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Do parents and spouses know how much money people with problem gambling lose to gambling?

What this research is about

Some people experience harms related to their own gambling. These may include feeling depressed, financial problems, and relationship issues. Gambling-related harms can also impact those close to people with problem gambling. For instance, partners and other family members of people with problem gambling may also experience financial problems and mental distress. While concerned significant others (CSOs) are also affected, there is little information about how much CSOs actually know about their family members' problem gambling.

Research in other fields of addiction, like alcohol and drug use, has found that CSOs have good insight into drinking and drug use. However, alcohol and drug use produce visible signs like intoxication. Gambling does not. So, it is not known whether CSOs of people with problem gambling know the extent of their issues.

The current study explored the level of agreement about the amount of money lost to gambling between a person with problem gambling and their CSO. It also examined whether the level of agreement differed based on the CSO's type of relationship to the gambler. Finally, the study assessed the best way to model the level of agreement about gambling losses.

What you need to know

Parents and spouses of people with problem gambling have good insight into the amount of money lost to gambling. They have some knowledge about gambling debt, and excellent awareness of the years of problem gambling. Spouses of people with problem gambling seem to have better knowledge about the amount of money lost due to gambling compared to parents. Parents of people with problem gambling have a better sense of gambling-related debt than spouses. When modeling the level of agreement about money lost due to gambling, it is important to use a model that allows for the distribution of participants' reports to be skewed, while still including reports that are zero (i.e., no money lost to gambling).

What the researchers did

Participants were 133 people with problem gambling based on a score of 8 or greater on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). The other 133 participants were their CSOs, who could be their spouse, parent, sibling, or friend.

Participants were part of a larger study about problem gambling treatment. Before beginning the treatment study, both gamblers and their CSOs filled out a timeline flowback (TLFB) report. The TLFB looks like a calendar. Participants were asked to record the number of days spent gambling and the amount of money lost to gambling each day for the past 30 days. They also reported gambling debt and years spent gambling.

The researchers used a statistical method called intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) to analyze the level of agreement between the gamblers' and the CSO's TLFB reports. The researchers also analyzed whether the level of agreement differed based on the type of relationship the CSO had with the gambler (i.e., if they were a parent, spouse, etc.).

The researchers tested for the best fitting model for assessing the level of agreement about gambling losses. Usually, most studies that calculate ICCs rely on a model that assumes a normal response distribution. A normal distribution has a bell-shaped curve, with most people scoring in the middle and few people at the two extreme ends. However, this is highly unlikely to hold in the case of gambling losses. This is because a few gamblers lose large amounts of money and many report small or no losses, making the curve heavily skewed to the right. So, the researchers tested a two-part gamma model using generalized linear mixed-effects model (GLMM).

What the researchers found

There was a fair level of agreement between the CSOs and the gamblers about the amount of money lost to gambling. This is in line with the findings of previous research. CSOs who were spouses showed better agreement with the gamblers' reports compared to CSOs who were parents and CSOs who were neither parents nor spouses.

There was excellent agreement between the CSOs and the gamblers about the years spent gambling. There was fair agreement about the amount of gambling debt. Parent CSOs showed higher agreement with the gamblers' reports on gambling debt compared to spouse CSOs.

The ability to detect a difference between the ICCs of the spouse CSOs and the parent CSOs was slightly better for the two-part gamma GLMM compared to the normal distribution model. This suggests that it is important to use a model that allows flexibility for the reports to be skewed, while still including reports that are zero (i.e., no money lost to gambling).

How you can use this research

The findings suggest that using a normal distribution when modeling the level of agreement about gambling losses could produce results that are inaccurate. Researchers could consider other options, like the two-part gamma GLMM, when modeling the level of agreement about money lost due to gambling (or similar outcomes that have a skewed distribution). This study could also be of interest to gambling prevention and treatment providers. It is important to understand how much CSOs know about their family members' gambling problems and include them as part of the treatment plan.

About the researchers

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Citation

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