

Experiences from participation in Norwegian self-help groups for problem gambling. A qualitative study

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Short background – What do we know about self-help groups for people with gambling addiction?

- Self-help groups allow people suffering from a specific condition or illness to provide mutual support and help to each other rather than relying on professionals (Humphreys & Rappaport, 1994).
 - Higher flexibility compared to traditional psychotherapy.
 - Lower threshold for seeking help? Sensitive to the stigma of PG.
- Research on self-help groups for problem gambling
 - Mostly conducted on Gamblers Anonymous in the US and Canada.
 - Gamblers Anonymous meeting attendance is associated with increased motivation for change, increased involvement in recreational activities, better coping strategies and gambling abstinence (Schuler et al., 2016).
 - Experiences of openness, hope of recovery, no longer feeling alone.

The study – A Qualitative Interview Study

Examination of two types of self-help groups: Gambling Addiction Norway and Gamblers Anonymous.

Research Question:

What does participation in self-help groups for gambling disorder entail and how is it experienced as beneficial?

Sample/methods:

- 12 individuals, including 5 current gambling disorder and 7 life-time gambling disorder (DSM-5)
- Interviews conducted in Bergen and Oslo.
- Average interview length 40 minutes, age 41 years old.
- Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2018)

Results



Themes – Relatedness and understanding

- This theme includes the most salient experiences among the participants
- Understanding
- Alleviation of loneliness
(shame)

No, well, I felt like there was somebody [in the group] that saw me in a way that they knew about gambling problems and stuff, and the place that I had been. That they don't, like many colleagues and the like and family, they don't understand the problem, but there you come to a place [in which] many have had gambling problems **(Woman, Gambling Addiction Norway, life-time GD)**.

Because then you meet other people with the same problem, you believe, in the beginning you believe that you are all alone with it, that, that there's nobody that can be so stupid and gamble away money **(Man, Gambling Addiction Norway, life-time GD)**.

Themes – Relatedness and understanding continuing

- Helping others

[...] I can definitely be part of the group to help others as well. The way that I feel that I was helped, I think new people that arrive in the group can be helped by me being there. Even if I don't really get that much out of it at that specific meeting, then it might benefit somebody else in getting a change in perspective or feeling like they have a place to be **(Man, Gambling Addiction Norway, current GD)**.

- Social interaction

It's really important because it might be that you don't have a social network left, because of what you have been doing, because you didn't have time to have a network. It's all about, oh god, going home to gamble right. So of course, it's important to have that kind of network, then you can maybe sometimes visit a café once in a while with somebody, right, that kind of stuff **(Woman, Gambling Addiction Norway, life-time GD)**.

Themes – Gambling relevance

- As long as a direct or indirect connection to gambling problems is present, any subject matter is OK.

- Structure



[...] and then there were two more or less fractions in the group and then one of the fractions was most interested in chit-chat and having a kind of cozy meeting, while the other half wanted to follow the [twelve-step] tradition and program, [...] I'm here to work with gambling addiction and keep myself free from gambling, not to sit there eating candy and drinking coffee, and talk about how I've... yeah, gambled since the last meeting **(Man, Gamblers Anonymous, life-time GD)**.



Then it becomes a more relaxed atmosphere and yeah. [I] think it makes people share more than they otherwise would, not that one should dry out people for good stories but I believe it's good for them to let out what they have on their chest and articulate the feelings **(Man, Gambling Addiction Norway, life-time GD)**.

Subtheme – Complete sharing

- Gambling was talked about in the context of ones own story, recent events and predetermined subject matters.
- Openness
 - [...] relationship problems relating to gambling, trust issues and everything that gambling addiction entails, we discuss all of that and share the most of it, there is nothing that is too personal for those meetings **(Man, Gambling Addiction Norway, life-time GD)**.
- Impact
 - Seriousness
 - Gamblers
 - Next of kin
 - Hope
 - I went there without wanting to quit. I went there with an attitude that I would just go there, as an obligation, and listen to people talk and then I would just leave again and go back to gambling. I didn't, I, there were some people there with some powerful stories. There was this one story, one very powerful story, and it made me come to terms with myself **(Man, Gambling Addiction Norway, life-time GD)**.

Subtheme – Finding solutions

- The instrumental value from participating in self-help groups: advice into practical matters and coping strategies for gambling problems.
- Observational learning
[...] the thing that's been most beneficial for my part, that's listening to and seeing people actually making it, [...], at the same time you get the other side of it with those who don't make it, that relapse, [you see] how easy it is to relapse, how little it takes, you get those kinds of stories, so you learn how to make precautions [...] **(Woman, Gamblers Anonymous, current GD)**.

Theme – Changes over time

- Experiencing discomfort in the beginning

No, well, it's very shameful, to be a gambling addict, and that fear that you could meet somebody you know there, that fear is really totally unfounded because they're in the same situation as myself, but you aren't thinking totally rationally when you're gambling or when you've just stopped gambling, you're in a kind of bubble like, yeah **(Man, Gambling Addiction Norway, current GD)**.

- The experience of understanding that made it easier

In the beginning it was like, oh god, am I going to go down there and tell them what I've done, and that's just totally lame, but then you go there and then it's just great. Because everybody does it, right, and then you're talking with others that know what you're talking about, right, because those at home don't always get it, or the others you may have told [about the problem] **(Woman, Gambling Addiction Norway, life-time GD)**.

Theme – Changes over time, continuing

- Ensuring abstinence, «chronic disorder»

Yes well it reminds me that I have to take it seriously, that I can't just think that it's okay that I gamble one time, because I can't, right, I can't go submitting a, purchasing a scratch card, or submit a lottery ticket or, not even once. I can't associate with gambling at all. [...] Because then I risk triggering my addiction again, and that, and that I feel like it [the group?] serves as a good reminder for **(Man, Gamblers Anonymous, life-time GD)**.

- From receiving to giving help

Because when I go there [i.e. a group meeting] and see a person who is new, who has just gotten there, and is completely down, then I know that I've been there myself. And then I want to try to rebuild him so that he gets up fast, a lot faster than. Because in a way I know what it takes to get to the point of feeling well with yourself again **(Man, Gambling Addiction Norway, life-time GD)**.

Discussion/conclusion – central trends

- Relational factors were especially pronounced among the experiences reported by this sample. Such factors could be included in quantitative treatment studies.
- **Experiences with relatedness** has been associated with increased quality of life and has been regarded as a basic psychological need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan 2000)
- **Experiences with empathy** has been associated with clinical improvement (Elliott, Bohart, Watson, & Greenberg, 2011).