

# research snapshot

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## Coping and impulsivity can affect the impact of stressful life events on problem gambling among college students

### What this research is about

Problem gambling rates are rising among college students. This may be related to the increased availability of online gambling. Currently, about 75% of college students in the US have gambled in the past year. As more college students gamble, they also have more opportunities to develop problem gambling. Problem gambling can disrupt their education, damage their relationships, and put them at higher risk of drug and alcohol use. Experiencing stressful life events can increase someone's risk of problem gambling. College and early adulthood can be a stressful time for many people. Therefore, college students who gamble may be at a higher risk of developing problem gambling.

People can have different motivations for gambling. Some people may gamble to cope with stress and emotional issues. Other people may gamble because they are generally impulsive. Impulsivity has several aspects, including lack of perseverance, lack of premeditation, and negative urgency. Lack of perseverance is when someone cannot stay focused on a task. Lack of premeditation is when someone acts without thinking first. Finally, negative urgency is when someone reacts rashly to negative emotions.

This study looked at how stressful life events might affect problem gambling in college students. The researchers looked at how gambling to cope with emotional issues, as well as impulsivity, affected the impact of stressful life events on problem gambling.

### What the researchers did

The researchers recruited students from 17 colleges across the US. They invited the students to complete a brief screening survey which included the South Oaks

### What you need to know

Many college students in the US gamble. College is a stressful time for many people, and stressful life events can increase the risk problem gambling. This study looked at how recent life stressors, impulsivity, and motivations for gambling were linked to problem gambling in college students. College students who gambled and were at risk of problem gambling participated in the study.

Participants who experienced more stressful life events were at higher risk of problem gambling. Additionally, participants who were more impulsive or who gambled to cope with their emotions were also at higher risk of problem gambling. Impulsivity and gambling to cope with emotions both affected the impact of stressful life events on problem gambling.

Gambling Screen (SOGS). SOGS is a 20-item survey that measures the risk of problem gambling. Close to 7000 students completed the screening survey. According to the SOGS, 1501 of the students were at risk of or experiencing problem gambling. These students were invited to participate in the study, and 653 completed the study survey. All participants were at least 18 years old (average age=26 years old).

First, participants completed the 20-item Gambling Problem Index (GPI). The GPI measures the consequences of gambling. For example, it asks how often someone misses out on other activities because of gambling. Participants were also asked how often they gambled. To measure stressful life events, the survey included the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory. This inventory gave participants a list of 43 life events

and asked them which ones they had experienced in the past year. These events included getting married, change in living conditions, and being fired from work.

Participants also completed the 3-item gambling to cope subscale of the Gambling Motives Scale. This subscale asked the participants if they gambled as a release from stress, to avoid responsibility, and/or to shut the world out. They also completed the 59-item Impulsive Behavior Scale. This scale asked them whether they agreed with items such as “I often make matters worse because I act without thinking when I’m upset”. The researchers focused on three aspects of impulsivity: perseverance, premeditation, and negative urgency.

### What the researchers found

Participants who experienced more stressful life events in the past year were at higher risk of problem gambling. Participants who gambled frequently or were highly impulsive in any of the three aspects were also at higher risk of problem gambling.

Overall, participants who ranked high for gambling to cope with their emotions were at higher risk for problem gambling. Interestingly, for those who ranked high for gambling to cope, stressful life events did not affect whether they experienced problem gambling. This suggests that people who gamble to cope with negative emotions will turn to gambling, regardless if they are experiencing a stressful life event or not. In contrast, for participants who ranked low for gambling to cope, stressful life events were linked to an increase in problem gambling. So, people who do not normally gamble to cope may do so when they are specifically experiencing life stressors.

Impulsivity also had an impact. Among participants who lacked perseverance, those who gambled to cope were at higher risk of problem gambling. This was observed regardless of life stressors. Among participants who lacked premeditation, gambling to cope was linked to an increase in problem gambling if they also experienced more life stressors. For participants with high levels of premeditation, gambling to cope was linked to problem gambling regardless of life stressors.

### How you can use this research

This research could be used to inform interventions. Clinicians who work with clients with problem gambling could discuss recent stressful life events with them. They could encourage healthier ways to cope with stressful life events in place of gambling.

### About the researchers

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### About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

Learn more about GREO by visiting [greo.ca](http://greo.ca) or emailing [info@greo.ca](mailto:info@greo.ca).

