

A nine-stage theoretical model of recovery from gambling disorder

What this research is about

Recovery is an ongoing process that involves subjective dimensions such as building a meaningful, productive, and satisfying life. The purpose of this study was to develop a theoretical model of recovery from gambling disorder (GD), including the stages, dimensions, and conditions that shape recovery trajectories. The model was grounded in the lived experiences of people who had recovered or were currently recovering from GD.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited people who self-identified as recovered or currently recovering from GD. Most participants were recruited through the addiction service at Nantes University Hospital in France. Two were recruited through a mutual support group. A total of 20 participants completed an interview between May 2023 and August 2024. Among them, 10 identified as recovered and 10 as currently recovering from GD. Before the interview, participants first completed a self-report questionnaire asking about their sociodemographic characteristics and gambling behaviours. The researchers analyzed the interviews using a constructivist grounded theory approach.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified nine stages of recovery. Overall, recovery is a multidimensional process that extends beyond reducing gambling behaviour to rebuilding identity, relationships, and purposes.

Stage 1: Coming to terms with one's condition –

Participants described the slow and challenging

What you need to know

The purpose of this study was to develop a theoretical model of recovery from gambling disorder (GD). A total of 10 people who self-identified as recovered and 10 people as currently recovering from GD were interviewed. The researchers developed a nine-stage model: (1) coming to terms with problem gambling; (2) viewing gambling disorder as a medical condition; (3) acknowledging accountability; (4) deciding to change; (5) constructing recovery goal; (6) maintaining long-term commitment; (7) reclaiming autonomy and agency; (8) rebuilding life through recovery; and (9) post-traumatic growth.

process in coming to terms with their problem gambling and the need for change. Denial and minimizing the seriousness of their problem gambling delayed this process. For both groups, concerned significant others (CSOs) helped them recognize their gambling behaviour as a problem.

Stage 2: Gambling disorder as a medical condition

– Framing GD as a medical condition helped reduce internal and external stigma. Presenting GD in medical terms also fostered understanding among CSOs. Yet, the labels “addiction” and “addict” could be stigmatizing.

Stage 3: Acknowledging accountability –

Participants described a key step toward recovery was acknowledging responsibility for their GD and its consequences. At the same time, they distinguished responsibility from blame or guilt. Admitting responsibility also meant disclosing their

gambling to loved ones, which provided relief from not having to keep it secret and the fear of discovery.

Stage 4: Deciding to change – The decision to change was often delayed by conflict between a desire to recover and the pull of gambling. Many participants committed to change when they felt there was no other choice. Talking with CSOs often encouraged them to seek professional help.

Stage 5: Constructing recovery goal – Some participants opted for full abstinence immediately, while others decided to try to control their gambling, but later realized that moderation was not possible. For some participants currently recovering from GD, abstinence was the ultimate goal, but seemed to be not yet attainable. They thus set gradual goals to reduce gambling to avoid being discouraged.

Stage 6: Maintaining long-term commitment – Participants emphasized that the effectiveness of therapeutic support depended on readiness to engage with it. Recovery involved negotiating compromises and giving up gambling as a coping strategy. It was a non-linear process and relapse could happen. Participants described adopting different strategies to prevent relapse. Some participants who self-identified as recovered saw recovery as a long-term process that required ongoing involvement in therapy and peer groups.

Stage 7: Reclaiming autonomy and agency – Participants experienced reduced compulsion to gamble and reclaimed autonomy and self-determination. They had better control over triggers and their gambling behaviour.

Stage 8: Rebuilding through recovery – Participants discussed rebuilding a balanced and meaningful life, a sense of self, social connections, and financial stability. Those who self-identified as recovered from GD also mentioned identity renegotiation, where they reconstructed their identity in the context of recovery.

Stage 9: Post-traumatic growth – Participants described a sense of serenity and pride in their progress. Both groups shared that their problem gambling acted as a catalyst for reconfiguring life and identity, strengthening close relationships, and developing a positive approach to life.

How you can use this research

This study can inform service providers, peer supporters, researchers, and CSOs. Understanding the different stages of recovery may help provide more effective and compassionate support.

About the researchers

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