The role of emotion regulation and gambling motivations in problem gambling among young adults

What this research is about

Evidence suggests that more young adults have gambling problems than adults. The proportion of teenagers with problem gambling (PG) increases as they get older and become young adults. PG is repetitive gambling behaviour that leads to negative consequences in daily life. Young adults between 22 and 30 years of age have the highest rates of PG. People tend engage in risky behaviours at these ages. Risky behaviours include drinking alcohol, using drugs, and gambling.

There is a lack of research investigating the mental and emotional states that may make someone more likely to have PG. People’s ability to regulate their emotions, also known as emotion regulation, may affect how likely they are to develop PG. People with poor emotion regulation skills may gamble more frequently to improve their mood. As a result, they may be more likely to develop PG.

There are many things that motivate people to gamble. People may gamble to avoid feeling negative emotions. These are called coping motivations. They may gamble to feel positive emotions. These are called enhancement motivations. Others may gamble for social reasons. People who gamble to avoid negative emotions and feel positive ones may be more likely to develop PG.

In this study, the researchers investigated how coping and enhancement motivations affect the relationship between emotion regulation and PG among young adults.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants by posting flyers on university campuses and notifications on online discussion boards. They also recruited participants using university participant pools and Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Participants were 919 young adults who gambled at least once in the past year. They completed an online survey. The researchers found that people who were less aware of and less able to identify their emotions were more likely to develop PG if they gambled to cope with negative emotions. Also, people who gambled to cope with negative emotions and could focus on their goals when feeling such emotions were more likely to develop PG. This finding suggested that these young people used gambling as a goal to escape negative emotions. Prevention service providers can use this research to create outreach programs that teach children and young adults emotion regulation skills.

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers investigated how coping and enhancement motivations affect the relationship between emotion regulation and problem gambling (PG). Participants were 919 young adults who gambled at least once in the past year. They completed an online survey. The researchers found that people who were less aware of and less able to identify their emotions were more likely to develop PG if they gambled to cope with negative emotions. Also, people who gambled to cope with negative emotions and could focus on their goals when feeling such emotions were more likely to develop PG. This finding suggested that these young people used gambling as a goal to escape negative emotions. Prevention service providers can use this research to create outreach programs that teach children and young adults emotion regulation skills.

The researchers recruited participants by posting flyers on university campuses and notifications on online discussion boards. They also recruited participants using university participant pools and Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Participants were 919 young adults who were 18 to 27 years old. They gambled at least once in the past year.

Participants completed an online survey. On the survey, they completed a questionnaire called the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS). The DERS assessed participants’ ability to regulate their emotions by measuring six components of emotion regulation. These components were: (1) clarity about the type of emotions they were feeling; (2) awareness
of their emotions; (3) non-acceptance of their emotional responses such as denying; (4) ability to control impulses when feeling negative emotions; (5) having various strategies to control negative emotions; and (6) ability to focus on their goals when feeling negative emotions.

Participants also completed the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI). The CPGI assessed participants for PG. According to the CPGI, 8.1% of participants were at high risk of PG. Another 15.2% of participants were at moderate risk. Participants completed the Gambling Motivations Questionnaire (GMQ). The GMQ assessed whether participants gambled to be social, to cope with negative emotions, or to feel positive emotions.

What the researchers found

Men and those who gambled more frequently were at higher risk of PG. With regard to gambling motivations, participants who gambled to avoid negative emotions or to enhance positive emotions were at higher risk. Gambling for social reasons was not associated with PG. Participants who were less aware of their emotions and were less able to identify their emotions were more likely to develop PG if they gambled to cope with negative emotions.

As well, people who gambled to cope with negative emotions and were able to focus on their goals when feeling such emotions appeared more likely to develop PG. This finding suggests that these people’s goal is to escape their negative emotions by gambling.

How you can use this research

Treatment service providers can use this research to create programs that focus on young adults’ specific emotion regulation difficulties and gambling motivations. For example, prevention service providers could teach young adults, who are not clear or aware of their emotions and who gamble to avoid negative emotions, how to recognize their emotions and deal with them. Prevention service providers can use this research to create outreach programs that teach children and young adults emotion regulation skills. These programs may reduce young people’s risk of PG. More research is needed to identify other characteristics that may affect the relationship between emotion regulation and PG.

About the researchers

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Citation


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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (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 safer 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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