

research snapshot

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Gambling to relieve anxiety in adolescents

What this research is about

People who gamble may be encouraged to continue gambling through the processes of positive and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement occurs when gambling is experienced as exciting and pleasurable, so the person gambles again to re-experience those positive feelings. Negative reinforcement occurs when gambling diminishes or takes away negative feelings. In particular, people may gamble to relieve anxiety or stress.

Adolescents who gamble in a problematic way may do so because they experience gambling as a positively and/or negatively reinforcing activity. However, there is little research on adolescents who are motivated to gamble to relieve anxiety. This is called anxiety-motivated gambling (AMG). AMG may result from ineffective emotional regulation. People who struggle to regulate their emotions are more likely to have more severe problem gambling. People with problem gambling and anxiety are at greater risk of health problems and substance use disorders. The aim of this study was to examine the relationships between AMG in adolescents and problem gambling, perceptions about gambling, and general health and functioning.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from a 2006 survey study of high school students in Connecticut, USA. Students completed the survey at their schools. Participants who reported gambling in the past year were included in this study. The researchers were interested in their AMG status, which was determined by asking participants if they had experienced anxiety that was relieved only by gambling. If participants answered yes to this question, they were considered AMG. If

What you need to know

The experience of gambling can be fun and exciting, making people want to gamble again to experience these positive emotions. The experience of gambling can also decrease negative emotions, such as anxiety. Anxiety-motivated gambling (AMG) in adolescents is not well-understood. The authors of this study used data from a survey of high school students in Connecticut. Of those who gambled, 6.41% reported AMG. AMG adolescents were compared to those who gambled but were not motivated by anxiety. AMG adolescents were more likely to be at-risk or have problem gambling. They were more likely to have poor health and functioning (e.g., substance uses, involvement in violence). They also tended to engage in gambling to a greater extent. Therefore, emotion regulation may be important in understanding gambling and other risky behaviours in adolescents.

they answered no, they were considered non-anxiety motivated gambling (NAMG).

The Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) was used to assess problem gambling severity. Gambling perceptions were assessed by asking participants to rate whether various gambling prevention approaches were important or not important. Participants were also asked about their parents' attitudes towards their gambling and if they had concerns about a family member's gambling. Health and functioning measures included involvement in extracurricular activities, lifetime tobacco smoking, marijuana use, other drug use, alcohol use, caffeine use, body mass index (BMI),

involvement in violence (e.g., carrying a weapon in the past 30 days), and depression. Participants were also asked which types of gambling they engaged in, if they ever craved gambling, and when they started to gamble (age of onset).

What the researchers found

The participants included 119 AMG (6.41%) and 1737 NAMG adolescents (93.59%). There was a greater proportion of male, Black, Asian, and Hispanic adolescents who were AMG. There was a much greater proportion of AMG adolescents who were at-risk of or who met the criteria for problem gambling (87.4%) compared to NAMG adolescents (31.1%). AMG adolescents reported more permissive perceptions about gambling. There was a greater proportion of AMG adolescents who had parents that gambled and who had concerns about a family member's gambling.

AMG adolescents were more likely than NAMG adolescents to have poor health and functioning. This included having grades lower than a D, smoking tobacco regularly, and reporting heavy alcohol use, lifetime marijuana use, and other drug use. AMG adolescents were more likely to be involved in violence. This included carrying weapons, feeling unsafe at school, having been threatened with a weapon, being involved in a physical fight, and having been injured in a physical fight.

There were several differences between AMG and NAMG adolescents in gambling characteristics. AMG adolescents were more likely to engage in machine gambling (e.g., slot machines), non-strategic gambling (e.g., lotteries), and strategic gambling (e.g., poker). They were more likely to gamble on the internet, at school, and at casinos. They were also more likely to feel pressured to gamble and to have gambled alone. They were less likely to gamble with friends.

How you can use this research

This study explored the differences between AMG and NAMG adolescents. Most of the sample was NAMG, suggesting that the majority of adolescents were motivated to gamble for positive reinforcement reasons. However, the adolescents who were AMG

had more severe gambling problems and worse health and functioning. The findings could inform gambling prevention efforts in schools and communities.

About the researchers

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