

# research snapshot

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## Are there differences in life events across addiction types?

### What this research is about

It is not clear why people develop different types of addiction. So, it is important to examine the differences among addiction types. It is also important to study different addictions within the same study. This allows for comparisons among addictions.

Past research suggests that experiencing negative life events is linked to addictions. Negative life events might include the death of a loved one or divorce. The “self-medication” theory suggests that addictions develop as a way to escape from stressful life experiences. This has been reported in substance-related addictions (drugs, alcohol) and behavioural addictions (gambling, sex).

Stress might not only be brought on by negative events. Some research suggests that positive events can also cause stress. Positive life events might include the birth of a child or getting a job. So, there might be a link between addictions and positive life events. Research must also consider how the person perceives their life events. An event that causes stress to one person may not to someone else.

The current study compared the relationship between life events (both positive and negative), and different substance and behavioural addictions. The study examined not only the overall number of events experienced, but also how the person was influenced by these events.

### What the researchers did

This study took place in Israel. Participants were 212 people suffering from an addiction (drugs, alcohol, gambling, and sex), and 79 people without an addiction (controls).

### What you need to know

This study explored both positive and negative life events, and their influence, across different addictions. People with an addiction experienced more negative and positive life events than those without. They were more influenced by their negative experiences. There were differences in the number and influence of life events across addiction types. Those with drug, alcohol, or gambling addiction experienced more negative than positive events. Those with sex addiction reported similar number of positive and negative events. While people with drug addiction reported the most negative life events, those with alcohol addiction were the most stressed by those events. People without an addiction placed greater value on their positive than negative life events.

Participants with drug addiction completed the Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST). Those with alcohol use disorder completed the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (MAST). Those with gambling disorder completed the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS). Those with sex addiction completed the Hebrew Individual-Based Compulsive Sexual Behaviour (I-CSB) questionnaire. Controls completed all measures.

All participants completed the Life Experiences Survey (LES). It captured the number of negative and positive life events that participants experienced. It also asked participants to rate the influence of each event on their life.

The researchers compared the number of events experienced and how they were perceived between those with and without an addiction. They also

analyzed the number and influence of negative and positive life events separately for each addiction type.

### What the researchers found

Participants with an addiction reported experiencing more negative life events than controls. They also reported experiencing more positive life events. Participants with an addiction felt their negative life events were more stressful than controls. There was no difference in the influence of positive life events between participants with and without an addiction.

There were differences across addiction types and negative life events. Participants with drug, alcohol, or gambling addiction reported experiencing more negative than positive events throughout their lives. Those with sex addiction and controls reported the same number of negative and positive life events.

Participants with sex addiction reported experiencing less negative life events than those with drug addiction, and considered them less stressful than those with alcohol addiction. This suggests that those with sex addiction were most like controls in regard to negative life events.

Participants with drug addiction reported the most negative life events. But, those with alcohol addiction felt these events were the most stressful on their lives. This might suggest that people with alcohol addiction find themselves less able to deal with stress in their lives than those with other addictions.

### How you can use this research

The findings could be useful to addiction treatment providers. Treatment providers could develop tailored prevention and intervention programs that focus on the relevant aspects of each addiction. The findings also suggest that it might not be helpful to focus on positive events during treatment. Instead, it could be more helpful to focus on improving factors that increase resiliency and reduce negative experiences.

Future research could study the relationship between addictions and life events over time. This might make more clear whether certain life events precede or follow the development of addictions.

### 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.

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