

research snapshot

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Attending Gamblers Anonymous online during COVID-19

What this research is about

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the mental health of people around the world. Restrictions introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19 had led to few opportunities for in-person social connection. These restrictions extended to Gamblers Anonymous (GA) meetings, which were held online instead of in-person. GA is a mutual aid fellowship for people with gambling problems. A mutual aid fellowship means that members offer each other solidarity and empathy, with less emphasis on giving advice. GA also tends to focus on the financial difficulties associated with gambling problems.

The aim of this study was to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected GA members in the UK. In particular, the study explored how GA members felt about the move to online meetings during the pandemic.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 18 men and 3 women who were members of GA over the age of 18. Participants were mostly interviewed over the phone throughout June and August 2020. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their experiences with GA before the pandemic (in-person meetings) and during the pandemic (online meetings). They were asked about their frequency of attending online GA meetings. Participants were also asked what they found helpful and unhelpful about attending GA online.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. In a thematic analysis, the transcripts are read repeatedly to ensure the

What you need to know

Gamblers Anonymous (GA) offers support for people recovering from gambling problems. It is traditionally held in-person. Restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic required that it transitioned to online meetings. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of GA members in the UK. The researchers wanted to know what GA members thought of attending GA online instead of in-person. The researchers interviewed 21 GA members and identified three themes from the interviews. Theme 1 was the practicalities of GA in lockdown. Theme 2 was the importance of relationships within GA. Theme 3 was the therapeutic elements of the meetings. Cutting across these themes was the tension between the individual versus group identity.

researcher is familiar with their contents. Common themes of the transcripts are then identified in a collaborative process amongst the researchers involved.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified three overarching themes from the interviews: 1) the practicalities of GA in lockdown, 2) the importance of relationships within GA, and 3) therapeutic elements of the meetings. Each theme had several subthemes.

The three subthemes for Theme 1 (practicalities) were *opportunity*, *novelty and variety*, and *Zoom fatigue*. In terms of *opportunity*, online meetings meant that GA members were not restricted to meetings in their geographic region. It also meant that there were more

meetings available to attend, as well as a greater variety of types of meetings. The second subtheme, *novelty and variety*, referred to the novelty of different meeting types. Members could attend online meetings in different countries, which provided different perspectives to think about their recovery. The third subtheme, *Zoom fatigue*, referred to the fatigue arising from spending so much of one's day on Zoom. With the restrictions, many people were working, doing school, and socializing via Zoom.

There were four subthemes for Theme 2 (importance of relationships). The first subtheme was *social comparison*. Much of GA meetings consist of members sharing their personal experiences of gambling, many of which revolve around the negative consequences. Participants mentioned listening to others' stories reinforced the importance of attending GA meetings. The second subtheme was *social affirmation*, which referred to the opportunity to share success stories of sobriety and having other people recognize and celebrate one's successes. The third subtheme was *solidarity*, or the experience of having other people understand what you are going through. The fourth subtheme was *disconnection*. Participants reflected that online meetings were still lacking "something" in comparison to physical meetings, and the social connection did not feel the same.

There were four subthemes for Theme 3 (therapeutic elements of GA). *Contract making and maintaining* referred to participants using attendance at the meetings as a sort of contract to stay sober. *Dropout rates and refusal to engage* referred to participant observations that the switch to online meetings resulted in a large number of dropouts. The third subtheme, *reduced investment*, referred to members being distracted during meetings. There was noted blurring of activities. Participants commented that it was easier to disengage from the meeting online than it would be in-person. The fourth subtheme was *anonymity and trust*. This referred to participants' worry that online meetings, in which participants logged in from their homes, made it difficult to maintain anonymity.

Finally, cutting across these themes was the tension between the individual versus their group identity. The benefits to attending GA are mainly individualistic (i.e., maintaining one's sobriety). However, the way GA works relies on group effort. The group dynamics were changed with online meetings as some members became more focused on their own needs.

How you can use this research

This research could be useful to GA and service providers to better understand how to support their users, especially during a crisis like COVID-19.

About the researchers

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