

Online peer support for gambling recovery from the perspectives of people with lived experience and service providers

What this research is about

Online peer support refers to support offered by people who share similar challenges with a particular issue. It takes place through online platforms like discussion forums, social media groups, or video meetings. This study explored how online peer support is used and experienced from the perspectives of people with lived experience of gambling harm and service providers.

What the researchers did

The researchers interviewed 24 adults with lived experience of gambling harm and 24 professionals working in gambling harm support services in the United Kingdom. Participants were recruited through support services, social media, and word-of-mouth. Participants with lived experience were restricted to those who experienced harm from their own gambling behaviour. The interviews took place remotely between January and June 2025.

What the researchers found

Participants with lived experience: These participants most often referred to informal, continuous peer support through messaging groups, forums, and social media communities.

Healing through connection: Participants described a strong sense of community within online peer support spaces, which reduced shame and isolation. They highlighted how shared experiences fostered trust and helped people to feel understood, speak openly, and support one another.

What you need to know

This study explored how online peer support is used and experienced from the perspectives of people with lived experience of gambling harm and service providers in the United Kingdom. The researchers interviewed 24 adults with lived experience and 24 professionals working in gambling harm support services. The findings highlight that online peer support can offer emotional support, reduce shame, create a sense of belonging, and foster trust and hope through shared experience. It provides benefits like accessibility, anonymity, and timely support that can help prevent relapse. But there are risks associated with a lack of moderation of content, group conflicts, and barriers related to access, inclusion, and technology. It is important to ensure that online peer support is well-structured and moderated, and that there are safeguards and training for peer supporters.

When support spaces become unsafe: Online peer support could be unsafe or overwhelming without effective moderation. Participants described encountering upsetting content, unclear boundaries, or harmful interactions such as trolling and scams.

Accessibility and crisis prevention: The easy access and immediate availability of online support make it an important source of help. Participants described online peer support as a first step toward recovery and a form of ongoing support to avoid relapse. The

continuous timely support was seen as a valuable “safety net”.

Service providers: Service providers focused on more formalized, structured online peer support within organizational settings.

Navigating access to support: Service providers discussed the ways that people find and use online peer support, such as through suggestions from other organizations (e.g., medical professionals, National Gambling Helpline) or internet searches. Online platforms increase accessibility by reducing geographic and financial barriers. But not everyone has access to technology, and others may struggle with it. Service providers also stated that people have to be ready to engage in online peer support.

Modes, preferences, and structures of support: Recovery from gambling harm is different for everyone, so online peer support has to be flexible and personalized. Service providers discussed the importance of giving people choice and autonomy in how they engage. They also highlighted the importance of having a clear structure balanced with informal interaction and careful scheduling to help keep the group engaged and effective.

Evolving and individualistic recovery: Recovery from gambling harm changes over time and can involve stepping away and returning as needed. Service providers also mentioned that online peer support can help people shape their identity and create a sense of belonging by connecting with others. This can reduce shame and increase hope.

Role of peer supporters: Peer supporters can face challenges around maintaining clear boundaries, managing emotional relationships, and staying professional. It is important to have safeguarding measures, like co-facilitators, proper moderation, and clear protocols, to manage risk and keep participants as well as peer supporters safe.

Benefits and risks: Overall, benefits of online peer support include emotional support like feeling accepted and reduced shame, social connection, easy access and anonymity, and personal growth in knowledge and confidence. Risks include safety concerns, group conflicts, barriers to participation and scheduling, and challenges in making support

inclusive for everyone. There is a need to tailor online peer support spaces for women, people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and those with neurodivergence or intellectual disabilities.

How you can use this research

This research can inform the design of online peer support that balances flexibility with a clear structure, while ensuring safeguarding and moderation systems are in place.

About the researchers

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