

research snapshot

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Evaluating an online tutorial to teach gamblers and counsellors about the nature of EGMs

What this research is about

It has been suggested that electronic gambling machines (EGMs) are the most problematic form of gambling. Previous research has found that many problem gamblers associate EGMs with their gambling problems. Problem gambling occurs when individuals lose control over their gambling behaviour and experience harms, such as debts, family conflicts, and physical and mental health issues.

EGMs have complex design features that can entice gamblers to continue gambling and eventually lead to addiction. For example, EGMs are programmed so that the casino will profit in the long run, an advantage called the “house edge”. Most gamblers do not understand the house edge because losses are hidden by occasional wins in the short term. Also, gamblers often do not appreciate the nature of random chance intrinsic to EGMs -- that is, outcomes are determined by chance. Thus, gamblers often develop irrational beliefs, such as believing that they can control or predict gambling outcomes.

Educating gamblers about EGMs may help reduce the harm from gambling. This study described a pilot evaluation of an online tutorial to educate problem gamblers and problem gambling counsellors on how EGMs work, including the short- versus long-term experiences of playing EGMs.

What the researchers did

Participants were 26 problem gamblers who were in treatment and 25 problem gambling counsellors. The counsellors were new counsellors who had not received training on EGMs. Participants completed the tutorial in a group or on an individual basis.

What you need to know

This study described a pilot evaluation of an online tutorial to educate problem gamblers and counsellors who work with them on the nature of EGMs. The tutorial was run interactively to demonstrate several aspects of EGMs, including the short- and long-term experiences of playing EGMs, the nature of random chance, and false wins when one wins less than the amount that was bet. The results showed that both gamblers and counsellors rated the tutorial positively. Most of the participants agreed that the tutorial was easy to use and understand. The results also showed that the tutorial could improve knowledge about the nature of random chance and how EGMs work. More research is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of the tutorial and if it can be used as a self-help tool.

The tutorial had four interactive modules. In the first module, participants could simulate the short- and long-term experiences of playing EGMs. The second module showed the relative numbers of wins, losses, and false wins (when the win is less than the amount of the bet). The third module addressed chasing losses and how the stop button does not give any advantage to gamblers. Chasing losses is a central aspect of problem gambling. It happens when gamblers believe they are due to win and keep on betting to win back their losses. The final module demonstrated the cost of play by allowing participants to input their typical gambling pattern including hours and amount of bet.

Participants completed two questionnaires to assess their understanding of random chance and the content of the tutorial before and after the tutorial

(pre- and post-test). Participants also completed an evaluation questionnaire regarding the tutorial at post-test. The gamblers were asked about their own responses and the counsellors were asked about “a client’s” response. For example, the gamblers rated if the demo would help reduce their cravings to gamble and the counsellors rated if it would help reduce a client’s cravings.

What the researchers found

Both gamblers and counsellors rated the tutorial positively. Nearly all of the participants agreed that the tutorial was easy to use and easy to understand. Overall, the gamblers were more positive about the tutorial than the counsellors were. For instance, the counsellors were more likely to disagree that the tutorial could help to reduce gambling cravings.

Both gamblers and counsellors showed improvement on the content questionnaire at post-test. The effect was stronger for the gamblers. Notably, the gamblers scored lower than the counsellors at pre-test, but the two groups’ overall scores did not differ significantly at post-test. These results suggest that the tutorial had moved the gamblers from a level of less knowledge about how EGMs work to a level that was roughly equal to that of the counsellors.

Only the gamblers improved on their knowledge about the nature of random chance at post-test. The largest improvements were on items directly related to EGMs, although little improvement was seen for other random event situations (e.g., lotteries). No improvement was observed for the counsellors; however, the counsellors scored rather high on this questionnaire at pre-test so it was not surprising that no new learning was observed for this group.

How you can use this research

This research is useful to problem gambling counsellors and clinicians. More research is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of the tutorial, particularly whether it can affect gambling behaviour over time. It is also not known if the tutorial can be used as a self-help tool.

About the researchers

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Citation

Turner, N. E., Robinson, J., Harrigan, K., Ferentzy, P., & Jindani, F. (2017). A pilot evaluation of a tutorial to teach clients and clinicians about gambling game design. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-017-9816-1>

Keywords

Problem gambling, tutorial, electronic gambling machines, prevention, treatment

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