

research snapshot

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The effect of stigma on treating gambling disorders

What this research is about

Stigmatization occurs when people with specific characteristics are viewed negatively by others because of those characteristics. The degree to which people with gambling disorder are stigmatized has been a popular area of research. People who struggle to control their gambling are often viewed by others from a moral perspective. As a result, people with gambling disorder are seen to be responsible for their difficulties with gambling. Stigma has many negative consequences for the person who experiences it. One consequence is that it may interfere with their getting treatment. People who experience stigma because of their gambling problems may be ashamed of their gambling and become afraid to seek help for it.

The researchers of this study sought to examine the effect of stigma on how treatment of gambling disorder is perceived socially. They also wanted to know if stigma affects the treatment of people with gambling disorder. They wanted to understand these issues from people with gambling disorder and professionals who treat gambling disorder.

What the researchers did

This study took place in Warsaw, Poland. The researchers interviewed 30 people with gambling disorder, 15 social workers, 15 therapists, 15 doctors, and 15 psychiatrists. The social workers and therapists worked with people with addictions. The professionals were recruited from where they worked. The people with gambling disorder were recruited from alcohol and drug treatment facilities and Gamblers Anonymous meetings.

There were three sets of interview guidelines: one for people with gambling disorder, one for social workers,

What you need to know

People with gambling disorder are the subject of stigma from others. This means that they are viewed negatively, and perhaps treated poorly, because they have a problem with gambling. People with gambling disorder may blame themselves for their mental illness and may be reluctant to seek treatment. The researchers of this study interviewed 90 people, 30 of whom had gambling disorder, and the remaining 60 were professionals who worked with them. They found that stigma is more common in society in general and is lessened in friends and family members of someone with gambling disorder. Women may feel stigma more strongly than men. Stigma can be a barrier to treatment and is important to target throughout the treatment process.

and one for the other professionals. People with gambling disorder were asked open-ended questions about how they thought people who gamble are seen by other people. They were also asked whether they or their friends had experienced negative treatment by others because of their gambling disorder.

All professionals were asked questions about motives for seeking treatment of gambling disorder and how available they thought treatment was. They were also asked questions about how people with gambling disorder were viewed by society. Professionals were also asked whether they had seen people with gambling disorder treated negatively by other people. Social workers were asked the same questions but worded differently to reflect the nature of their work.

The researchers then transcribed the interviews and searched through them for common themes.

What the researchers found

Several themes were identified in the interviews. The first theme is the responsibility of the person with gambling disorder. Many participants spoke about how people with gambling disorder are blamed for their illness. By extension, they are blamed for the negative consequences of their gambling behaviours. This appraisal can lead to the point of view that treatment is not necessary, and willpower alone should be sufficient to overcome a gambling disorder. However, friends and family members of a person with gambling disorder are more likely to be compassionate. They are more likely to be supportive and positive of their loved one entering treatment.

The second theme is how the fear of stigmatization impacts treatment. Participants discussed how entering treatment requires the person to admit that they have a trait that is viewed negatively by society. It also labels them definitively as someone with an addiction, which can be viewed negatively by people.

The third theme is that of gender. Women feel the negative consequences of stigma more strongly than men. They may be more reluctant to seek treatment because they experience more stigma.

The next theme revolves around the type of treatment. Social workers and psychiatrists noted that the use of their services is heavily stigmatized. People who need help from social workers are viewed as being of a lower social status. The use of psychiatric services may carry more stigma than other forms of treatment. People with mental disorders in general are more stigmatized than healthy people.

The final theme is about how treatment helps the person deal with stigmatization. People with gambling disorder may experience self-stigma. Self-stigma involves agreeing with the negative views that one has an undesirable trait. Some professionals spoke about the importance of targeting self-stigma in treatment of gambling disorder. It helps the person to frame it as a medical issue, not a moral one.

How you can use this research

This research could be useful for public health professionals, particularly those involved in educating the public. The study showed that there are many negative consequences of stigma. There is a clear need to better educate the public about gambling disorder. Education can reduce the stigmatization of people with gambling disorder. If there is less stigma about gambling disorder, then people suffering from it may be less reluctant to seek out treatment.

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.

