

research snapshot

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The potential for emotion regulation-enhanced group therapy in the treatment of gambling disorder

What this research is about

People with gambling disorder (GD) may lack impulse control and find it challenging to engage in goal-directed behaviours. Thus, they may not be able to control their urges to gamble, particularly when they experience emotional distress. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can help people with GD reduce time and money spent on gambling. But one complicating factor in treating people with GD is that they often have other psychiatric disorders, such as mood disorders and anxiety disorders.

Emotion regulation (ER) can help people adapt and cope with emotional distress through a greater awareness, understanding, and acceptance of emotions. ER can also help people control their impulsive behaviours and select more goal-directed behaviours even when they are experiencing negative emotions. People may explicitly use certain strategies to regulate their emotions. They may also rely on some strategies without being aware of their use. Past research has shown that people with GD have difficulties with regulating their emotions.

This study examined the feasibility of including ER strategies in the treatment of people with GD. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into participants' experiences and to evaluate the outcomes of ER-enhanced group CBT.

What the researchers did

The researchers conducted a non-randomized pilot study. People from the waiting list at the Stockholm Dependency Center in Sweden were recruited to participate in this study. Inclusion criteria included: (1) a diagnosis of GD according to the DSM-5 criteria; (2) at least 18 years of age; (3) be able to speak and read

What you need to know

People with gambling disorder (GD) may lack impulse control. They may also have additional psychiatric disorders (e.g., anxiety disorders). Emotion regulation (ER) strategies can help people with GD control their impulsive behaviours and deal with their urges to gamble even when they experience emotional distress. The researchers did a pilot study to assess whether ER-enhanced cognitive behavioural therapy is an acceptable treatment for those with GD. A total of 21 treatment-seeking adults with GD participated in the study. Participants took part in eight ER-enhanced cognitive behavioural group therapy sessions. Participants' gambling symptoms decreased over the course of the treatment and the 12-month follow-up. Participants were satisfied with their treatment. They reported being more aware of their emotional processes and strategies to deal with difficult emotions.

Swedish; and (4) available for participating in scheduled group sessions. People were excluded if they had a manic episode and reported gambling during this episode. People were also excluded if they had acute psychiatric symptoms and higher risk of suicide.

A total of 21 people were included in the study. The average age of participants was 36 years, and most were men (81%). Additionally, most participants (81%) had at least one additional psychiatric disorder (e.g., depressive disorders).

The ER-enhanced group CBT treatment involved two-hour group sessions led by licensed clinical

psychologists. A total of eight ER-enhanced group CBT sessions were offered to participants. On average, participants attended six sessions. Each participant also received a short individual session within the first three weeks of treatment. The purpose of the individual session was to clarify personal motivation and set individual goals.

The researchers asked participants to complete surveys pre-, during-, and up to 12 months post-treatment. The surveys assessed: (1) the severity of their symptoms of GD using the Gambling Symptoms Assessment Scale (G-SAS); (2) how much money and time they spent gambling weekly; (3) symptoms of depression and anxiety; (4) their ability to regulate emotions; (5) gambling urges and cravings; and (6) alcohol consumption.

Participants who completed more than three sessions were interviewed to understand whether they were satisfied with their treatment and whether they felt that ER-enhanced group CBT was an acceptable form of treatment. Participants were asked about possible improvements and pros and cons with the treatment.

What the researchers found

The researchers found that during and post-treatment, participants' GD symptoms declined over time. Participants also reported that they spent less time and money gambling. The researchers did not find any significant changes with respect to anxiety, depression, and ER difficulties.

Participants did not note any negative effects or ethical issues with their treatment. In fact, participants were highly satisfied with the treatment. Participants also noted that it was important for the treatment to be able to be individually tailored and the duration to be lengthened as needed. After the treatment, participants reported greater awareness of their emotions and adoption of focused strategies to cope with gambling cravings. Participants also found the weekly review of their gambling behaviour and homework assignments helpful. Although participants experienced cravings less frequently, when they did occur, these cravings remained intense.

How you can use this research

The findings of this study could inform clinical treatment. Clinicians could enhance CBT using emotion regulation strategies to treat gambling disorder. Clinicians could also consider the importance of individual tailoring and adding sessions to the treatment protocol outlined in this study.

About the researchers

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Citation

Månsson, V., Molander, O., Carlbring, P., Rosendahl, I., & Berman, A. H. (2022). Emotion regulation-enhanced group treatment for gambling disorder: A non-randomized pilot trial. *BMC Psychiatry*, 22, 16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03630-3>

Study funding

The study was funded by Region of Stockholm and Stockholm Center for Dependency Disorders. Open access funding provided by Karolinska Institute.

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