



Psychological Factors

WHAT IS THIS FACTOR ABOUT?

This factor describes the psychological characteristics that may lead to gambling at a harmful level. These include personality traits, coping styles, self-perceptions, beliefs about gambling, and the presence of mental health disorders. The factor also describes the influences of social learning, adverse experiences during childhood, and lifespan development.

WHY IS THIS FACTOR IMPORTANT?

Psychological characteristics are shaped by a person's biology and the environment he or she lives in. This factor allows insight into how these individual characteristics, along with social environments, may affect gambling.

WHAT TOPICS ARE INCLUDED IN THIS FACTOR?

Personality and Temperament

Personality and temperament describe the differences between people in thoughts, feelings, and actions. People with higher levels of impulsivity are more likely to have gambling problems. Impulsivity is a tendency to act rashly without thinking about the consequences. There are different aspects to impulsivity. Gambling problems are more likely to occur among people who tend to act rashly when they feel negative emotions and among those who favour immediate, smaller rewards over delayed, larger rewards.

The Five-Factor Model of Personality is commonly examined in gambling research. It has been reported that people with gambling problems have lower conscientiousness, lower agreeableness, and higher neuroticism. Lower

conscientiousness means that the person is less motivated to achieve goals and less concerned about the consequences of his or her actions. Lower agreeableness means that the person is less willing to work with others and tends to act in self-interest. Higher neuroticism means that the person often feels worried, anxious, and other negative emotions. A sixth personality trait, honesty-humility, has also been examined. It has been reported that people who gamble more heavily have lower honesty-humility. That is, they are less concerned about being sincere, modest, and fair when dealing with others, and are more concerned with wealth and status.

Personality disorders often occur in people with gambling problems. It has been reported that almost half of the people who seek gambling treatment have a personality disorder. The most common are narcissistic, antisocial, avoidant, obsessive-compulsive, and borderline disorders.

Coping Styles

Coping styles refers to how people normally deal with stress and challenges in life. People with gambling problems may rely on avoidance and emotional coping. That is, they try to avoid the stress or challenge (e.g., by gambling) rather than dealing with it. They also try to reduce any negative emotional responses, such as fear and anxiety, that they may have.

Self-Perceptions

Self-perceptions are the ways people view themselves in relation to others and the world. There is mixed evidence for whether people who gamble more heavily have lower self-esteem. Certain gambling games may be seen as an opportunity to increase self-esteem. For example, some gamblers may play casino table games to show their skill, impress others, and gain prestige. People who gamble for these reasons may spend large amounts of money.

Research has shown that people with a financially focused self-concept are more likely to have gambling problems. These individuals place great importance on the amount of money that they have as a source of self-worth. Thus, they may gamble heavily in the hope of winning big. Having gambling problems can change how people view themselves for the worse.

Social Learning

People can learn to gamble from family members and friends, but the social environment can also lead to a rejection of gambling. People may gamble less or not at all because they have witnessed others affected negatively by gambling.

Lifespan Development

Younger people tend to gamble more and have more gambling problems compared to older people. Gambling often increases in adolescence and peaks in the twenties and thirties, but gambling problems can also occur among older people.

The relationship between age and gambling is complex. People in different age groups have different attitudes toward gambling. Also, younger age groups are exposed to more gambling opportunities since legal gambling has expanded in many countries. While people who start gambling at an earlier age are more likely to have gambling problems, gambling behaviours often change over time. Thus, people who gamble heavily at a younger age may not necessarily gamble as much later in life.

Comorbid Disorders

Many people with gambling problems have another mental health disorder. Substance use and mood disorders, such as depression and anxiety, are the most common. Behavioural addictions, such as problematic Internet use and video gaming, have also been observed. In addition, gambling problems have been reported among people receiving dopamine agonist treatment for Parkinson's disorder.

People with a comorbid disorder have more severe gambling problems and stress. They also respond more poorly to their gambling treatment. An underlying vulnerability may explain why gambling and mental health disorders often co-occur. Impulsivity has been identified as one factor making people more vulnerable to gambling and mental health issues.

Subjective Well-Being

People with gambling problems have a poorer sense of well-being and more stress. In contrast, people with stronger feelings of well-being are more likely to gamble without any problem.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Many people with gambling problems report traumatic experiences during childhood. These can include abuse, neglect, parental divorce, and mental illness in family. The more adverse childhood experiences a person has, the greater the risk of developing gambling problems.

Judgement and Decision Making

People may have biases when making decisions, which can affect their gambling behaviours. For example, they might rely on mental shortcuts to make quick decisions and over-estimate rare events (e.g., the chance of winning a jackpot).

People with gambling problems often have faulty beliefs about gambling. For example, the illusion of control is a belief that one can control gambling outcomes. Gamblers' Fallacy is the belief that past events can predict a future event even though they are random occurrences (e.g., a win is due to happen after a losing streak). These faulty beliefs can be encouraged by certain game features; for example, a stop button on a slot machine can cause people to believe that using it will change the outcome of the game.

This is a summary of the Psychological Factor, one of eight interrelated factors that comprise the Conceptual Framework of Harmful Gambling. To learn more about this factor, please refer to the [full report](#) or visit the [psychological factor webpage](#) on the GREO website.