

research snapshot

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An examination of co-occurring gambling and addictive behaviours over a 5-year period

What this research is about

It is common for people who gamble to also engage in substance use or other behavioural addictions. Research has found that when problematic gambling behaviours decrease, other addictive behaviours may increase. This is known as ‘addiction substitution’, which is associated with worse treatment outcomes and a greater risk of relapse. On the other hand, it is possible for people to decrease their problem gambling and other addictive behaviours at the same time. This is known as ‘concurrent recovery’.

Among people who gamble, changes in addictive behaviours not only occur in people who meet the criteria for gambling disorder. Research has found that people with different levels of problem gambling severity increased their engagement with other addictive behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this study, the researchers aimed to investigate the co-occurrence of problem gambling and problems with substance use and other behavioural addictions over time. They also examined demographic and psychological factors associated with different patterns of gambling and addiction severity.

What the researchers did

The researchers analyzed data from the Quinte Longitudinal Study (QLS). The QLS is a study of gambling and gambling problems over a 5-year period. It included 4,121 participants aged 17 to 80 living in the Quinte region of Ontario, Canada. The QLS recruited a sample of people from the general community and a sample of people at high risk of problem gambling. It collected information regarding problem gambling severity using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI); substance uses such

What you need to know

People who gamble often engage in other addictive behaviours. In this study, the researchers examined co-occurring patterns of problem gambling and other addictive behaviours over time. They also examined demographic and psychological factors associated with these different patterns. The researchers analyzed data collected for a 5-year longitudinal study. They identified six co-occurring patterns of problem gambling and addictions. It was found that people who experienced a decrease in problem gambling did not ‘substitute’ this behaviour with other addictions. Rather, most people showed a pattern of decreases in both problem gambling and other addictions at the same time.

as alcohol use and smoking; behavioural addictions such as shopping and video gaming; other mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety; personality traits; stress, happiness, and life satisfaction; social support; and family history of addictions and mental health issues.

The researchers identified patterns of co-occurring problem gambling and addiction severity over the 5-year period. They also identified predictors of these co-occurring patterns.

What the researchers found

The researchers found six different patterns of problem gambling and addiction severity. One pattern had the highest number of participants (41%). Participants showing this pattern had low levels of problem gambling and other addictions at the start of the study. Their problems with gambling and other

addictions decreased over time. Co-occurring patterns 3 and 4 were similar to the first pattern. Only the decrease in other addictions was not significant. Compared to pattern 2 (28.4% of participants), pattern 3 (21.9%) showed a more rapid decrease in problem gambling in years 1 to 3, followed by an increase from years 4 to 5.

Pattern 4 (4.9% of participants) showed moderate gambling problems and moderate severity in other addictions, which remained stable over time. Pattern 5 (3%) included participants with moderate problem gambling and high addiction severity that remained stable over time. Pattern 6 (0.8%) included those with high problem gambling and high addiction severity that remained stable over time.

Compared to people with a decrease in problem gambling only, people whose problem gambling and addiction severity both decreased were more likely to be employed, report lower life satisfaction, and experience other mental health problems. This finding may be related to a lack of self-help and treatment options for problem gambling compared to substance use addictions and mental health. Seeking help for other addictions and mental health may help decrease problem gambling among people who gamble to deal with distress. Being non-White also predicted being a member of the group that showed decreases in both problem gambling and addiction severity. Being a student predicted a decrease in gambling but not in other addictions.

In contrast, people with moderate-to-high problem gambling and addiction severity tended to show a stable pattern over time. This finding may be explained by the fact that there is often a long delay between experiencing problem gambling symptoms and seeking treatment. Another potential explanation is that people with moderate-to-high gambling problems might have yet to experience significant problems that would prompt them to make change.

The researchers did not find that a decrease in problem gambling led to an increase in other addictions. In other words, there was no pattern indicating addiction substitution. Overall, the findings suggest that co-occurring gambling and addictive

behaviours are likely to decrease over time among people from the general community.

How you can use this research

This research can be used by gambling researchers and healthcare professionals. The findings indicate the need to simultaneously address gambling and other mental health and addictive problems.

About the researchers

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