

knowledge snapshot



Implementation intentions as goal-directed plans to reduce gambling

What this article is about

Problem gambling can cause harm. It can lead to depression, unemployment, financial distress, relationship problems, and criminal behaviour. People who have problem gambling can also have other behavioural addictions.

The theory of planned behaviour is a prominent theory that helps explain why people behave the way they do. When people intend to behave in a certain way, they are motivated and willing to do so. People's intention is based on their attitude, whether they think others will approve of their behaviour, and whether they think they have control over the behaviour. Some studies have found that the theory of planned behaviour is useful in understanding gambling intention and behaviour. Previous research has found that intention can predict gambling behaviour.

There is a gap between what people intend to do and what they actually do. For example, people might intend to stop gambling but are not able to successfully do so. Implementation intentions can help overcome the gap between intention and behaviour. Implementation intentions are goal-directed plans based on *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how* a behaviour will happen. This review discusses implementation intentions and how they can be used by people who intend to stop or limit their gambling.

What was done?

The author provided a summary of current research on implementation intentions in the field of gambling.

Why is this article important?

Problem gambling can cause harm (e.g., depression and financial distress). Even if people really want to limit or stop gambling, they may find it hard to do so. Implementation intentions can help people follow through on their desired behaviours. Implementation intentions are goal-directed plans that can help people connect cues or situations with appropriate behavioural responses. This review summarizes recent research on the use of implementation intentions in gambling. Implementation intentions have been found to be useful in supporting behavioural changes. But, there is not much research on the use of implementation intentions in limiting or stopping gambling. The author provides some examples of what implementation intentions may look like for people who gamble. The author also provides some suggestions around future interventions that use implementation intentions to help people change their gambling behaviour.

What you need to know

Even someone who is highly motivated to stop or limit their gambling can have trouble doing so. Having a plan can help them engage in behaviour change.

An implementation intention is essentially a plan for what someone might do if they identify a specific cue or a critical situation. A cue or critical situation might support a desired behaviour. Cues might also be related to barriers that have to be overcome to be able to engage in the desired behaviour. Once a cue is met, an appropriate behaviour in response to the cue is automatically prompted.

It is particularly helpful to connect the cue to the response by using an “if/then” statement. For example, a person who wants to stop gambling might say that “If I am asked to go to a casino, then I will remind myself of the money I will likely lose.” But, implementation intentions can only be effective if the person is willing to engage in the desired behaviour (i.e., having a strong intention or motivation).

People can develop implementation intentions on their own. When they do so, people are more likely to be committed to the plan. But, researchers or health providers can provide people with implementation intentions that are already developed. For example, the researchers or health providers can give people sheets of paper that list possible situational cues and the ideal responses to those cues. Some people may find it helpful to have this list because they have trouble coming up with their own plans.

Previous research has found that implementation intentions can influence health behaviours. There has not been a lot of research on the links between implementation intentions and gambling behaviour. But a past study found that people with problem gambling use action planning during online forums.

The author of this review provided a list of 20 situations or cues that might occur (e.g., being invited by friends to go to a casino). The author also provided a list of appropriate behavioural responses to those situations/cues. For example, making polite refusal to go to the casino. Finally, the author provided an if/then statement (i.e., implementation intention) for each situation/cue. For example, “If my friends ask me to go to the casino, then I will politely decline and inform them of my motivation to stop gambling.”

It is important that the implementation intention is specific to the person who wants to stop or limit their gambling. The person must have the motivation to make the change for the implementation intention to work. Also, the effectiveness of the implementation intention might depend on the severity of the gambling problem.

The author provided some suggestions about how implementation intentions can be used to help people

stop or limit gambling. For example, the author suggested that interventions can focus on helping people to create planning strategies to support their desired behaviours. These interventions might include using technology (e.g., mobile phones) to communicate and prompt people to develop an implementation intention.

Who is it intended for?

This review is intended for researchers and healthcare providers who want to learn more about how implementation intentions can help to support people who want to stop or limit their gambling.

About the researchers

Tom St Quinton is affiliated with the School of Psychology and Therapeutic Studies in the Faculty of Social and Health Sciences at Leeds Trinity University in Leeds, United Kingdom. For more information about this study, please contact Tom St Quinton at t.stquinton@leedstrinity.ac.uk.

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