

# research snapshot

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## What partners of individuals with gambling problems say about their relationship, family life, and parenting

### What this research is about

Problem gambling is prevalent in Norway. It is estimated that about 2.3% of the population in Norway are gamblers with moderate risk, and another 0.9% have problem gambling. Treatments continue to occur on an individual basis, without much regard for the context around the person. This is limiting because problem gambling may affect everyone in the gambler's social circle, especially the family. The consequences may be negative for partners, children, and extended family members. Past research has found that problem gambling not only brings financial and relational problems, but also increases partners' distress, depression, and isolation. It can also subject children to experience instability and insecurity in their family life.

Despite these negative consequences, there is limited research into how gambling problems affect the family and parental roles. There is a research gap in how the gamblers' partners experience parenting and family life in their daily life. Therefore, the aim of this study was to fill in this gap by interviewing partners of people with gambling problems.

### What the researchers did

The researchers recruited nine female partners of people with gambling problems. All had responsibilities of parenting minor children. The researchers interviewed the participants. They then organized the content of the interviews into main themes that were common across the interviews.

### What the researchers found

Results revealed that there were three main themes: the lone problem, the lone parent, and the lone adult.

### What you need to know

This study examined how partners of individuals with gambling problems experience everyday family life, relations, and parenting. The researchers interviewed nine female partners of people with gambling problems. Results revealed that gambling problems affect family life and parenting. The participants shared experiences of loneliness, increased responsibility, lack of trust, lack of support, and feelings of shame and stigma. However, they reported trying to conceal the situation from others (and their children). Despite their struggles, the participants found ways to regain power by making themselves in charge of the family's finances and daily chores, and by trying to find ways to keep the family together.

The lone problem described how the participants experienced problem gambling as invisible and not understood by others. Due to feeling of shame and stigma, they felt embarrassed, alone, and blamed for choosing to stay with their partner. This limited their ability to get support. Getting support was not easy because it was often insufficient or not accessible.

Many participants mentioned a lack of knowledge about problem gambling among health and social services workers. The participants had little support from their partner who was dealing with gambling problems. They were also reluctant to talk about their situation with their friends and family. However, some managed to find peer support and felt like their struggles were recognized by others who had the same experiences. There people felt less lonely in their situation.

The lone adult was about the experience of being the only adult in the family. Participants reported overseeing all the chores and responsibilities because they could not trust their partner to get things done. They also took control of the family's finances. The participants described how they and their partner were not equal partners anymore. Regardless of how difficult it was and how much damage was done financially to the family, many felt that they needed to support their partner's recovery.

The lone parent referred to how participants experienced parenting. The participants reported that they wanted their family life to continue as usual, without their children suffering. However, this was difficult, and many participants sensed that their children knew something was wrong. They described how their children expressed their troubles in many different ways (e.g., stomach pains, trouble sleeping, showing anger).

The participants also shared how they tried to stay together as a family, although it was a hard choice, since they could not count on their partner. At times, they had to defend why they stayed with their partner to their family and social network. To help them not give up, many participants separated the person from the problem and focused on family unity. Sometimes setting limits to how much they were going to deal with their partner's problem gambling was helpful.

#### How you can use this research

This research could be used by treatment and prevention service workers. Treatment options could be provided for partners and other family members of those with gambling problems. Support could also be offered by developing interventions to increase awareness of how family life changes for people who go through these problems. Future research could examine the effectiveness of support groups and interventions for partners of people with gambling problems.

#### About the researchers

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#### Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (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 responsible 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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