

research snapshot

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Exploring the link between anxiety and gambling behaviour in non-treatment seeking gamblers

What this research is about

Gambling disorder is often linked with other mental health issues. These include depression, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, and suicide risk. Subsyndromal gambling involves significant gambling activity, but does not yet meet the clinical diagnosis of gambling disorder. Subsyndromal gamblers also suffer from similar mental health problems. Previous research has suggested that anxiety can influence gambling behaviour. This study assessed the link between anxiety symptoms, gambling severity, and other cognitive and clinical factors in non-treatment seeking gamblers.

What the researcher did

Participants were recruited from Chicago, Illinois, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, through advertising in the media. A total of 143 non-treatment-seeking young adults, aged 18–29 years, participated in the study. The participants completed questionnaires that asked about anxiety symptoms, gambling behaviour, gambling severity, impulsiveness, suicide risk, and quality of life. They also completed several computer tasks to assess their cognitive functions (e.g., ability to plan and make decision, cognitive flexibility to adapt to new and unexpected situations).

The researchers grouped the participants into three categories based on their gambling severity: 1) recreational gamblers who did not have gambling problems; 2) gamblers with subsyndromal gambling disorder; and 3) gamblers with gambling disorder. Data were analyzed to examine the link between anxiety symptoms, gambling severity, and other cognitive and clinical factors.

What you need to know

Anxiety may be a risk factor for gambling-related problems. This study found that anxiety symptoms were associated with greater gambling severity and poorer ability to pay attention to tasks. Gamblers with more severe anxiety symptoms also had poorer quality of life and higher risk of suicide. Gambling treatment providers should be aware of and treat anxiety symptoms among their clients. More focused attention to support anxious gamblers may help reduce suicide risk and improve quality of life.

What the researcher found

Gamblers with more severe anxiety symptoms had more gambling problems. They had poorer quality of life and higher risk of suicide. Anxiety was also related to attentional impulsiveness. Thus, gamblers with more severe anxiety symptoms had more trouble focusing on tasks. However, there was no association between anxiety symptoms and other cognitive functions, such as decision making or cognitive flexibility.

How you can use this research

Gamblers who have anxiety symptoms may have a reduced focus on their gambling behaviour. For example, they may not be aware of how much they have gambled. This may lead to more severe gambling problems. Gambling treatment providers may want to help gamblers manage anxiety to improve treatment outcomes. Relaxation techniques may be beneficial in treating anxiety. More focused attention to support anxious gamblers may also help reduce suicide risk and improve their quality of life.

About the Researcher

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Keywords

Gambling disorder, subsyndromal gambling, problem gambling, anxiety, neurocognition

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