

knowledge snapshot



Review of how problem gambling affects partners, family, and friends

What this article is about

This article reviews the evidence about how problem gambling (PG) affects concerned significant others (CSOs). PG is repetitive gambling behaviour that leads to negative consequences. Every person with PG negatively affects four to ten other people with their gambling behaviour. Any person who is affected by another person's gambling is known as a CSO. CSOs can include friends and family members of gamblers. Few gamblers seek professional help for their problems. Many ask family or friends for help instead.

There is a lack of research investigating how PG affects CSOs from the CSOs' perspective. Some research suggests that people with PG underestimate how their gambling behaviour affects people around them. In this article, the authors did a thorough review of research studies to explore how PG affects CSOs. They also explored how CSOs attempt to minimize the harm they experience from PG. Based on their review, the authors suggested areas and topics that need more research.

What was done?

The authors examined peer-reviewed studies that investigated the effect of PG on gamblers' CSOs. Studies had to collect information directly from CSOs. Gamblers did not have to be diagnosed with PG at a clinical level. However, family members reported that the gambler they knew had a gambling problem.

The authors reviewed studies that were published up until July 2018. They assessed the quality of the studies using three different forms. Quantitative studies (i.e., studies using survey design) were assessed using the McMaster University Critical Review Form, Quantitative Studies Version.

Why is this article important?

Even though families and friends are affected by problem gambling (PG), there is a lack of research investigating how PG affects them. In this review, the authors examined studies published up until July 2018 to explore how PG affects concerned significant others (CSOs). They also explored how CSOs attempt to minimize the harm they experience from PG. Partners are especially affected, and suffer from both physical and mental health problems. Children are also particularly affected. This review highlights a need for problem gambling service providers to reach out to CSOs.

Qualitative studies (i.e., studies exploring a topic through people's own words and viewpoints, using methods like interviews and focus groups) were assessed using the McMaster University Critical Review Form, Qualitative Studies Version 2.0. Mixed-method studies were assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool Version 2011.

What you need to know

The authors found 53 studies. Twenty-one studies were quantitative, 26 were qualitative and six used mixed methods. The studies focused on four main areas: 1) how PG affects the health of a partner; 2) how PG affects a partner's relationship with the gambler; 3) how PG affects CSOs who are not partners; and 4) the help-seeking behaviour of CSOs.

Studies consistently found that PG negatively affected gamblers' partners, children, and parents. Partners suffered a lot of emotional pain that led to depression, anxiety, and anger. They also tended to

use alcohol and smoke cigarettes. Partners also suffered from poor physical health, such as headaches, backaches, and high blood pressure.

Studies often found a lot of conflict between gamblers' partners and gamblers themselves. Divorce and separation were common. Partners also experienced violence from gamblers. They were constantly worried that gamblers were out gambling. This led them to constantly look for evidence of gambling. Such monitoring behaviours had a negative impact on the relationship, as gamblers became defensive and resentful. Partners often experienced money problems, which could continue even after the gambler had stopped gambling.

Younger children who had a parent with PG engaged in more risky behaviours, like drinking and smoking. They also had more mental health issues than children without a gambling parent. They tended to hide their emotional problems from anyone outside of their family. Adult children were not affected as much because they were financially independent. Some adult children moved away so that their gambling parent could not ask them for money.

Many CSOs dealt with PG by using their own coping strategies, such as taking over the family's finances. They also got help from a range of professionals and gambling services. CSOs were often reluctant to tell their friends about their problems with PG. Some studies suggested that CSOs encouraged or coerced gamblers to get professional help.

Some studies reported that people with PG were less aware of how much their gambling had negatively affected their partner. A few studies also found that families were better off when gamblers sought treatment for their gambling problems.

Who is it intended for?

This review is intended for researchers. More research is needed to understand how CSOs are affected by gamblers who do, or do not, get professional help. Future research could also investigate how PG affects CSOs performance at work and school, and involve more male CSOs. Treatment

service providers could reach out to CSOs who may be negatively affected by PG to offer strategies on how to cope with PG.

About the researchers

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Citation

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