

research snapshot

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Sources of motivation for changing gambling behaviour in online gamblers

What this research is about

Gambling can lead to problems for some people. These include money problems, crime and legal problems, relationship problems, and work-related problems. Most people with gambling problems do not seek formal help. Past research has found that those who do seek help do so because of a crisis, rather than becoming motivated to change their gambling behaviour over time.

Reasons for help-seeking might differ from reasons for becoming motivated to change gambling. One theory suggests that 'dissonance' may be a source of motivation. Dissonance arises from the perceived difference between actual and ideal selves (i.e., what one should be to another person). Dissonance can produce feelings of shame, guilt, and depression.

The current study explored the processes related to online gamblers' motivations for change, including sources that trigger dissonance.

What the researchers did

Participants were 19 male online gamblers, aged 20 to 44 years of age. Some had sought treatment for gambling problems while others had not.

A treatment center in Norway had developed a referral website to recruit gamblers for treatment. Participants were invited to help test the referral website. The website included a self-test, a write-up on gambling and problem gambling, and video interviews with fictional gamblers and their spouses. The videos showed three men with different gambling experiences and levels of motivation for change, and a girlfriend who told her experience of living with someone who gambles too much.

What you need to know

The current study found two sources of motivation for changing gambling behaviour. These were: (1) empathizing with the feelings of others, (2) dissonance between gambling behaviour and ideal self. Dissonance could arise because of a desire to take part in sports and athletic activity again without it being tied to gambling. Dissonance could also arise due to gambling in the family.

The researchers held four focus groups with 14 participants. They also held in-depth interviews with five participants. The first three focus groups discussed features of the referral website. They also examined participants' views on how the website content related to their own motivation to change gambling.

The researchers recorded and transcribed the focus groups. They looked for events and people that triggered dissonance, problem awareness, and motivation for change. The researchers grouped the participants' descriptions and statements into themes. They further explored the themes from the focus groups using the interviews. A fourth focus group reviewed the themes to confirm them.

The researchers analyzed the data using the general inductive approach. This method allows researchers to describe and interpret participants' experiences from their point of view.

What the researchers found

Among the non-treatment-seeking gamblers, motivation to consider changing their gambling depended on feeling 'out of control'.

There were two themes related to the sources of motivation and the process of becoming motivated to change. The first theme was ‘empathizing with others’. This involved participants thinking about how a loved one might feel about their gambling. The empathic feelings motivated participants to change.

The second theme was ‘dissonance between gambling behaviour and ideal self-image’. Awareness of problems related to gambling would lead to dissonance. Dissonance could come from comparing money problems, relationship problems, and other challenges to how they felt things ought to be. The dissonance caused painful feelings for participants, such as guilt. Resolving dissonance and moving towards a more positive self by taking responsibility were a source of motivation for change.

The second theme included two sub-themes: (1) dissonance due to sports and athletics, and (2) dissonance due to gambling among family. For some participants, dissonance was caused by a desire to take part in sports activities again or become a sports fan. Previous participation had stopped when sports became tied with gambling. For other participants, dissonance was caused by other family members who had gambling problems. Participants had difficulties changing their own gambling due to the fear of letting their family down. This could lead to feelings of hopelessness, but also a sense of responsibility to not cause their family further suffering.

How you can use this research

Clinicians or e-health interventions could encourage gamblers to reflect on the thoughts and feelings of those close to them. They could also explore dissonance with gambling clients through a series of case vignettes. These cases could show gamblers who have successfully coped with dissonance due to family issues or sports. These strategies could help motivate online gamblers to consider changing.

Future research could assess whether gamblers’ family members are critical or supportive of their gambling behaviours. This may provide important information when designing therapies to ensure they do not reduce gamblers’ desire to seek help.

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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