The WAGER, Vol. 24(9) – Seven-day exclusion from online gambling: A quick fix for at-risk gamblers?

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Voluntary self-exclusion (VSE) is a tool that allows gamblers to exclude themselves from gambling in casinos or online. People who use land-based VSE usually report positive outcomes such as decreased gambling and increased psychological well being. But are these outcomes the result of being excluded from gambling, or from committing to changing one's gambling? Julie Caillon and colleagues recently explored this question by imposing a gambling ban on at-risk gamblers and studying the consequences. We review their study here.

What was the research question?

Does a 7-day exclusion from online gambling change gambling behavior in the short- and medium-term?

What did the researchers do?

Sixty at-risk[1] internet gamblers completed baseline measures of their gambling behavior, a scale measuring aspects of gambling cravings, and a scale measuring several gambling-related beliefs. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental condition (a 7-day online gambling ban) or the control condition (gambling as usual).[2] The participants completed phone surveys at both 15 days and two months after the baseline assessment. The researchers used ANOVAs to compare changes in gambling behavior, gambling cravings, and gambling-related beliefs between groups.

What did they find?

Everyone in the exclusion group returned to gambling online after the initial 7-day period. At 15 days, the two groups were similar in the amount of money wagered, time spent gambling, gambling-related beliefs and gambling cravings. At the two month interval, there was still no significant difference in money wagered or time spent gambling between groups. However, at two months, the

exclusion group reported a greater decrease from baseline in two of the five measures of gambling beliefs (i.e., perceived inability to stop gambling and illusion of control) and one aspect of craving (i.e., desire to gamble), compared to controls (see figure).

Figure. Change from baseline to two months post-baseline in three measures. a: Scaled from the Gambling Craving Scale b/c: Scaled from the Gambling Related Cognition Scale (GCRS). Click to enlarge image.

Why do these findings matter?
Implementing new responsible gambling programs without evidence can be both expensive and has the potential to cause harm. This study suggests that a 7-day exclusion period helps improve some aspects of gambling-related beliefs and cravings, but is not sufficient to drive short-term behavior change. More research is needed to determine if these cognitive changes could eventually lead to behavior change or at least prevent the transition from at-risk gambling to gambling disorder. Behavior change might only come about among people who've developed a real commitment to change their own gambling and decide to exclude themselves voluntarily.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?
The majority of gamblers in the experiment did not consider gambling to be a problem in their life, likely suggesting low motivation to stop. We can learn more about the effects of voluntary self-exclusion by recruiting participants who acknowledge their problem and actively want to stop gambling.

For more information:
Do you think you or someone you know has a gambling problem? Visit the National Council on Problem Gambling for screening tools and resources. For additional resources, including gambling and self-help tools, please feel free to visit The BASIS Addiction Resources page.

— Alex LaRaja

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

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1. Scoring 3-7 on the Problem Gambling Severity Index
2. The randomization was stratified according to their favorite type of gambling (pure chance games, skill and chance bank games, and skill and chance social games) so that the experimental and control group group had the same representation of each type of gambler.