Cognitive distortions explain the link between depression and gambling disorder

**What this research is about**

Gambling disorder and depression commonly co-occur. Past research has found that people with both gambling disorder and depression have more severe gambling problems. But, little is known about the processes that may explain the relationship between the two disorders. Some evidence suggests that cognitive distortions may be a mechanism to explain why people with both disorders have more severe gambling problems. Cognitive distortions are beliefs and assumptions that are exaggerated or untrue. They usually occur from generalizing, deleting, and distorting past events.

Cognitive distortions are found in both gambling disorder and depression. Some examples of gambling-related cognitive distortions are the ‘gambler’s fallacy’ and ‘illusion of control’. Gambler’s fallacy is the belief that the likelihood of an event is affected by past independent random events, and illusion of control is the belief that one can influence the outcome of events that are based on chance. Cognitive distortions in depression include a bias in recalling negative events over positive events. The current study examined the potential role of gambling-related cognitive distortions in explaining the link between gambling disorder and depression.

**What the researchers did**

Participants were 345 adults with gambling disorder who were seeking treatment at an outpatient clinic in Brazil between 2006 and 2015. They were assessed by registered psychologists and psychiatrists through a clinical interview. All participants were diagnosed to have gambling disorder using DSM-IV criteria.

**What you need to know**

People with gambling disorder have cognitive distortions, which are beliefs and assumptions that are exaggerated or untrue. Many people with gambling disorder also have depression. This study examined if cognitive distortions might explain the link between depression and gambling disorder. Among individuals who were seeking treatment for gambling disorder, those with more severe depression symptoms had greater cognitive distortions and more severe gambling problems.

Cognitive distortions mediated the relationship between depression and gambling severity. In other words, among individuals with gambling disorder, those with more severe depression symptoms had greater cognitive distortions. This led to more severe gambling problems. Thus, cognitive distortions might be an important treatment target among individuals with both gambling disorder and depression.

Participants completed several self-report questionnaires. During intake, they provided their demographic information. These included age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation, level of education, and monthly income. They completed a Portuguese version of the Gambling Symptom Assessment Scale (G-SAS). This scale was used to assess how severe their gambling problems were.
Participants also completed a Portuguese version of the Beck Depression Inventory-I (BDI-I). The BDI-I was used to assess how severe their depression symptoms were. Finally, participants completed a Portuguese version of the Gamblers’ Beliefs Questionnaire (GBQ). The GBQ was used to assess gambling-related cognitive distortions related to luck/perseverance and control.

What the researchers found
Participants with more severe depression symptoms had greater cognitive distortions. They also had more severe gambling problems. When controlling for the effect of depression symptoms, participants with greater cognitive distortions still had more severe gambling problems.

Among both men and women, cognitive distortions mediated the relationship between depression and gambling severity. This means that among individuals with gambling disorder, those with more severe depression symptoms had greater cognitive distortions. This led to more severe gambling problems.

The researchers further examined the type of distortions that might explain the relationship between depression and gambling severity. Both luck/perseverance and control-related distortions influenced the relationship. Luck/perseverance distortions had a greater effect, though.

How you can use this research
This study could be useful to clinicians and treatment providers. Treatment providers could target cognitive distortions when treating clients with both gambling disorder and depression. The findings also suggest another route to modify the influence of gambling-related cognitive distortions on gambling severity. Treatment providers could address depression symptoms, including distortions related to depression. Doing so might help their clients develop more flexible and adaptive ways of thinking about their gambling. Future research could explore the effects of targeting cognitive distortions among individuals with both gambling disorder and depression.

About the researchers
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Citation

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)
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