

research snapshot

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Three types of help-seekers among people with problem gambling

What this research is about

Not all people with problem gambling seek help. Past research has found that there are different reasons why people might or might not seek treatment from professionals.

Major barriers to help-seeking include feelings of shame, fear of stigma, or belief that one's gambling is not a problem. Also, gamblers might try to handle the problem by themselves or might not know how and where to get help. For some, there might also be social or cultural barriers to seeking help. Reasons for help-seeking include depressive feelings, financial problems and relationship issues.

Although research exists on the barriers and motivators to help-seeking among people with gambling problems, there is limited research on the whole process of help-seeking for gambling problems. The current study explored barriers faced by gamblers when seeking help and the actual process of seeking help.

What the researcher did

Participants were 12 adults with problem gambling who were attending treatment in four different towns in Eastern and Central Finland. Ten of the participants were men and two were women. Most were between the ages of 20 and 40. Nearly all the participants had a long history of gambling, except for two who started gambling as adults.

The researcher interviewed all the participants after their first treatment appointment. Interviews ranged from half an hour to more than 2 hours. The interview covered four main topics: gambling and its negative effects, personal life history, the help-seeking process,

What you need to know

This study found three types of help-seekers based on different patterns of barriers to treatment and help-seeking process. The three types were called: individualistic, multi-problematic, and family-centric. It is important to recognize differences in the experiences of help-seeking among people with gambling problems to offer more effective help.

and general attitudes to gambling. The questions were broad to encourage participants to express their own views.

The researcher audio-taped and transcribed each interview. She analyzed and grouped all barriers to treatment mentioned by the participants. To understand the help-seeking process, the researcher analyzed and grouped all help-seeking motivators (the main reason for seeking help), activators (a person or a factor that moves the process of seeking help forward), and actors (the person who turns the decision to seek help into action) listed by the participants.

Finally, the researcher identified different types of help-seekers based on patterns of barriers to treatment and factors supporting the help-seeking process.

What the researcher found

Based on different patterns of factors that influenced the help-seeking process, the research found three types of help-seekers: (1) individualistic, (2) multi-problematic, and (3) family-centric.

Psychological barriers were the main reason for individualistic help-seekers to not get professional treatment. These included emotions and thoughts, such as shame and secrecy, that prevented or slowed their search for help. This group of help-seekers felt that finding help was easy after admitting to themselves that they had a gambling problem. The main reasons for seeking help among this group were feeling at 'rock bottom' and wanting to change. This group of help-seekers saw themselves as the activators and actors in the help-seeking process.

Multi-problematic help-seekers reported having many problems apart from gambling throughout their lives. These might include alcohol problems, mental health issues, or being in prison. This group of help-seekers felt that their gambling problems were not taken seriously by health or social services, or that professional help was not effective. This group of help-seekers lacked the motivation to seek help. They felt gambling had a positive impact and was a normal part of their life. They looked for help when there was improvement in other parts of their lives.

There was not any single group of barriers among family-centric help-seekers. They reported many individual, treatment or cultural reasons for not seeking help. They had feelings of shame and were worried that their partner would leave them if they revealed their problem gambling. Some also expressed doubts about treatment services. Their family members and partners played a central role as motivators, activators, and actors in the help-seeking process. For some, keeping the family together was their main reason for seeking professional help.

How you can use this research

The results suggest that to offer effective help for problem gambling, differences in patterns of help-seeking should be considered. Public health professionals and clinicians could offer different kinds of encouragement and targeted actions to different help-seeking groups. For instance, family-centric help-seekers could be reached through their family members. So, family members and friends of this type of help-seekers could be a target for social education and support.

Future research could explore whether different help-seeker types are linked to gamblers of different genders or certain gambling forms.

About the researcher

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