

research snapshot

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How problem gambling impacts the partners and families of gamblers

What this research is about

Problem gambling harms not only those who gamble, but their families as well. For example, problem gambling can cause emotional harm, financial difficulties, and relationship issues for those who gamble and their families. The partners of people with problem gambling may have to emotionally and financially support their partner and the family. This can put strain on their relationship with their partner. They may also lose trust in their partner because of uncontrollable gambling. Furthermore, the children of people with problem gambling may not receive enough care from their parent who gambles. Thus, gambling can cause substantial harm within families.

The partners of people with problem gambling can play an important role in encouraging those who gamble to seek help. Partners may also seek help for themselves for the harm they suffer because of their partner's gambling. However, many partners of people with problem gambling avoid seeking help. This can be because they feel ashamed of the gambling problem. They may also avoid seeking help because of the stigma surrounding problem gambling. This study aimed to understand the help-seeking experiences of the partners of people with problem gambling.

What the researchers did

The researcher analysed messages from an anonymous online discussion forum. Finland's national gambling helpline created this forum specifically for people with problem gambling and their partners. Since 2016, the partners have had their own forum.

What you need to know

Problem gambling is a public health issue that harms those who gamble and their families. The partners of people with problem gambling may suffer significant emotional and financial stress because of the gambling. At the same time, they may avoid seeking help because of the stigma around problem gambling.

This study looked at messages on an online discussion forum for the partners of people with problem gambling. Most partners said the forum was the first place they went to for help. Many said they did not seek help elsewhere due to the stigma around problem gambling. Many partners said the gambling hurt their relationship and caused financial issues for their family. Overall, the partners worried about how the problem gambling had affected their children. Some chose to stay in the relationship to keep the family together, while others chose to divorce.

The researcher reviewed messages that were posted to the forum between 2007 and 2016. She looked for messages that included information about family life, gambling harms, and help seeking behaviour. She found 97 messages that met these criteria. The messages were written by 40 different forum users (38 women and 2 men) who had partners with problem gambling. The researcher looked for the main themes addressed in the partners' messages.

What the researchers found

The researcher found four main themes in people's messages on the anonymous forum.

Seeking help and support

For many partners, this online forum was the first place they went to for help. Some partners had found out about the gambling problem recently, while others had lived with it for a long time. People who found out about it recently asked other members for advice on where to get help. Others who had lived with the situation for longer mentioned seeking outpatient services from addiction and mental health services. Some had sought help from health services or social services.

Dealing with shame and trust issues

Many partners did not seek help elsewhere because they felt ashamed. They often hid the problem from friends and relatives. Some partners had been openly criticized by their friends for staying with the gambler.

Many people with problem gambling had lied to their partner about the extent of their gambling. As a result, most partners felt they could not trust their spouse. The loss of trust made some people feel even more anxious about their partner's behaviour and spending. Some attended couples therapy to try to improve their relationship.

Managing the gambling problem financially

The main gambling harm the partners discussed on the forum was financial harm. Those who gambled often used all of the family's resources for gambling. In some cases, this caused families to not have enough money to buy food or pay for rent. Many of those with problem gambling borrowed money from relatives and friends. Some people also took out loans in their name or in their partner's name, to support their gambling. As a result, many partners took over the family finances after discovering the gambling problem.

Motivators and barriers in family life

Many partners stayed in the relationship because they loved their spouse and hoped their gambling problem would improve after they had received help. Some female partners stayed because they were not working and relied on their spouse for financial support. Partners wanted to do what was best for their children. For some partners, they felt keeping

the family together was best for the children, while others thought divorcing would be best.

How you can use this research

This study highlights how the partners of people with problem gambling need support. Public health agencies could raise awareness about problem gambling and try to reduce the stigma around it. They could also create more programs aimed at the partners of people with problem gambling.

About the researchers

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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

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.

Learn more about GREO by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.

