

research snapshot

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Different ways of coping with shame affect the link between depression and gambling

What this research is about

Many studies show a strong link between problem gambling and mood disorders such as depression. People who experience depression are at a greater risk of developing gambling problems. Additionally, having more severe gambling problems is linked to having higher levels of depression. However, the pathway from depression to problem gambling is still not well understood. Shame is known to be linked to both depression and problem gambling. For example, people with problem gambling may feel shame after gambling losses.

Shame is the feeling that negative outcomes are caused by one's own flaws. There are four ways people cope with shame: attack self, attack others, withdraw, and avoid. When someone attacks themselves, it means they accept the shame and turn their anger inward. When they attack others, they may not accept the shame, and instead try to make others feel worse. If they withdraw, it means they accept the shame and try to hide from the situation. In contrast, if they avoid, they do not accept the shame and try to distract themselves from it. How people cope with shame affects their well-being.

One possibility is that coping with shame plays a role in linking depression to problem gambling. This study tested how people's ways of coping with shame might affect the link between depression and gambling.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 1379 undergraduate students from the University of Manitoba in Canada to complete an online survey. The researchers excluded participants who had never gambled. This left 484 participants who gambled.

What you need to know

People who experience depression are at a greater risk of experiencing problem gambling. However, the pathway from depression to problem gambling is not well understood. This study tested if the ways people cope with shame affect the link between depression and problem gambling. Participants completed an online survey that asked about gambling behaviour, feelings of depression, and four ways that they might cope with shame. The researchers found that people with greater feelings of depression gambled more frequently and at a more severe level. This was because of a greater tendency to cope with shame by attacking others and a lower tendency to cope with shame by attacking oneself. Coping with shame by withdrawal or avoidance did not link depression to gambling.

First, participants rated how often they gambled in the past year. Then they completed the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). The PGSI is a 9-item scale that measures the risk of problem gambling in the past year. It asks participants how often they have experienced different gambling problems, such as betting more than they could afford to lose. PGSI scores range from 0 to 27. A score of 0 indicates non-problem gambling while a score of 8 or higher indicates problem gambling. Scores from 1–7 indicate the participant is at a low to moderate risk of having problem gambling.

Next, participants completed the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21). This study focused on the depression section of the DASS-21. This section asks

people to rate how much statements applied to them (e.g., whether they have felt downhearted in the past week). Participants also completed the Compass of Shame Scale. This scale has 48 items that measure the four ways of coping with shame: attack self, attack others, withdrawal, and avoidance. It gives example scenarios and asks people to indicate how they would respond to those situations.

The researchers examined participants' scores for gambling problems, gambling frequency, and depression. They also tested which of the four ways of coping with shame linked depression to problem gambling.

What the researchers found

Based on the PGSI scores, 71% of the participants had non-problem gambling and 6% had problem gambling. The remaining 24% were at low to moderate risk of problem gambling. Based on the DASS-21 scores, 33% of participants had mild to moderate depression while 14% had severe to extremely severe depression. The remaining 53% did not have depression.

Depression was strongly linked to gambling severity and gambling frequency. This means that participants with more severe depression gambled more often and were more likely to experience problem gambling.

The researchers found that depression was linked to gambling severity and frequency through higher levels of coping with shame by attacking others. At the same time, depression was linked to gambling severity and frequency through lower levels of attacking oneself. Finally, withdrawal and avoidance did not link depression to gambling severity or frequency.

These results suggest that people who experience depression and cope with shame by attacking others (and not themselves) may be at higher risk of problem gambling.

How you can use this research

This research shows that how people cope with shame can affect the link between depression and problem gambling. Clinicians could use this information when working with patients who have

depression and problem gambling. They could help patients find healthier ways to cope with shame than by attacking others.

About the researchers

Karli K. Rapinda is affiliated with the Department of Psychology at the University of Manitoba in Manitoba, Canada. **Jason Pchajek** and **Jason D. Edgerton** are affiliated with the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Manitoba. **Matthew T. Keough** is affiliated with the Department of Psychology at York University in Ontario, Canada. For more information about this study, please contact Karli K. Rapinda at rapindak@myumanitoba.ca.

Citation

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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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