

Trauma-Related Emotional Dysregulation and Cognitive Distortions as Psychological Predictors of Gambling Disorder

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Abstract

Gambling disorder is increasingly regarded as a multifactorial behavioral addiction shaped by the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms. In the context of rapid digitalization and growing accessibility of gambling activities, particular attention should be paid not only to the clinical manifestations of gambling disorder but also to the psychological vulnerabilities that precede its development. Among these vulnerabilities, trauma-related emotional distress, cognitive distortions, impulsivity, and difficulties in affect regulation may play a significant role.

The purpose of the present study was to examine cognitive, emotional, and behavioral predictors of gambling disorder from a trauma-informed perspective and to identify psychological mechanisms relevant for early prevention. The study was based on a mixed-methods design combining quantitative assessment and qualitative analysis. The sample included 100 participants divided into two groups: individuals with clinically significant manifestations of gambling disorder and individuals with subclinical involvement in gambling activities. The research methodology included standardized psychometric instruments such as the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS), DSM-5 criteria, the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (BIS-11), the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), and measures of gambling-related cognitive distortions. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted and analyzed using thematic analysis.

The findings revealed that participants with gambling disorder demonstrated more pronounced gambling-related cognitive distortions, including illusion of control, gambler's fallacy, magical thinking, and overestimation of personal influence on random outcomes. They also showed higher impulsivity, greater difficulties in emotion regulation, increased negative affect, and more evident manifestations of alexithymia. These characteristics indicate that gambling behavior may be associated not only with reward-seeking motives but also with attempts to reduce internal tension, avoid painful emotional experiences, and regulate distress that may have a traumatic origin.

The results suggest a meaningful overlap between the psychological profile of gambling disorder and mechanisms commonly observed in post-traumatic stress responses, including emotional avoidance, affective instability, heightened arousal, and reduced awareness of emotional states. From this perspective, gambling may function as a maladaptive coping strategy aimed at temporary relief from unresolved emotional distress.

The study concludes that trauma-informed screening and prevention strategies should be integrated into psychological support systems for individuals at risk of gambling disorder. Early identification of cognitive distortions, emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, alexithymia, and post-traumatic symptoms may contribute to reducing the risk of persistent addictive patterns and minimizing the long-term psychological and social consequences of gambling behavior.

Keywords

Gambling disorder, cognitive distortions, emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, alexithymia, post-traumatic stress, trauma-informed approach.