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Older adults with comorbid mental health conditions are more likely to be diagnosed with gambling disorder if using DSM-5 criteria

What this research is about

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is a manual that health professionals use to diagnose mental health conditions in their patients. The fourth edition (DSM-IV) presents diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling. The fifth edition (DSM-5) presents criteria for gambling disorder (GD). Pathological gambling or GD is when a person has repetitive gambling behaviour that leads to negative consequences.

There are two changes that have been made in the DSM-5 compared to DSM-IV. First, GD is reclassified as an addictive disorder, rather than an impulse control disorder. Second, the DSM-5 removes the criterion of committing illegal acts to fund gambling. Thus, a person only has to meet four criteria in the DSM-5 instead of five in the DSM-IV. There are concerns that people with less severe gambling problems may be diagnosed with GD since the minimum number of criteria has been lowered in DSM-5.

People diagnosed with GD often have other mental health disorders, also known as comorbidities. The most common disorders include alcohol and smoking addictions, as well as mood and anxiety disorders. In this study, the researchers investigated if the number of people diagnosed with comorbid conditions would change depending on whether their GD was diagnosed with the DSM-IV or DSM-5. They also explored if the use of the DSM-IV or DSM-5 criteria would have an effect on different age groups.

What the researchers did

The researchers examined data collected by the National Epidemiology Survey for Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC) in 2001 and 2002. Adults who were 18 years of age or older and lived in the United States completed the survey. This study included 135 participants who had gambled at least five times in the past year and met the DSM-IV or DSM-5 criteria for GD.

The severity of participants' gambling problems was assessed using both DSM-IV and DSM-5 criteria. The researchers diagnosed participants with GD if they met five out of the ten DSM-IV criteria. For DSM-5 diagnosis for GD they removed the "illegal acts" criterion and lowered the minimum number of criteria to four. The Alcohol Use Disorder and Associated Disabilities Interview (AUDADIS-IV) was used to assess addictive and mental health disorders. These included substance use, anxiety, and mood disorders.

What you need to know

The researchers investigated if using the DSM-IV or DSM-5 criteria to diagnose gambling disorder (GD) would affect rates of comorbid mental health conditions. They also explored if the use of the DSM-IV or DSM-5 criteria would have an effect on different age groups. The researchers looked at data collected by the National Epidemiological Survey for Alcohol and Related Conditions. They found that using the DMS-5 criteria for GD did not affect the number of younger and middle-aged adults who were also diagnosed with comorbid mental health conditions. Using the DSM-5 criteria for GD increased the number of older adults who were also diagnosed with comorbid conditions. These results suggest that the DSM-5 may be better at detecting comorbid mental health conditions in older adults with gambling problems.

Participants also reported their demographic information (e.g., age, sex, marital status). The researchers grouped the participants into three groups based on their age: 1) young adults who were 18-34 years old; 2) middle-aged adults who were 35-54 years old; and 3) older adults who were 55 years of age or older.

What the researchers found

A similar number of young and middle-aged adults had comorbid mental disorders regardless of whether their GD was diagnosed with the DSM-IV or DSM-5. This finding suggests that the new DMS-5 criteria do not affect the rates of comorbid mental disorders in younger and middle-aged adults with GD.

Older adults were more likely to have a comorbid mood, anxiety, drug, or substance use disorder if they were diagnosed with GD using the DSM-5. This finding suggests that diagnosing older adults using the DSM-5 criteria increases the number of older adults who are also diagnosed with comorbid mental health conditions. The DSM-5 may be better able to identify older adults with comorbid mental health conditions for various reasons. These reasons could be that the DSM-5 criteria are better at capturing older adults who have milder GD problems but low well-being and high stress. The DSM-5 may also be better at identifying older adults who use gambling to escape from their problems.

How you can use this research

Treatment service providers can use this research to create programs that focus on treating GD and comorbid mental health conditions in older adults. Researchers and policy makers can use this research to better understand the effects of the changes in the DSM-5 criteria on different age groups. As such, policy makers could budget for more resources that may be needed to effectively treat older GD patients. More research is needed to understand how comorbid conditions influence the development and persistence of GD symptoms.

About the researchers

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Citation

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