

knowledge snapshot



What behaviour change techniques do online interventions use to help with gambling, alcohol use, and binge eating?

What this article is about

Problem gambling, alcohol misuse, and binge eating have become relatively common in Western countries. This may be because society has come to view gambling, alcohol use, and unhealthy eating habits as acceptable. However, each of these behaviours can cause harms. For example, gambling can cause emotional and financial harms.

Problem gambling, alcohol misuse, and binge eating have each been linked to impulsive tendencies. Additionally, some people gamble, drink, or eat to cope with stress or other negative emotions. So, these behaviours may have common root causes. If they do have similar causes, then they may be improved by similar treatments. For example, interventions that teach people healthier ways to cope with stress could reduce gambling, alcohol use, or binge eating.

Many people do not seek professional help for problem gambling, alcohol misuse, or binge eating. This may be because of the stigma associated with these behaviours. People may also not seek help because treatment centres are far away or only open at certain times of day. Online interventions allow people to receive treatment in private and at their own convenience. There are many online interventions for problem gambling, alcohol misuse, and binge eating. However, it is unclear if they follow best practices for changing behaviours.

This study reviewed studies about online interventions for gambling, alcohol misuse, and binge eating. It looked at what types of interventions were effective. It also looked at the techniques each intervention used to change people's behaviours and determined if there were similarities.

Why is this article important?

Many people who experience problem gambling, alcohol misuse, or binge eating do not seek professional help. Instead, they may turn to online interventions to help them change their behaviour. This article reviewed studies on online interventions for gambling, alcohol misuse, and binge eating. Specifically, it looked at how effective different types of interventions were. It also looked at the techniques these interventions used to change behaviours. The researchers found five behaviour change techniques that were often used in interventions that were both effective and of high quality. For example, monitoring one's own behaviour was the most common technique in these interventions. These results can help researchers develop effective online interventions for harmful behaviours.

What was done?

The researchers searched for studies about online interventions for gambling, alcohol misuse, and binge eating. They searched the scientific databases PsycINFO, PubMed, and Scopus for papers published in the past 20 years. They found 4195 papers in total. The researchers checked that each paper met their criteria. To meet the criteria, the studies had to look at the effectiveness of online interventions. They also had to have a treatment group (that received the intervention) and a control group (that did not receive the intervention). Finally, they had to measure the participants' behaviour before and after the intervention to show a change in behaviour. Forty-five papers met all of these criteria.

The researchers read the 45 papers and recorded the types of interventions they used and how effective the interventions were. They recorded the specific behaviour change techniques used in each intervention. The researchers also assessed the quality of each study. Finally, they looked at the studies that were both high quality and had effective interventions to see which techniques they used.

What you need to know

Most of the studies (71%) tested interventions for alcohol use. Sixteen percent tested interventions for gambling and 13% for binge eating. The interventions in the studies ranged from taking less than 1 hour to up to 1 year to complete. Many of the studies on gambling interventions used the South Oaks Gambling Screen to measure gambling behaviour.

The researchers found 7 behaviour change techniques that were commonly used across the 45 studies. The most common behaviour change technique was 'self-monitoring of behaviour'. This means the interventions encouraged people to monitor their own gambling, drinking, or binge eating behaviours.

Overall, only 43% of the gambling studies had effective interventions (3 out of 7 studies). So, over half of the gambling studies did not find that the intervention reduced gambling behaviour. In contrast, 66% of alcohol studies (21 out of 32 studies) and 83% of binge eating studies (5 out of 6 studies) had effective interventions.

The researchers rated 56% of the studies as being of high quality, with four studies targeting gambling. They found that only 36% of the studies were both high quality and had effective interventions. Three of these studies targeted gambling. The researchers summarized the behaviour change techniques used most often in these high quality and effective studies. The most common techniques were:

- i) Self-monitoring of behaviour (e.g., monitoring the amount of time spent gambling).
- ii) Receiving feedback on behaviour (e.g., feedback on how often they consume alcohol).
- iii) Self-monitoring the outcomes of the behaviour (such as the financial consequences of gambling).

- iv) Receiving instructions on how to perform a behaviour (such as a healthy coping behaviour).
- v) Social comparisons (i.e., comparing your behaviour to others).

Who is it intended for?

This review can inform researchers as well as people who design online interventions for these behaviours.

About the researchers

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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.

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