

research snapshot

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Brief motivational contact by telephone or mail to reduce gambling behaviour in heavy gamblers

What this research is about

Few gamblers who develop gambling problems seek treatment. So, it is just as important to prevent gambling problems as it is to provide treatment. There are increasing expectations that the gambling industry helps protect gamblers from the harmful effects of gambling. Responsible gambling strategies can be used by the gambling industry to help in preventing gambling problems.

One type of strategy involves providing gamblers with information during or after their gambling. This can be factual information about the odds of winning, or more personalized information about the gambler's play (i.e., money spent or how the gambler's play compares to other people's). Past research has found that giving personalized feedback is the best way to reduce gambling behaviour. In another line of research, motivational interviewing (MI) has been effective for people with gambling problems. MI encourages people to think about the negative impacts of gambling on their lives and to take steps toward reducing gambling.

The current study combines these two lines of research. Heavy gamblers in Norway received brief feedback on their gambling losses either by telephone or through mailed information. The study assessed the impact of both methods for encouraging gamblers to reflect on their gambling behaviour and take steps toward more responsible gambling behaviour.

What the researchers did

Norsk Tipping (NT) is a state-owned land-based and online gambling operator in Norway. Participants were from the top 0.5% of NT customers who had lost the most money during the last year. There were

What you need to know

Among heavy gamblers with big losses, telephone and letter contact using motivational interviewing techniques to provide personalized feedback could reduce their gambling behaviour. They lost less money compared to gamblers who did not receive a phone call or letter. The telephone contact was more impactful than the letter contact. Gamblers who were interested in a follow-up call reduced their gambling behaviour further after receiving the follow-up call. Most gamblers who made changes to their gambling after receiving the intervention chose to set limits, rather than to stop gambling completely.

3,009 participants made up of 1,003 'triplets' who were matched on sex, age, and net losses. Each person in a triplet was randomly placed into one of three groups: telephone intervention, letter intervention, or control (no intervention).

Those in the telephone group received a call that started by asking participants to guess their last-year loss at NT and whether they wanted feedback about their real loss. Using an MI approach, the interviewer encouraged participants to reflect on their gambling behaviour. Participants who seemed interested in making a change received information about possible actions (e.g., setting limits, taking a pause, or self-excluding from gambling).

The letter mimicked the telephone call as much as possible. The letter included information on the participant's gambling loss, questions that prompted reflection, and information about possible actions if the participant wanted to make a change.

The researchers further randomized half of the participants receiving the telephone or letter contact to receive a follow-up call or letter after 4 weeks. The follow-up included information about the participants' last 4 weeks of gambling loss, compared to their prior spending. It also included information on possible actions to change one's gambling behaviour.

The researchers compared gambling spending (obtained from the NT database) 12 weeks before and 12 weeks after receiving the interventions between the groups. The researchers also compared responsible gambling behaviour (setting gambling limits, decreases in gambling limits, self-exclusion, etc.) 12 weeks before and 12 weeks after receiving the interventions between the groups.

What the researchers found

Participants receiving the telephone call reduced their gambling behaviour more than participants receiving the letter or no contact. They lost less money over the 12 weeks after the intervention compared to the other two groups. This might be because the telephone contact had much more MI content than the letter did. Participants receiving the letter reduced their gambling behaviour more than participants receiving no contact. Gambling losses decreased 29% for the phone and 15% for the letter groups, compared with only 3% for the control group.

A follow-up by phone or letter did not seem to have much impact. However, only some participants in the telephone group were interested in receiving a follow-up call. For these participants only, receiving a follow-up call reduced gambling behaviour further than not receiving the follow-up call.

Most participants who were contacted and wanted to change their gambling behaviour chose to set gambling limits. Few participants chose to self-exclude or be referred to treatment. Almost all participants kept gambling after the contact.

How you can use this research

Prevention efforts, including responsible gambling strategies, could consider offering heavy gamblers a variety of options (i.e., not just self-exclusion and/or

treatment referral) for changing their gambling behaviours. Future research could study the impact of similar interventions in areas outside of Norway. Future research could also explore whether gambler characteristics (e.g., income, debt) impact the effects of the interventions.

About the researchers

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Citation

Jonsson, J., Hodgins, D. C., Munck, I., & Carlbring, P. (2019). Reaching out to big losers: A randomized controlled trial of brief motivational contact providing gambling expenditure feedback. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 33(3), 179-189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/adb0000447>

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