

research snapshot

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Barriers and facilitators to screening for problem gambling in Australian mental health services

What this research is about

People with gambling problems often have other mental health problems. However, few individuals specifically seek help for gambling problems. It is important to screen for gambling problems among people seeking treatment in mental health services. This can allow for early detection of those experiencing gambling-related harms. There is limited research into screening for problem gambling among mental health patients.

The current study examined current screening practices for problem gambling in mental health services in Victoria, Australia. It explored the barriers and facilitators to screening for problem gambling in mental health services. Barriers are factors that hinder problem gambling screening, whereas facilitators are factors that help promote problem gambling screening.

What the researchers did

The researchers interviewed 30 clinicians and managers from six large adult and child and youth mental health services in Victoria, Australia. The researchers asked participants questions such as “How do clinicians usually become aware that a patient has gambling problems?”, “What do you/your service do to identify patients with gambling problems?”, and “What sort of things impact on your/your service’s ability to identify gambling problems in patients?”

The researchers recorded and transcribed the interviews. They then identified major themes and subthemes among the interview responses.

What you need to know

The current study explored the barriers and facilitators to screening for problem gambling in Australian mental health services. Interviews with 30 clinicians and managers in Victoria, Australia, revealed six main themes. These included competing priorities, importance of routine screening, access to appropriate screening tools, available resources, patient responsiveness, and workforce development needs. These issues must be addressed to meet the needs of problem gamblers seeking treatment in mental health services.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified that, currently, problem gambling screening in mental health services usually happens ad-hoc or at the decision of individual clinicians.

Six themes emerged regarding the main barriers and facilitators to screening. These included:

- (1) **Competing priorities:** Many participants did not view gambling as an urgent risk to health, but rather a longer-term concern. They viewed it as a rare condition. Also, they reported competing priorities brought about by requirements to screen for a range of physical and mental health issues. This results in limited time to consider gambling. Despite these barriers, participants were willing to screen for problem gambling because it can impact the treatment for other conditions.

- (2) **Importance of routine screening:** Participants reported a common reason for not screening was that clinicians forgot or did not remember. Participants noted the importance of having gambling as part of routine screening so that clinicians would be prompted to ask about it.
- (3) **Access to appropriate screening tools:** Most participants were not aware of available screening tools or any uniform ways to assess problem gambling. They welcomed a brief screening tool that could quickly determine whether there was a gambling problem.
- (4) **Resources:** Participants reported that it would be helpful to have tools and resources to use if a gambling problem existed. This included information on the harms of gambling, strategies to change, and where to seek help.
- (5) **Patient responsiveness:** Participants felt that some patients may not want to disclose a gambling problem at their first appointment because of embarrassment and stigma. They also felt that patients must be ready to change and do something about their gambling.
- (6) **Workforce development:** Participants felt that they lacked training and education about problem gambling. This led to low confidence in identifying and managing problem gambling. Participants believed that training should be resourced and funded, and regular training should be provided due to staff turnover.

How you can use this research

Mental health service executives and directors should mandate the use of a brief problem gambling screen in routine screening practices of mental health services. They should also fund regular training for their staff. Training should include information about the signs and symptoms of problem gambling, and where to refer problem gamblers for help. Researchers should develop a brief screening tool for problem gambling that is easy to administer and can be incorporated into other existing screening tools.

About the researchers

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Citation

Rodda, S. N., Manning, V., Dowling, N. A., Lee, S. J., & Lubman, D. I. (2017). Barriers and facilitators of responding to problem gambling: Perspectives from Australian mental health services. *Journal of Gambling Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-017-9713-3>

Keywords

Screening, alcohol, barriers, assessment, mental health services, mental health disorders, gambling

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