research snapshot
summarize | mobilize

Does stress impact the link between problem gambling and mental disorders?

What this research is about

Problem gamblers often have other mental disorders. For instance, bipolar disorders, depression, personality disorders, and anxiety are very common among problem gamblers. Alcohol abuse, tobacco use, and drug abuse are also very common among problem gamblers.

Past research has found that stress is an important factor in these disorders. It can impact their development, persistence, and relapse. Some studies suggest a relationship between stress and gambling. However, most of these studies have examined the relationship in adolescents, university students, or people seeking treatment. Little is known about how stress may influence the severity of problem gambling in adults from the general community.

The current study examined the relationship between stress, problem gambling severity, and various mental disorders among U.S. adults. These included Axis-I (mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders) and Axis-II disorders (personality disorders).

What the researchers did

This study used data from Wave 1 (2001-2002) of the National Epidemiologic Survey of Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC). It included 41,935 U.S. adults aged 18 years and older, who provided data on gambling behaviour and stress.

The survey collected participants' demographic information (age, gender, race, etc.). It captured their gambling behaviour, including if they gambled at least five times in any year during their life. If participants answered yes, the survey assessed their problem

What you need to know

The findings of the current study suggest that stress may play an important role in the relationships between problem gambling severity and mental disorders. Participants with more severe problem gambling were more likely to have experienced stressful events in the past year. In both those who experienced few stressful events (low stress group) and those who experienced many stressful events (high stress group), at-risk and problem gamblers were more likely to have mental disorders than non-gamblers. Further, stress moderated the relationships between problem gambling severity and some disorders; there were stronger relationships observed in the low stress group as compared to the high stress group.

gambling levels. For this study, the researchers focused on gambling behaviour in the past year.

The survey assessed psychiatric disorders, including Axis-I and Axis-II disorders. It asked if participants experienced 12 stressful life events in the past 12 months. Stressful life events included: death of a family member or close friend, being fired or laid off, getting arrested or going to jail, etc. The researchers created two groups: a low past-year stress group (0 or 1 event), and a high past-year stress group (two or more events).

The researchers also divided participants into three gambling groups: (1) NG: low frequency or non-gambling (never gambled five or more times in one year); (2) ARG: low-risk or at-risk gambling (gambled five or more times in one year, but were not problem

research impact
turning research into action

GAMBLING RESEARCH EXCHANGE ONTARIO
DRIVING KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

gamblers); and (3) PPG: problem or pathological gambling (met 3 or more DSM-IV criteria in the past year).

First, the researchers analyzed differences in mental disorders between participants with low and high past-year stress, by the severity of problem gambling. Next, they analyzed, within the low and high past-year stress groups, the relationships between problem gambling severity (ARG vs NG, and PPG vs NG) and mental disorders. Then, the researchers analyzed the extent to which the strength of the relationships differed in the low and high past-year stress groups.

What the researchers found

Among participants, 55.65% were in the low past-year stress group and 44.35% were in the high past-year stress group. There were more problem gamblers in the high past-year stress group. Participants with more severe problem gambling were more likely to have experienced all 12 of the stressful life events.

In both low and high past-year stress groups, ARG and PPG groups were more likely to have any Axis-I and Axis-II disorders compared to the NG group. Stress moderated the relationships between problem gambling severity and some of the disorders. This means that there were stronger relationships between problem gambling severity and the disorders in the low past-year stress group compared to the high past-year stress groups. This also suggests that people with high stress were more likely to have mental disorders regardless of gambling behaviour.

Specifically, in the ARG vs NG groups, there were stronger relationships in the low past-year stress group compared to the high past-year stress group for any Axis-I and Axis-II disorders. In the PPG vs NG groups, there were stronger relationships in the low past-year stress group compared to the high past-year stress group for some personality disorders.

How you can use this research

These findings can help public health target stressful life events in efforts to prevent gambling problems. More research is needed to better understand the role of stress in gambling disorders. For instance, the differences in gender and the types of stressful life events.

About the researchers

Silvia Ronzitti is affiliated with the Yale School of Medicine and the VA Connecticut Healthcare System in Connecticut, USA. **Shane W. Kraus** is affiliated with Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital in Massachusetts, USA. **Rani A. Hoff** is affiliated with the Northeast Program Evaluation Center at the National Center for PTSD, and the Department of Psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine. **Marc N. Potenza** is affiliated with the Department of Psychiatry at Yale School of Medicine and the Department of Neuroscience, Child Study Center, National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, and Connecticut Mental Health Center. For more information about this study, please contact silvia.ronzitti@yale.edu.

Citation

Keywords

Gambling, stress, comorbidity, adverse life events, stressful events

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

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.

Learn more about GREO by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.