The WAGER, Vol. 30(3) – Betting on family: How context influences vicarious gambling harms

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Editor's note: *Today's review is part of our month-long [Special Series on Addiction and Social Support](#). Throughout March, the BASIS is highlighting the role of social support in addiction-related experiences.*

Though it is a popular recreational activity, gambling [can be harmful](#) in a number of ways. Gambling-related harms include financial, physical, and mental harms to both the gambler as well as [gamblers' friends and family](#). Despite the fact that gambling-related harms can extend beyond the gambler, relatively little research has explored the experiences of those affected by others' gambling behavior. Of particular note are methods to attenuate these harms such as through [positive coping strategies](#) and finding increased [social support](#). This week, as part of our Special Series on Addiction and Social Support, The WAGER reviews a [study by Catherine Tulloch and colleagues](#) that explored how coping styles and social support influence the experiences of people affected by others' gambling.

What was the research question?
How do social support, coping style, problem gambling severity, and closeness to individuals experiencing problem gambling influence distress and harms to close loved ones?

What did the researchers do?
The researchers used a survey panel platform to recruit 1,131 Australians who were close to someone with a gambling problem. Participants completed a modified version of the [Problem Gambling Severity Index](#) that allows for second-hand responses (e.g., "Did [the gambler in your life] borrow money or sell anything to get money to gamble?"). Participants also reported on their closeness to the individual with a gambling problem, the harms they've experienced as a result of their loved one's gambling (financial or otherwise), their distress, how often they engaged in certain ways of coping with their relative's gambling, and social support. The researchers then used a series of [regression](#) analyses to examine the predictive role of problem gambling severity, closeness, social

support, and coping styles on distress and harm.

What did they find?

Participants reported more harm and more distress when (1) their loved ones had more severe gambling problems, (2) they were closer to their loved one, and (3) they frequently coped with their loved one's gambling in a maladaptive way. In comparison, increased social support was related to lower levels of harm and distress (see Figure). Interestingly, though the researchers did not identify any interactions among variables predicting harm, they did find that problem gambling severity interacted with closeness, maladaptive coping, and withdrawal coping. Specifically, the effect of the gambler's problem gambling severity on the participant's distress was stronger for participants who were closer to the gambler or who engaged in either withdrawal or maladaptive coping strategies. Notably, however, the interaction effects and influence of withdrawal coping disappeared when the researchers examined the predictors of harm and distress simultaneously, which suggests the interactions might not be especially stable
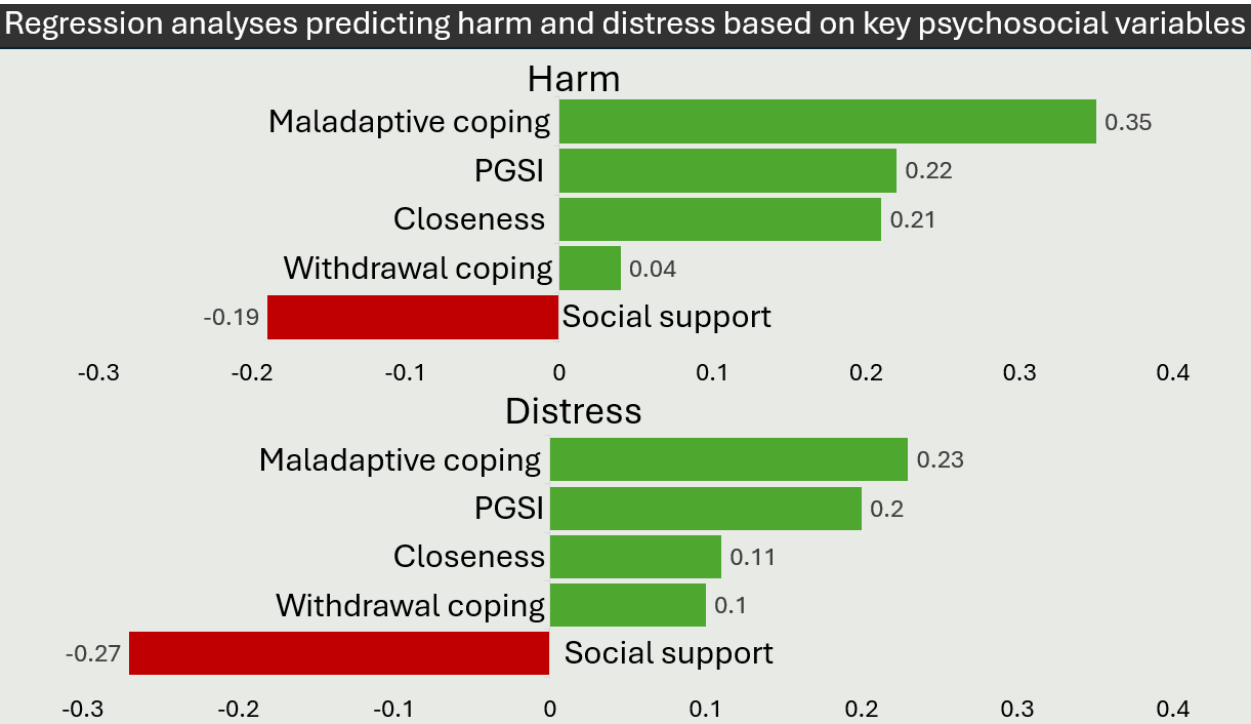

Figure. Displays the β (Beta) for each variable included in the full multivariate regression model predicting gambling-related harm (top) or distress (bottom). β can be interpreted as the estimated change in the dependent variable (e.g., distress) for a one-unit change in the independent variable (e.g., social support). PGSI = Problem Gambling Severity Index. Only predictors that reached statistical significance in at least one model are included. Adapted from Tulloch et al. (2025). Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

These findings provide insight into risk factors for vicarious harm among affected others. Social support seems to buffer the painful effects on affected others, so groups like [Gam-Anon](#) may be especially important for loved ones affected by problem gambling. Furthermore, interventions that target coping styles and social support among those affected by another's gambling, such as the [5-step treatment model](#), may be especially beneficial as has been suggested by [previous research](#).

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?

This study used a proxy measure for problem gambling severity. While proxy measures are commonly used, their [validity is often not established](#), as is the case with the measure used in this study. Additionally, this study measured social support via perceived informal support and thus does not include professional support or other for formalized systems.

For more information:

Individuals who are concerned about their own gambling may benefit from visiting the resource locator on the [1-800-Gambler webpage](#) or Gamblers Anonymous. Individuals who are affected or worried about another persons gambling, may benefit from visiting [Gam-Anon](#). Additional resources can be found at the BASIS [Addiction Resources](#) page.

—John Slabczynski

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