

knowledge snapshot



The relationship between stress and gambling

What this article is about

Gambling is a popular recreational activity. However, it can develop into gambling disorder for some people. Gambling disorder affects 1% of the population. Also, 3–4% of individuals experience gambling problems at a subclinical level. People with higher levels of stress are more likely to have a gambling disorder. Groups that experience higher levels of stress include individuals with substance use problems and those who have problems with the law.

The researchers reviewed articles on stress and gambling. They described how stress and gambling are related in three ways. First, gambling is used to escape stress. Second, gambling itself could cause stress. Third, altered stress reactions may be a risk factor for gambling disorder.

What was done?

The researchers reviewed and summarized the three ways gambling and stress are related.

What you need to know

Gambling to escape stress

Gambling can be used to escape stress. This is one of the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for gambling disorder. Stress can also lead to gambling disorder. Childhood stress and stressful events in later life are associated with gambling disorder. Studies have shown that young people with gambling problems report higher levels of stress. Gambling disorder is most likely to develop in young adulthood. This suggests that poor coping skills may develop early in life.

Stress is also associated with more severe symptoms of gambling disorder. Further, increased stress and

Why is this article important?

Stress impacts gambling in important ways. This article reviews the three ways gambling and stress are related. The first is using gambling to escape stress. The second relationship is gambling itself could cause stress. Third, altered stress reactions may be a risk factor for gambling disorder. The article provides ideas for future challenges and directions.

gambling problems are associated with substance use and personality disorders. It is thought that too high or too low stress reaction could lead to addictions.

Stress is a common trigger to gamble. Stress can also trigger relapse to gambling. Stress and craving may share similar brain processes, which may sensitize people to problematic gambling. People who relapse to gambling report increased stress response and negative emotions. The stress of trying to quit gambling and other life stresses may lead to relapse. It is important to note that gambling could potentially solve financial stress if a person were to win a large amount of money. This is different from substance use addictions, which always lead to a loss of finances.

People who gamble are not all the same, and stress may affect people who gamble differently. The Pathways Model of Gambling Disorder proposes three pathways in the development of gambling disorder. The first group are individuals who develop gambling disorder through the experiences of wins and losses. They do not have underlying risk factors, such as depression and anxiety, and have low gambling severity. Rather, emotional problems develop as a result of gambling. The second group are emotionally

vulnerable gamblers. They have mood or anxiety problems and experienced negative life events prior to developing a gambling problem. Gambling is usually used as an escape for these individuals. The third pathway includes people who are emotionally vulnerable and have anti-social and impulsive traits. Stress may lead people in the third pathway to seek out risky gambling.

Gambling as a stressor

Gambling itself can be a stressor because of financial losses. Close to 50% of people with gambling problems endorse loss of sleep due to stress or worry about gambling. Financial stress may lead to more gambling, which leads to more stress. Longitudinal studies have found support for the gambling-stress cycle. People who gamble may experience stress-related reactions when losing, such as arousal. Recent research has also found that people with gambling problems have weaker physiological reactions to stress. Thus, they may be less sensitive to losses.

Chasing losses in gambling is one of the DSM-5 criteria for gambling disorder. Chasing losses can create a cycle of stress and further gambling. Financial losses may increase the risk of suicide, particularly among gamblers with family conflicts.

Altered stress reaction

The third relationship may be due to a pre-existing risk factor. Gambling increases activity in the nervous system that responds to stress. When the body under- or overreacts to stress, it can lead to poor health. People with substance use problems have lowered stress response and heart rate. This suggests that people who gamble may show similar patterns. Lower cortisol levels, a marker of stress, may be a sign of gambling problems.

Future Directions

A challenge for the future is to identify people at risk for gambling disorder using both markers of stress and psychological characteristics, such as coping patterns. Another challenge is to see how stress is associated with the three different pathways of gambling. People at high risk could be taught coping

skills to manage stress and replace gambling with healthier options.

Who is it intended for?

This research is intended for people who gamble to understand how stress affects gambling. It also provides insights for researchers to conduct future research on stress and gambling.

About the researchers

Tony W. Buchanan, Sara D. McMullin, Catherine Baxley, and Jeremiah Weinstock are affiliated with the Department of Psychology at Saint Louis University in Saint Louis, MO, USA. For more information about this study, please contact Tony W. Buchanan at tony.buchanan@health.slu.edu.

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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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