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Identifying change strategies to manage gambling behaviour using online forum posts

What this research is about

Problem gambling occurs when people have an uncontrollable urge to gamble even after experiencing negative consequences. Few people seek treatment for their gambling problems. This may be because of shame and fear of stigma. Also, gamblers may lack the willingness to get help or the confidence that treatment will work. They may want to deal with the problems on their own without professional help.

Gamblers may turn to online community forums for self-help information. They may post about their experiences and their strategies to change gambling behaviour. Change strategies are the resources, plans or actions that gamblers use to control their gambling without necessarily seeking help from others. These strategies can include setting gambling limits, spending time with family, and finding other hobbies.

In this study, the researchers explored the change strategies discussed by gamblers on two Australian online forums. They categorized the change strategies according to the Rubicon model of action phases. Action phases are the different stages people go through to achieve their goal. The stages include pre-decisional where a person considers the pros and cons of pursuing the goal, pre-actional where a person decides the details of how and when to fulfill the goal, and actional where a person carries out the change strategies and progresses towards their goal.

What the researchers did

The researchers collected data from two Australian online gambling forums. The first forum was the Problem Gambling Forum hosted by the Victorian state government. The purpose of this forum was to promote healthy gambling and to provide self-help

What you need to know

Gamblers may use different change strategies to help them control their gambling behaviour instead of seeking professional help. This study explored the change strategies discussed by gamblers on two Australian online gambling forums. The researchers identified 27 discrete change strategies across both forums. The change strategies were organized into pre-decisional, pre-actional, actional, and multi-phased. Gamblers discussed change strategies in the actional phase most often. Future research could identify which change strategies are successful in helping gamblers limit or quit gambling.

resources to visitors. It was the only available online gambling forum in Australia during 2009 and 2012. The researchers reviewed 296 posts related to change strategies that were posted between 2009 and 2012.

The second forum was the Gambling Help Online Forum funded by each Australian state and territory government. The purpose of this forum is to offer gambling counselling, support, and resources. It is now the largest peer-to-peer forum for gambling in Australia. The researchers reviewed 2158 posts that were posted in 2017 on four sub-forums.

The researchers identified 2937 strategies and sorted them into 27 discrete change strategies. They organized these strategies into four phases: pre-decisional, pre-actional, actional, and multi-phased. Multi-phased strategies were strategies mentioned across pre-decisional, pre-actional, and actional phases. The researchers also examined if change

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strategies differed by the purpose of the forum and across the time periods (2009-2012 versus 2017).

What the researchers found

Gamblers posted comments related to actional strategies most often. *Actional strategies* included: maintaining readiness (staying positive and building confidence), urge management (knowing what their triggers are and what to do if the urge to gamble arises), avoidance (staying away from gambling venues and controlling the amount of money spent on gambling), and alternative activities (replacing gambling with a different activity such as a hobby).

Pre-decisional strategies included self-assessment (determining if there is a problem), realization (understanding the nature of gambling), establishing reasons for change, identifying barriers, and seeking knowledge and information. *Pre-actional strategies* included action planning (setting priorities and making plans), commitment, and goal setting. *Multi-phased strategies* included seeking external support (professional and peer support), seeking social support (family and friends), and well-being (engaging in self-care, exercise, good mental health).

Gamblers on the Problem Gambling Forum posted more about pre-decisional strategies than gamblers on the Gambling Help Online Forum. This could be because the Problem Gambling Forum was a closed forum for people to tell their story without commentary or feedback from others. The Gambling Help Online Forum provides online counselling and support, and visitors may have already made the decision to change their gambling behaviour. The researchers also found a greater focus on the use of technology than previously reported. Thus, gamblers appear to use the same change strategies over time, but how they put the strategies into action may be influenced by technology.

How you can use this research

Future research could identify which change strategies are successful in helping gamblers limit or quit gambling, and if age or gender groups prefer certain change strategies over others. Researchers could also explore methods that would help gamblers successfully implement the strategies in their lives.

About the researchers

Simone N. Rodda is affiliated with the School of Population Health at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, and with Turning Point Eastern Health in Australia. **Nerilee Hing** is with the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at Central Queensland University in Australia. **David C. Hodgins** is with the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary in Canada. **Alison Cheetham**, **Marissa Dickins**, and **Dan I. Lubman** are with Turning Point Eastern Health and the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences at Monash University in Australia. For more information about this study, please contact Simone N. Rodda at s.rodda@auckland.ac.nz.

Citation

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Self-help, processes of change, gambling disorder, recovery, treatment

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Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (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 responsible 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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