

research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



Factors that predict discontinuing online treatment for problem gambling

What this research is about

Problem gambling can result in many negative consequences. However, only around 10% of people with gambling problems seek treatment. Internet-based treatments have been offered to reduce the barriers to help-seeking. Previous research has shown that online treatments can reduce gambling problems, depression, and anxiety. But amongst people who seek treatment online or offline, many cancel or discontinue their treatment early.

The aim of this study was to examine factors that predicted treatment discontinuation. The researchers used the term “discontinuation” rather than “dropout” since dropout implies a failure in commitment to treatment. But not completing treatment might reflect other issues, such as no longer needing professional help. The researchers looked for factors that predicted discontinuing online treatment at three different phases: pre-treatment, before halfway, and before the end of treatment.

What the researchers did

Peli poikki is an online 8-week cognitive behavioural therapy for people with gambling problems in Finland. The treatment is low threshold as it is free, anonymous, and open to Finnish- or Swedish-speaking adults over 18 years of age. People do not need a referral to register. Since *Peli poikki* involves weekly contact with a therapist, it has a wait-list period.

Data for this study came from 1,139 Finnish adults who registered in the *Peli poikki* programme between 2019 and 2021. The researchers used data that were collected during screening (being placed on waiting list) and at baseline (right before treatment began). They looked for factors that predicted whether

What you need to know

This study examined factors that predicted discontinuing treatment for gambling problems at pre-treatment, before halfway, and before the end of treatment. Data were from 1,139 Finnish adults who registered in the *Peli poikki* programme between 2019 and 2021. *Peli poikki* is an online cognitive behavioural therapy that lasts eight weeks. It involves weekly contact with a therapist. Thus, there is a wait-list period. The researchers found that people were more likely to discontinue treatment if they were younger, had lower education, had more severe gambling problems, were not ready to change their gambling behaviour, had spent longer time on the waiting list, and had fewer good social relationships.

participants discontinued their treatment either: (1) before the first module (pre-treatment); (2) before the fourth module (before halfway); and (3) before the final eighth module (before the end of treatment).

The following factors were included in the analyses:

- Gambling problems based on the National Opinion Research Center DSM Screen for Gambling Problems (NODS).
- Depression symptoms based on the Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale (MADRS).
- Alcohol use based on the brief Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C).
- Readiness to change gambling behaviour based on the Readiness to Change Questionnaire (RCQ).
- Self-rated physical health and mental health.
- Sense of being in control of financial situation.

- Gambling-related factors including presence of gambling debt, number of years with gambling problems, previous help-seeking, and problems with specific game types (e.g., online slots, offline slots, online casino games, offline casino games).
- Social score based on number of good social relationships with mother, father, siblings, spouse, children, and friends.
- Number of days on waiting list.
- Demographic characteristics, including gender, education, income, age, age first starting to gamble, and being employed or not.

What the researchers found

Discontinuation at pre-treatment

Of the 1,139 participants, 64 participants did not complete the first treatment module (5.6%). The predictors of discontinuing before the first module were age, RCQ scores, and mental health. Participants were more likely to discontinue at this phase if they were younger, not ready to change their gambling behaviour, and reported better mental well-being.

Discontinuation before halfway and before the end of treatment

A total of 295 participants discontinued treatment before the fourth module (22.7%), and 357 participants discontinued treatment before the eighth module (31.3%). The same predictors were found for discontinuing treatment before halfway and before finishing it. These predictors included age, education, NODS scores, RCQ scores, number of days on waiting list, and social scores. Participants were more likely to discontinue treatment if they were younger, had lower education, and had more severe gambling problems. They were also more likely to discontinue treatment if they were not ready to change their gambling behaviour, had spent a longer time on the waiting list, and had fewer good social relationships.

Effects of COVID-19

The researchers also explored whether the COVID-19 pandemic had an effect on treatment discontinuation. Participants were less likely to discontinue treatment if they registered in the programme after March 1,

2020. But there was no effect of a specific lockdown period (March to June 2020) on treatment discontinuation. Including COVID-19 time periods in the analyses did not change the main results.

How you can use this research

The findings of this study could inform the *Peli poikki* programme and other online treatments for problem gambling. For example, treatment programmes might want to target participants' level of readiness to change and quality of social relationships.

About the researchers

Jussi Palomäki is affiliated with the Gambling Clinic at Helsinki University Hospital in Helsinki, Finland. **Kalle Lind**, **Maria Heiskanen**, and **Sari Castrén** are affiliated with the Health and Well-Being Promotion Unit at the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare in Helsinki, Finland. For more information about this study, please contact Jussi Palomäki at jussi.palomaki@hus.fi.

Citation

Palomäki, J., Lind, K., Heiskanen, M., & Castrén, S. (2022). Predicting online problem gambling treatment discontinuation: New evidence from cross-validated models. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*. Advance online publication.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000875>

Study funding

No funding was declared for this study.

About Greo

Greo has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. Greo is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization with almost two decades of international experience in generating, synthesizing, and mobilizing research into action across the health and wellbeing sectors. Greo helps organizations improve their strategies, policies, and practices by harnessing the power of evidence and stakeholder insight.

Learn more about Greo by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.

