What this research is about

Gambling is a growing public health issue that can lead to several harmful consequences. Low levels of treatment access and high drop-out rates indicate a need to encourage people to seek help for their gambling problems and to complete their treatment. More research is needed to examine how gambling treatment approaches can address these issues.

Contingency management (CM) is a behavioural treatment that involves identifying target behaviours (e.g., attending treatment sessions and abstinence from gambling) and providing incentives (e.g., vouchers for the purchase of items) when the targets are met. CM is a treatment that has been refined in multiple research studies. It is an approach that strictly follows a protocol for assessing, implementing, and recording attendance and abstinence.

A large amount of research suggests that CM is highly successful in increasing abstinence and attendance in substance misuse treatment when added to other forms of treatment. CM has yet to be applied in a gambling treatment setting, however.

The purpose of this study was to address the research question: ‘What views do clients of gambling treatment services express when presented with an explanation of CM and examples of how it might apply to gambling?’ The researchers also examined contextual influences on participants’ views.

What the researchers did

The researchers interviewed 25 people who were, or had previously been, engaged in treatment for gambling in Great Britain. All participants were over the age of 18 years. Of the 25 participants, the most common forms of gambling were online gambling on casino-like games. To facilitate discussion, participants were provided with an explanation of CM, two hypothetical scenarios, and two questionnaires. Participants were asked to describe their initial reactions to CM and how they might have responded to this approach if it had been an available option. The interviews lasted around one and a half hours and occurred by video conference.

The researchers transcribed the audio from the interviews using an online transcription service. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which captures key aspects of the data, and generates codes and

What you need to know

Contingency management (CM) is a behavioural treatment that involves identifying target behaviours and providing incentives when such targets are met. CM has been a successful approach for treating substance use problems. But it has not been adopted for problem gambling treatment. In this study, the researchers aimed to examine how people who have attended or are attending gambling problem treatment perceive CM. The researchers interviewed 25 people. The researchers found that some participants believed people with gambling problems could manipulate CM to obtain money to gamble. They also believed that some CM mechanisms could trigger recovering clients to gamble. Participants also identified positive aspects of CM, such as its ability to help bring people to treatment earlier and enhance motivation to make change.
themes. The researchers then interpreted their findings.

What the researchers found

Four main themes were identified. The first theme was ‘dishonesty of active addiction disrupting CM’. This theme explores the idea that people could be driven to dishonesty by their compulsion to gamble. Participants believed that some clients may manipulate CM treatment to obtain money to gamble. Some participants thought that CM could negatively affect the trust between therapists and clients. The next theme was ‘get people through the door and keep them coming back’. This theme explores the idea that CM could help bring people into treatment earlier and keep them engaged in treatment.

The third theme was ‘avoidance of triggers in early recovery could be contradicted by CM’. This theme explores the idea that CM could put people who gamble in contact with triggers that they would not be able to resist. Many mentioned that money and gambling-like activities (e.g., raffles) should be avoided as incentives. There were also concerns that feelings of failure for not meeting a target might trigger people to gamble.

The final theme was ‘CM could spur you on in early recovery’. Participants saw CM incentives as potentially encouraging people with gambling problems by rewarding small steps. This could enhance motivation towards change.

Themes one and three pointed to the potential negative consequences of CM, while themes two and three pointed to the potential benefits of CM. The participants agreed that it is important to be aware of the potential to accidentally incentivize deceptive behaviour when designing CM treatments. Participants agreed that there is a difference between clients who are in ‘active addiction’ and clients who are ‘help seeking’. CM may need to be adjusted depending on client needs.

In summary, participants broadly supported the use of CM as treatment, and CM was seen as a way to facilitate engagement in the treatment process.

How you can use this research

This research suggests that treatment providers who deliver CM need to work with clients to emphasize how CM can work with their triggers. Treatment providers should also work with clients to address these triggers as part of the treatment process.

About the researchers

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Citation


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Greo has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. Greo is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization with almost two decades of international experience in generating, synthesizing, and mobilizing research into action across the health and wellbeing sectors. Greo helps organizations improve their strategies, policies, and practices by harnessing the power of evidence and stakeholder insight.

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