

research snapshot

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An international study of self-help strategies used by people who are affected by someone else's gambling

What this research is about

Problem gambling can harm the person who gambles and their loved ones. People who are impacted by someone else's gambling are called 'affected others'. Affected others can be partners, children, and others close to the person who gambles. Affected others can experience financial harm, relationship conflict, distress, and poor health because of the gambling.

Affected others may seek professional treatment. These treatments can be family-focused or focused on the person who gambles. Family-focused treatments aim to help family members cope and reduce stress, with or without involving the person who gambles. Treatments that focus on the person who gambles involve affected others to support the person who gambles. They focus on changing the behaviour of the person who gambles.

Most affected others do not seek professional treatment. Instead, they use self-help strategies to reduce harm. These strategies may overlap with techniques from professional treatments. This study aimed to categorize the behaviour change strategies that affected others use to try to reduce harm. It also looked at whether these self-help strategies match professional behaviour change techniques.

What the researchers did

The researchers searched online for websites and forums that discussed behaviour change strategies used by affected others. These behaviour change strategies are actions taken to reduce harm from someone else's gambling. The content of the websites and forums included the lived experiences of affected others. They could also be advice given to affected others by professionals.

What you need to know

'Affected others' are people who are harmed by someone else's gambling. Many affected others seek help online to deal with gambling harms. This study looked at the self-help strategies affected others use. The researchers reviewed websites and forums for information written by affected others, as well as professionals on self-help. Affected others used strategies that focused on changing their own behaviour, such as taking over the family's finances. They also used strategies to support the person who gambles to change their behaviour, such as telling them how their gambling has affected the family. Overall, affected others used self-help strategies that matched with many techniques from professional treatments.

The researchers recorded the statements people made on 329 sources from international websites and forums. First, they categorized the statements based on whether they described a behaviour change that was family-focused or focused on the person who gambles. Then they further categorized them based on the 'phase' of behaviour change they were describing. These four phases were:

- i) Pre-decisional phase – motivational strategies to help decide to change behaviour.
- ii) Post-decisional phase – after deciding to change, the strategies focus on planning the change.
- iii) Actional phase – strategies discussing how to act on the behaviour change.
- iv) Post-actional phase – strategies discussing the effects of the behaviour change and the motivation to continue.

What the researchers found

The researchers found 16 different family-focused behaviour change strategies. Most of these strategies did not involve the person who gambles. The most common strategies focused on the affected other seeking professional help (actional phase). Other strategies included:

- i) Pre-decisional – realizing there is a problem and seeking information.
- ii) Post-decisional – setting boundaries on gambling; planning how to cope when the person who gambles asks for money; communicating with the person who gambles.
- iii) Actional – seeking professional and social support; withdrawing from the person who gambles; taking control over bank accounts and family finances; managing stress.
- iv) Post-actional – learning from past attempts; deciding future actions.

There were 11 different strategies that focused on the person who gambles. These focused on supporting the person who gambles so that they can reduce gambling harm. The most common strategies focused on giving feedback to the person who gambles (pre-decisional phase). Other strategies included:

- i) Pre-decisional – giving the person who gambles information about symptoms of problem gambling.
- ii) Post-decisional – supporting the person who gambles to set goals or make a plan to reduce gambling; supporting the person who gambles stick to the plan.
- iii) Actional – supporting the person who gambles to make a budget, avoid gambling triggers, or seek professional support.
- iv) Post-actional – no strategies were found.

Overall, affected others' experiences and strategies matched up with the behaviour change techniques from professional treatments.

How you can use this research

This research can inform treatment providers and researchers. Future work could create more online, self-help resources for affected others, and investigate which strategies are more useful.

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.

Learn more about GREO by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.

