterns that are common in people with GD; and (3) identify key predictors of GD.

What the researchers did

The researchers conducted a systematic review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. They searched for relevant studies in

PubMed and Scopus. The search strategy involved combinations of terms related to emotion regulation and gambling.

To be included in the review, studies had to be original research written in English, involve adults aged 18 years or older with a diagnosis of GD or pathological gambling, and examine the relationship between GD and emotion regulation assessed using the ERQ or CERQ. Only studies published between October 25, 2015 and October 25, 2025 were considered.

What the researchers found

Nine studies were included in the review. Most studies were cross-sectional or case-control studies. One study was a randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluating a cognitive behavioural therapy intervention combined with a serious gaming approach. Four studies were from Spain, three from Italy, and one each from Ecuador and France.

The studies included mostly male participants, and the average ages ranged from 26 to 48 years. Sample sizes varied from 44 to 246 participants. The total number of participants with GD was 607. The studies were found to have good methodological quality, and no study had a high risk of bias.

In studies that used the ERQ, it was found that people experiencing GD displayed lower cognitive reappraisal and higher expressive suppression. In other words, people experiencing GD were less likely to regulate emotions by reinterpreting and were more likely to not show their emotions outwardly.

Studies using the CERQ found that people experiencing GD relied more on maladaptive strategies such as self-blame, catastrophizing, and rumination. Surprisingly, some strategies typically considered to be adaptive, such as putting into perspective, were also linked to more severe problem gambling and stronger gambling-related thinking biases. This suggests that people with GD may use such strategies rigidly or in ways that are not appropriate for the context.

Neuroimaging from one study showed altered activation patterns of the frontal regions in people with GD during cognitive reappraisal. The

intervention reduced expressive suppression and improved gambling-related outcomes.

How you can use this research

This study further highlights the relationship between emotion regulation and GD. The findings could be relevant to researchers, policy makers, and clinicians interested in the link between emotion regulation and GD.

About the researchers

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