

research snapshot

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Emotional regulation and coping strategies affect the mental health of family members of people with gambling disorder

What this research is about

Gambling disorder not only affects the gambler, but also close family members. It is estimated that an adult with gambling disorder can lead to negative impacts on six other people. Family members often suffer from physical and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. They may also suffer from financial, social, and work or school related problems. Some researchers have argued that many of the issues that family members face arise from their poor ability to cope with the problems they are facing.

Emotional regulation is the ability to understand, accept, and manage one's emotions. It helps people respond to the demands of different situations in their daily life. In contrast, a lack of ability to manage emotions can lead people to feel stressed by daily life situations. Therefore, both emotional regulation and coping strategies have an impact on the degree of hardship that people experience. This study compared emotional regulation and coping strategies of people with and without family members who have gambling disorder. It also examined if emotional regulation and coping strategies could predict symptoms of depression and anxiety.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited two groups of participants. The clinical group were family members of people with gambling disorder. They were recruited from a gambling treatment center in Spain, where they attended group therapy for family members. The general population group were people who had no one in their family with gambling disorder. In total, there were 89 participants in the clinical group, and 114 participants in the general population group.

What you need to know

Family members of people with gambling disorder often suffer from mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Their ability to manage emotions and their coping strategies may determine the extent to which they can cope well with their situation. This study compared people who were family members of people with gambling disorder and people who had no one in their family with the disorder. The results showed that family members of people with gambling disorder had more symptoms of depression and anxiety. Difficulties in managing their emotions and poor coping strategies could lead to more symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The clinical group completed a questionnaire on-site at the gambling treatment center. The general population group completed the questionnaire online. The questionnaire included the following measures:

- The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) was used to assess emotional regulation. The DERS measures five aspects: 1) not being aware of one's emotions; 2) not accepting one's emotional responses; 3) not being able to recognize one's emotions; 4) not being able to focus on one's goals due to the emotions that one feels; and 5) not being able to control negative emotional states.
- The Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI) was used to assess coping strategies. The CSI focuses on eight strategies: 1) problem solving by working on changing the stressful situation; 2) changing the way one thinks about the situation; 3) seeking

social support; 4) expressing emotions; 5) problem avoidance by avoiding thoughts and behaviours associated with the situation; 6) wishful thinking; 7) social withdrawal by distancing oneself from the situation and the people associated with it; and 8) self-blame.

- The Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R) was used to assess depression and anxiety.

What the researchers found

Family members of people with gambling disorder (the clinical group) had more symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who had no one in the family with the disorder (the general population group). In terms of emotional regulation, the clinical group were less able to manage their emotions. In particular, they were less able to recognize their emotions and less accepting of their emotional responses. They also had less control over their negative emotion states.

In terms of coping, the clinical group relied more on problem solving, emotional expression, wishful thinking, and social withdrawal. Problem solving and emotional expression are generally considered to be adaptive strategies that help people cope well with their situation. Participants in the clinical group were already seeking therapy. Thus, they had taken the initial step in attempting to actively cope with their situation. On the other hand, social withdrawal and wishful thinking are generally considered to be poor coping strategies.

Both depression and anxiety were predicted by difficulties in emotional regulation and poor coping strategies. In particular, people who were less able to control their negative emotions had more symptoms of depression and anxiety. People who relied more on social withdrawal, self-blame, and changing the way they thought about their situation had more symptoms of depression. People who relied more on social withdrawal and emotional expression had more symptoms of anxiety.

How you can use this research

This study could be of use to gambling treatment providers and clinicians. The results show that it is

important to address the needs of family members who are affected by gambling disorder. There are two potential ways to support them. These include helping them develop better ways to manage their emotions and better coping strategies. Focusing on these two aspects may help prevent and reduce the mental health problems that they have.

About the researchers

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Citation

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