

research snapshot

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One session of online counselling leads to positive outcomes for problem gamblers

What this research is about

Few problem gamblers seek help from traditional treatment services. Online counselling is attractive to problem gamblers because it is easy and convenient to access, and is anonymous. However, there is little information available about its effectiveness. The current study examined the immediate impact of a single session of online counselling for problem gambling. It explored if one session would lead to an increase in readiness to change and a decrease in distress. It also explored how intervention outcomes were related to the characteristics of problem gamblers and how they experienced the session.

What the researchers did

Participants were 229 Australian problem gamblers, who used Gambling Help Online between November 2010 and February 2012. Gambling Help Online is a chat-room that offers immediate and free counselling, education and support to problem gamblers from professional counsellors. Each session usually lasts for 50 minutes.

Before the counselling session, participants provided their demographic and gambling information (e.g., preferred gambling activity). They completed an assessment of how severe their gambling problems were. They also rated their readiness to change and distress. Readiness to change included a set of 3 rulers: 1) importance ('how important is it for you that you limit/stop your gambling?'); 2) readiness ('where does limiting/stopping gambling fit on your list of priorities?'); and 3) confidence ('how confident are you that you could deal with an unexpected urge to gamble?').

What you need to know

This study explored if a single session of online counselling would lead to positive outcomes for problem gamblers. Results showed that a single session of online counselling had immediate benefits. After receiving the counselling session, problem gamblers reported an increase in confidence to resist an urge to gamble. They also reported a decrease in distress. Sessions that were rated as both deep (valuable and meaningful) and smooth (easy and pleasant) resulted in greater increases in confidence to resist an urge to gamble. The smoothness of a session was helpful in decreasing distress. But the depth of a session had no impact on distress.

After the counselling session, participants rated their readiness to change and distress again. They then evaluated their experience with the session by rating its 'depth' and 'smoothness'. Session depth was based on the perceived value, fullness, and power of the session. Session smoothness was based on the perceived comfort, ease, and pleasantness of the session.

What the researchers found

Before their counselling session, participants reported high levels of importance and readiness, but low levels of confidence to resist an urge to gamble. Thus, they thought it was important and they were ready to limit or stop their gambling. However, they were not confident about their ability to resist an unexpected urge to gamble.

After completing the counselling session, participants reported an increase in confidence to resist an unexpected urge to gamble. They also reported a

decrease in distress. Overall, participants rated their sessions as “good”. They gave highest ratings for the sessions as being pleasant and easy (smooth). In terms of depth, participants gave higher ratings for the sessions as being valuable and powerful. They were least likely to think that the sessions were special.

Participants who rated their session as having greater depth and smoothness reported greater increases in confidence to resist an urge to gamble. Only smoothness predicted a decrease in distress. The depth of a session had no impact on distress. Session depth and smoothness predicted improvement in these outcomes over and above the characteristics of problem gamblers (e.g., age). The results suggest that how problem gamblers experience the session is important to intervention outcomes.

How you can use this research

This study has important implications for online counselling service and screening for problem gambling. Clinicians and treatment providers should screen problem gamblers at the start of a counselling session to prioritise the need to reduce distress or build confidence. The findings suggest that an easy and smooth session would be more helpful for distressed clients than a deep and meaningful session. Future research should explore how the content of counselling sessions can affect intervention outcomes. Researchers should also examine the long-term outcomes of brief web-based interventions.

About the researchers

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Keywords

Online, session evaluation, gambling, single session, web-based counselling, satisfaction

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