

research snapshot

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A review of Gamblers Anonymous for treating problem gambling

What this research is about

Gamblers Anonymous (GA) is a support group for problem gamblers based on 12-step principles. It is free and widely available in the United States and Canada. However, little is known about GA's effectiveness as a treatment for problem gambling. This study reviewed and provided a summary of findings from research studies on GA that were published between 2002 and 2015.

What the researcher did

The researchers searched electronic databases for relevant studies published in English between 2002 and 2015. They also searched the websites of Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO), the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, and the Alberta Gaming Institute. Studies were included if they involved adults and youth with problem gambling who were attending GA meetings or were in GA and other treatment. A total of 25 articles eligible for inclusion were identified. Of those 25 articles, 17 were original research studies.

What the researcher found

The majority of research studies were conducted in the United States (47%) and Canada (35%), and were cross-sectional studies that collected data at a single point in time. There were few studies that evaluated GA's effectiveness for problem gambling. Overall, the research findings regarding GA's effectiveness were mixed. One study found that cognitive behavioural therapies alone and with GA were more effective in reducing gambling symptoms than GA alone. Another study found that GA and stress management were more effective in reducing depression, anxiety, and stress than GA alone. Individuals who attended GA had more gambling problems and debts than those who had not

What you need to know

Gamblers Anonymous (GA) is a widely available support group for problem gamblers, but its effectiveness is not known. This study reviewed research studies on GA that were published between 2002 and 2015. Overall, the evidence for GA's effectiveness as a treatment is mixed. A "compulsive gambler" identity, patience, and using prayer to help accept financial matters and reality are important aspects of GA. The focus of GA meetings tends to be on gambling issues important to men, although GA has become more attuned to issues important to women over the last 10 – 20 years. Future research should examine the impact of social networks established through GA for women and the number of GA meetings attended on treatment outcomes.

previously attended GA. One study found that GA members were more likely to seek professional gambling treatment and attend GA again during the 2 months after beginning treatment.

Important aspects of GA included asserting a "compulsive gambler" identity, emphasizing patience, and using prayer to help members accept financial matters and reality. In some studies, members described GA as providing a safe place for them to share and discuss their gambling problems. Others indicated that they felt unwelcome at GA meetings because of the focus on gambling issues important to men. The male-centric nature of GA might be a reason why few women stayed in GA. There were some early findings that women used GA to develop informal social networks that might be important for their recovery. In

addition, GA had gone through important changes over the last 10-20 years in the US and Canada. Members were more encouraged to discuss emotions and other life issues important to women.

How you can use this research

Treatment providers and researchers can use this review to understand GA characteristics and effectiveness as a treatment for problem gambling. This review also identified gaps in knowledge. Future research should recruit larger samples and examine the impact of number of GA meetings attended on treatment outcomes. There were some findings that GA had gone through important changes to be more attuned to issues important to women. More research is needed to explore the changing status of women in GA and the impact of social networks developed through GA for women's recovery from problem gambling. There should also be longitudinal studies to examine the impact of GA on a long-term basis.

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Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (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 responsible 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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