What this research is about

Few individuals with problem gambling seek formal treatment, such as from a gambling counsellor. This could be due to a lack of awareness of gambling help services, feelings of shame and guilt, and fear of stigma. In fact, many gamblers attempt to recover from problem gambling on their own without formal treatment.

Little research has examined behavior changes in non-treatment seeking problem gamblers. The aim of this study was to follow a group of problem gamblers who wanted to reduce or quit gambling on their own. Participants were followed for 18 months for any change in their gambling behaviors.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited adult problem gamblers, aged 19 and older, who wanted to reduce or quit gambling within the next 30 days or six months. Recruitment occurred in 2013-2014 via online, newspaper, and metro advertisements. A total of 204 participants completed online surveys every three months for the next 12 months. They then completed a final follow-up survey at six months after the 12-month period (at 18 months since the start of the study).

The initial baseline survey assessed demographic information, gambling behaviors, and use of treatment services. Demographics included age, sex, education, marital status, employment and income. Gambling behaviors included types of gambling activities, frequency and money spent on gambling, and gambling severity.

What you need to know

This study observed behavior changes in problem gamblers over a period of 18 months. The participants were problem gamblers who wanted to reduce or quit gambling on their own. The researchers found that the severity of problem gambling reduced over time. The largest reduction occurred in the first three months of the study. Participants with more severe gambling problems reported greater reductions in their gambling severity. Further, the reductions experienced within the first 12 months were maintained for another six months without formal treatment.

These results suggest that self-directed changes in gambling could occur in problem gamblers motivated to reduce or quit their gambling. Future research could examine the efficacy of self-help tools and other informal treatment options in the recovery from problem gambling.

Over the next 12 months, participants completed follow-up surveys that asked the same questions. These surveys referred to changes in gambling behaviors in the past three months. Thus, participants completed four follow-up surveys at three, six, nine, and 12 months.

Participants completed a fifth and final follow-up survey at six months after the 12-month period. This final survey asked about gambling behaviors in the past six months and evaluated if gambling had been reduced to a low-risk threshold. Low-risk gambling was defined as gambling no more than three times per month, spending no more than $1000 Canadian.
per year, and no more than 1% of gross family income.

The researchers excluded participants who were receiving formal treatment from their analyses. Receiving formal treatment included help from a family doctor, psychologist, gambling service, religious leader, counsellor or social worker. This left 167 participants.

**What the researchers found**

The researchers found that gambling severity decreased over the first 12 months. The largest decrease occurred in the first three months. Participants with more severe gambling problems at baseline reported greater reductions in gambling severity over time. It should be noted that participants varied a lot in how their gambling severity changed over time.

Participants also reduced how frequently they gambled over the first 12 months. The largest reductions in gambling frequency occurred at six, nine, and 12 months. Reductions in amount of money spent on gambling were also reported.

Gambling severity did not change significantly from 12 to 18 months of follow-up. At 18 months, about 11% of participants gambled at a low-risk threshold. Almost one-thirds of participants were no longer identified as problem gamblers for one year or longer throughout the 18-month period. But most participants who had reduced their gambling behaviors continued to gamble.

**How you can use this research**

This study provides insight into the natural recovery from problem gambling. Researchers could explore the efficacy of self-help tools and other informal treatment options in the recovery from problem gambling. Future research could also explore how self-identity, thought processes, and life events might lead to change in gambling behaviors.

**About the researchers**

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**Keywords**

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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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