

research snapshot

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How co-occurring mental health disorders are connected with changes in gambling activity

What this research is about

People experience gambling disorder at the same time as many other mental health disorders. For example, 73% of people with gambling disorder also have a lifetime alcohol use disorder. Also, 61% of people with gambling disorder have a personality disorder, 50% have a mood disorder, and 41% have an anxiety disorder.

This 'co-occurrence' of gambling and other disorders is well-documented. However, little is known about how co-occurring disorders affect gambling behaviour over time. Previous studies suggest that mental health disorders may lead to increased gambling. In particular, people with a mental health disorder may gamble to cope with stress and negative moods. Other studies show that gambling may lead to or worsen mental health problems.

In this study, the researchers examined the association between gambling and co-occurring mental health disorders over time. They did so by surveying younger adults (aged 18 to 40) and older adults (aged 60+) with gambling disorder.

What the researchers did

Participants were from the Iowa Longitudinal Follow-up Study of Problem Gambling. In this study, participants rated the severity of their gambling and other mental health disorders every week. All participants met the criteria for pathological gambling based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition. Participants had to be between 18 to 40 years old (younger adults) or over 60 years old (older adults). Participants also had to speak English. They could not have a psychotic, cognitive, or chronic neurological disorder. They could

What you need to know

Gambling disorder frequently co-occurs with other mental health disorders. These include alcohol, personality, mood, and anxiety disorders. In this study, the researcher examined the association between co-occurring disorders and changes in gambling behaviour over time. Participants were 57 younger adults (aged 18–40) and 48 older adults (aged 60+). All participants had gambling disorder. Participants were followed-up every 6 months for an average of 31.4 months. Anxiety, mood, and impulse control disorders were the most problematic in both groups. Having more severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder was linked with increased gambling activity in both groups. For older adults, agoraphobia and social phobia were linked with lowered gambling activity. For younger adults, increases in alcohol use and compulsive computer use were connected with lowered gambling activity. The results suggest that co-occurrence of other mental disorders may increase or decrease gambling behaviour over time. However, these changes may differ for younger and older adults.

also not have a personal history of adoption or be taking dopamine agonist medications. These medications are known to worsen gambling problems.

The baseline interviews were done in person. Follow-ups were over the phone every six months. The study began in March 2011 and stopped in December 2015. The average length of follow-up was 31.4 months.

The researchers collected demographic characteristics such as age and gender. Structured clinical interviews

were used to assess various mental health disorders. These included mood, anxiety, and personality disorders. Addictions, impulse control disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder were also assessed. A modified version of the Longitudinal Interval Follow-up Evaluation was used to assess the weekly course of gambling and other mental health disorders. Participants rated how severe their gambling and other mental health disorders were each week.

What the researchers found

There were 57 younger adults with an average age of 27.5 years. There were 48 older adults with an average age of 66.6 years. There were more women among the older adults, and more men among the younger adults. The majority of the participants were European-Caucasian.

For both older and younger adults, anxiety, mood, and impulse control disorders were the co-occurring disorders that were most severe. Depression and eating disorders were more problematic in older adults than in younger adults. But, gender explained some of the differences. There were more women in the older adult group. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and compulsive computer use were more problematic in younger adults than in older adults. Drug use disorders were observed in younger adults but not in older adults.

For both older and younger adults, having more severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder was associated with increased gambling activity. For older adults, having more severe ADHD, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, and personality disorders was associated with increased gambling activity. Agoraphobia and social phobia were associated with lowered gambling activity.

For younger adults, having more severe anxiety was associated with greater gambling activity. However, increases in alcohol use and compulsive computer use were associated with lowered gambling activity. This finding suggests that alcohol and computer uses may act as substitutes for gambling in younger adults.

How you can use this research

This research could be used by clinicians to assess for and treat co-occurring mental health disorders in people with gambling disorder. Researchers could examine the association between gambling and other mental health disorders in other groups of people (e.g., middle-aged people).

About the researchers

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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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