What this article is about
When some people gamble, they become so immersed in the activity that they lose track of time and money spent. This is known as dissociation. Individuals with gambling disorder (GD) are more likely than those without GD to experience dissociation. The current review summarizes recent research on dissociative experiences in gambling, people with GD, and harm reduction strategies that have been developed to target dissociative experiences while gambling.

What was done?
The authors searched for research studies through Scopus, PsychInfo and Google Scholar searches. They used the following search terms: gambling AND one of the following: dissociation, absorption, immersion, the zone, or dark flow. The authors review research studies published between 2012 and 2018.

The authors describe the definitions of dissociative experiences within gambling research. They also review dissociation’s relationship to GD severity and risk factors for GD. Then, the authors go over dissociation research for specific types of gambling. Finally, they discuss strategies targeting dissociative experiences to reduce harms caused by gambling.

What you need to know
There is no agreed upon definition of dissociation in gambling research. Individuals with GD report experiences that include at least some parts of the definition in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5). Here, dissociation refers to “a disruption in the integration of mental activities including consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behavior”. It is unclear, based on this definition, whether dissociation during gambling and in general day-to-day life are alike.

Most of the recent research focused on the dissociation-gambling relationship. Some people may gamble to escape from or cope with bad feelings, such as depression or anxiety. Dissociative experiences during gambling create feelings of escape. Therefore, dissociation may prevent people with GD from stopping gambling permanently. It may also negatively influence treatment success.

Most of the research included in this review has focused on electronic gaming machines (EGMs). Past research suggests that several features of EGMs, such as multi-line betting, lead to in-game dissociation. This effect especially impacts people with GD.

Due to dissociation’s role in the development and/or continuation of GD, past research suggests it may be
an important treatment target for reducing the harms related with gambling. One line of research has focused on breaks in play, which are game features that disrupt attention to gambling, and therefore, the dissociative process. However, breaks in play were found to increase the desire to escape, rather than reduce in-game dissociation. Some research findings support the use of pop-up messages, which also disrupt in-game dissociative experiences.

**Who is it intended for?**

This review is intended for gambling researchers. Future research could explore how in-game and general dissociation compare, so a clear definition for gambling-related research could be determined. It could also explore whether general dissociation increase the risk of in-game dissociation and escape-motivated gambling. Future research could examine the dissociation-gambling relationship across other forms of gambling. Finally, future research could continue exploring interventions that effectively interrupt in-game dissociation for reducing gambling-related harms.

**About the researchers**

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**Citation**


**Study funding**

This study did not report any funding.