

# research snapshot

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## Can fear prompt at-risk gamblers to seek help?

### What this research is about

Some advertising uses fear appeal. Fear appeal is a message that is designed to scare people by describing threats that occur if they engage in a certain behaviour like gambling. This is followed by recommendations on how to prevent the threats from occurring. For example, a fear appeal may portray excessive gambling as leading to debts and recommend where to seek help. However, fear appeals may not be effective for everyone due to differences in peoples' characteristics.

Past research found that experiential avoidance (EA) influenced how people responded to fear. EA is a mental process that people use to avoid negative thoughts and emotions. Other research found that gender influenced how people responded to fear; females responded to fear appeals more than males.

There is little research on the effectiveness of fear appeals in problem gambling. The current research applied the Revised Protection Motivation Model (RPMM). The RPMM suggests that people react to threats differently based on their perceived susceptibility (PS), or consideration of the likelihood of harm from the threat. Study 1 explored fear appeal perceptions among gamblers at-risk for problem gambling. Study 2 examined the relationship between PS and at-risk gamblers' intentions to seek help for their gambling. It also explored the role of EA and gender in this relationship.

### What the researchers did

**Study 1:** The researchers held five focus groups with 43 gamblers, aged 20-60 years, from Adelaide, South Australia. The focus groups had 2 parts. First, participants recalled any advertising that impacted

### What you need to know

This research demonstrates the role of gender and experiential avoidance (EA) on fear appeal effectiveness in at-risk gamblers. In Study 1, gamblers suggested that fear appeals must focus on threats relevant to problem gamblers to prompt them to seek help. Many gamblers felt that loss of control, social isolation, and loss of self-esteem and identity would be impactful threats. In Study 2, fear appeals were more likely to prompt two groups of at-risk gamblers to seek help: (1) females, and (2) those who do not tend to avoid negative thoughts and feelings (low EA).

them emotionally. Next, participants viewed a series of print advertisements (ads) and reported their feelings towards each ad. They then viewed print ads specific to gambling. Participants discussed the emotions they felt and whether the ads would be effective in communicating gambling risks.

The researchers analyzed the focus group discussions for common themes. Based on the results, two fear appeals for gambling were designed. These ads featured a person (a man or a woman) in a poor state, lying on the floor. The text on the ads read "First, gambling strips away your money. Then your self-control. Your friends. Your family. And your pride. Until there is nothing left to lose. Call gambling help and support centre." The researchers pre-tested the fear appeals with 196 individuals from the general population to confirm that they caused fear.

**Study 2:** Participants were 324 Australian gamblers who gambled 2-5 times a week. Participants viewed one of the fear appeal ads based on their gender.

After viewing the ad, participants completed an online survey. The survey assessed negative (fearful, afraid, and scared) and positive emotions (determined, hopeful, eager, and inspired). It also assessed EA and PS. PS was assessed with the following items: "I think it is possible that I have a problem with gambling"; "If I continue gambling like I am, my personal life could suffer"; and "I could suffer the same fate as the person in the ad." The survey also asked participants to indicate how likely they would seek help for gambling in the next three months.

## What the researchers found

**Study 1:** Opinions on the effectiveness of fear appeals to prompt gamblers to seek help were mixed. The gamblers felt that loss of control over excessive gambling was the most impactful and fear-causing threat to prompt someone to seek help. Other threats such as isolation, self-esteem and identity loss, and financial debt were also relevant to the gamblers. However, many gamblers indicated that hard-hitting fear appeals could overwhelm individuals. For example, they discussed how a suicide attempt scenario should be avoided.

**Study 2:** EA and gender influenced how effective fear appeals were in problem gambling. At-risk gamblers who had low EA (not avoiding negative feelings and thoughts) processed fear appeals using both emotional (fear) and mental (PS) processes. This led to intentions to seek help. For high EA gamblers, PS did not lead to fear. These findings suggest that low EA gamblers are potentially more reachable with fear appeals than high EA gamblers.

Female and male gamblers did not differ in the amount of fear they felt after viewing the fear appeals. Appraisal of likelihood of harm from gambling (PS) led to fear in both males and females. PS also impacted on the intention to seek help in both genders. However, only in female gamblers did fear prompt the intention to seek help for gambling. Fear did not impact male gamblers' intention to seek help.

## How you can use this research

This study shows that campaigns to promote gambling counselling and help services should be focused on threats that are relevant to at-risk and problem gamblers. Clinicians can use this study to improve communication with clients differing in EA and gender. For instance, fear appeals might be effective in gamblers low in EA and females, but not gamblers high in EA or males.

## About the researchers

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## Citation

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## Keywords

Fear appeal, experiential avoidance, gambling, gender, advertising

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