

research snapshot

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The role of psychological factors in the relationship between stressful life events and gambling disorder

What this research is about

Gambling disorder (GD) is a significant global public health issue. In Australia, around 1.5% of men and 0.8% of women have GD. People with GD experience a wide range of harms, including financial problems and poorer quality of life. They are also more likely to suffer from other mental health conditions. Understanding the risk factors of GD is crucial to prevention and treatment.

A major risk factor of GD is stressful life events. It has been proposed that people may gamble as a way to cope with the negative emotions arisen from stressful life events. This makes them more vulnerable to the development of GD. However, not all people who experience stressful life events and who gamble develop GD. Therefore, other factors may influence the relationship between stressful life events and GD.

The aim of this study was to determine the role of several psychological factors in the relationship between stressful life events and GD. Specifically, this study investigated the role of erroneous gambling beliefs, difficulty with emotion regulation, and self-control. All of these factors are known to be associated with both stressful life events and GD.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited Australian adults who had gambled in the past 12 months for an online survey study. Participants were either undergraduate students from a university in Australia or members of the broader population. The latter group was recruited through Prolific, a market research company, or through social media platforms (e.g., Facebook).

What you need to know

A risk factor of gambling disorder (GD) is stressful life events. However, not all people who experience stressful life events and who gamble have GD. The aim of this study was to determine the role of several psychological factors in the relationship between stressful life events and GD. Specifically, this study investigated the role of erroneous gambling beliefs, difficulty in emotion regulation, and self-control. Survey data from 290 Australian adults who had gambled in the past 12 months were analysed. Erroneous gambling beliefs and difficulty in emotion regulation were found to mediate the relationship between stressful life events and GD. However, self-control did not. These results suggest that people who experience more stressful life events are more likely to have erroneous gambling beliefs and to struggle with regulating their emotions. Consequently, they are more vulnerable to the development of GD.

A total of 516 participants completed the online survey. Those who did not gamble in the past 12 months and those who did not pass an attention check question were screened out from the study. The final sample size included 290 participants.

The online survey included the following measures:

- Socio-demographic questions, including age, gender, and relationship status.
- Questions on gambling-related behaviours, including frequency of engaging in land-based and online gambling in a typical month; average amount of money spent; and frequency of gambling on a variety of gambling activities.

- The DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for GD, with GD being classified as endorsing four or more criteria out the nine criteria.
- The Stressful Life Events Scale, which included questions about 12 life events (e.g., death of a loved one) and three new questions about stressful events due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Gamblers' Beliefs Questionnaire (GBQ), which was used to assess the extent to which people hold erroneous gambling beliefs.
- The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale Short Form (DERS-SF), which was used to assess the extent to which people are able to regulate or control their emotions and related responses.
- The Amsterdam Executive Function Inventory (AEFI). Only the self-control subscale of the AEFI was used in this study.

What the researchers found

There were 167 male participants (57.59%) and 121 female participants (41.72%). Two participants identified their gender as 'other' (0.69%). The average age of the participants was 33.63 years. One in eight participants met the DSM-5 criteria for GD (12.41%).

Participants with GD had more erroneous gambling beliefs and were less able to regulate their emotions. They also had lower self-control. Moreover, they had experienced more stressful life events.

The researchers ran a model to examine the role of the psychological factors in the relationship between stressful life events and GD. Erroneous gambling beliefs and difficulty in emotion regulation were found to mediate this relationship. However, self-control did not play a significant role. These results suggest that people who experience more stressful life events are more likely to have erroneous gambling beliefs and to struggle with regulating their emotions. Consequently, they are more vulnerable to the development of GD.

How you can use this research

The findings of this study could inform treatment and prevention programmes. For example, people who experience stressful life events may benefit from in-

depth training that targets emotion regulation skills. They may also benefit from cognitive behavioural therapy that targets erroneous gambling beliefs.

About the researchers

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Citation

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