

The WAGER, Vol 4(45) - False Beliefs and Cognitions

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A primary aim of cognitive-behavioral therapy (see WAGERS 2(20) and 4(7)) is to correct false beliefs that contribute to a particular pathology. For example, a patient with depression might ruminate excessively on a particular set of personal misfortunes. A cognitive-behavioral therapist might try to correct the scheme of negativity used by the patient to understand and process information, helping him or her to perceive both the positive and negative aspects of events. One distorted cognitive scheme relevant to gambling is the misshapen probability weighting curve discussed in WAGER 4(26). What other mistaken beliefs are common in pathological gamblers? Toneatto (1999) reviews several such beliefs, describing each in detail. A sample of his work is presented below. This review will likely stimulate discussion. Many non-gambling readers may recognize one or more of these distorted schema in themselves, suggesting that these beliefs are not specific or limited to pathological gambling. Researchers have conducted few studies that measure the prevalence of these beliefs among pathological gamblers, let alone a study of the general population for use as a comparison group. Nevertheless, Toneatto's partial list may provide important clinical fodder for practitioners of cognitive-behavioral therapy who might encounter patients with gambling problems.

Magnification of Skill

Belief that he or she has found a way to "outsmart" the system

Temporal Telescoping

The contraction or expansion of time to exaggerate wins and downplay losses. For example, believing that a series of wins occurred within a period of time shorter than the reality

Illusion of Luck as...

controllable

Belief that luck and probability can be manipulated to produce favorable outcomes

contagion

Belief that luck (or lack thereof) in other areas of life is predictive of luck at gambling

Selective Memory

Recall of past wins is easier than recall of past losses.

Interpretation

attribution

Overestimation of the power that personal traits have over situational variables such as luck

anthropomorphism

Imbuing inanimate objects such as roulette wheels and slot machines with human characteristics

gambler's fallacy

Erroneous belief in the "law of averages." That is, a series of losses must inevitably be followed by a win

Superstitions

cognitive

Belief that certain states of mind or thoughts can be beneficial to gambling

behavioral

Belief that particular rituals and actions can favorably affect the odds of winning

talismanic

Belief that possessing certain objects increases the chances of big wins

Source: Toneatto, T. (1999). Cognitive psychopathology of problem gambling. Substance use & misuse, 34(11), 1593-1604.

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