

The WAGER, Vol. 30(6) - How do gamblers experience stigma? Themes from an online support forum

June 10, 2025

Stigma occurs when someone is viewed negatively based on specific characteristics, like having an addiction. Stigma can lead to [psychosocial impairments](#) and may deter people from accessing treatment or recovery resources. Gambling disorder, in particular, is a highly stigmatized addiction that can perpetuate feelings of shame/embarrassment and lead to isolation. Despite these consequences, there is a [lack of research](#) on stigma related to gambling. Online support forums create spaces for gamblers to anonymously share their perspectives, which can help researchers and clinicians understand gamblers' experiences with stigma. This week, The WAGER reviews a [study by Katy Penfold and colleagues](#) that investigated the experiences of stigma among gamblers who used online support forums.

What was the research question?

What experiences with stigma and discrimination do gamblers who have experienced gambling harm describe on online peer support forums?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers identified three UK-based public online support forums for gambling harm. Twenty-seven threads (389 posts) across these forums included content from someone with lived experience with gambling harm, discussing their experiences with stigma or discrimination, or obstacles to seeking help. The researchers used [thematic analyses](#) to identify themes relating to experiences of stigma. These interpretations were reviewed for accuracy by the research team and a gambling lived experience panel.

What did they find?

Participants' discussions about stigma centered around five themes: (1) beliefs about gambling and how it can become an addiction, (2) self-stigma, (3) anticipating stigma from others, (4) stigmatizing others who experience gambling

harm, and (5) experiencing stigma and discrimination (see Figure). Most participants viewed addiction as a disease and compared their experiences to drug dependence. Their perceptions of gambling appeared to influence how they viewed their own gambling behavior, often leading to self-stigma. Participants criticized themselves and often felt ashamed of their behavior. They anticipated that others would hold similar negative views and judge them for their addiction, discouraging help-seeking. Participants rarely stigmatized one another, but when they did, they seemed to make generalizations about all gamblers based on their own negative self-views. Some participants experienced discrimination by family/friends or others. These experiences ranged from non-hostile discrimination, like having a partner take control of the finances, to hostile discrimination, like being disrespected by casino employees.

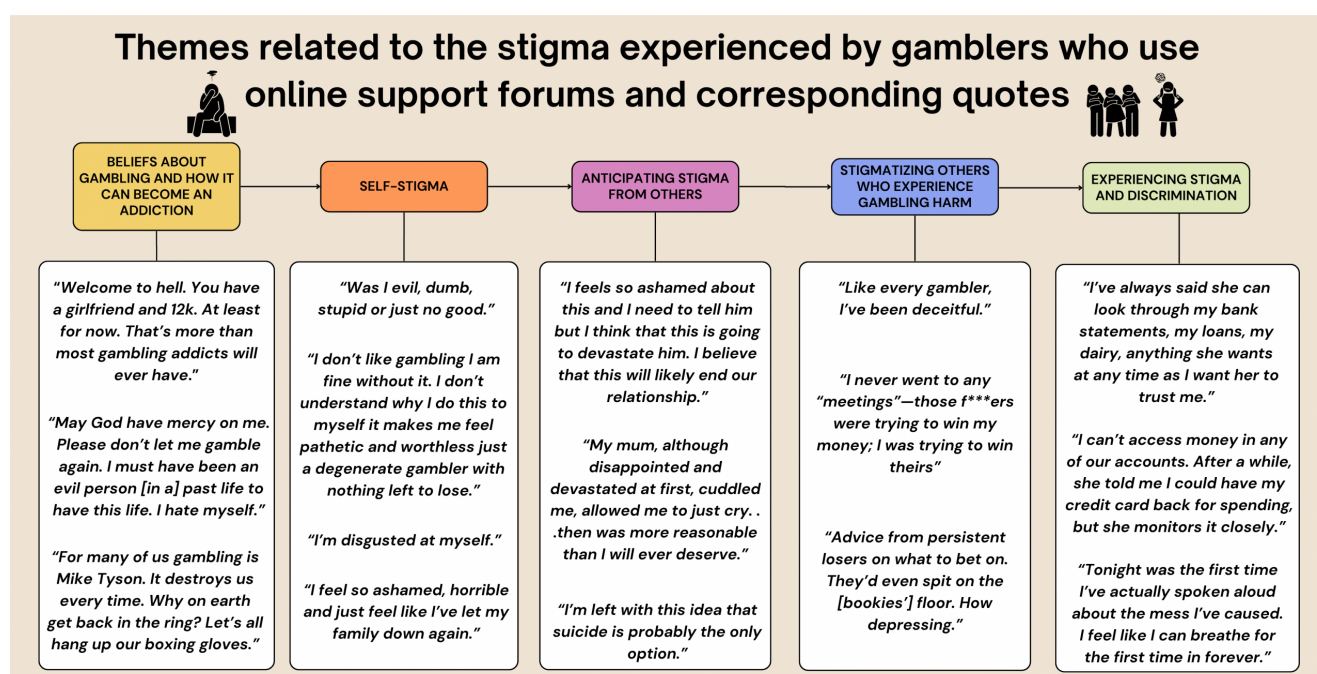


Figure. Quotes from participants on their experiences with stigma, separated into five themes: (1) beliefs about gambling and how it can become an addiction, (2) self-stigma, (3) anticipating stigma from others, (4) stigmatizing others who experience gambling harm, and (5) experiencing stigma and discrimination. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

These findings can be used to inform stigma-reduction campaigns. Efforts to reduce stigma should challenge negative stereotypes and reframe gambling as a health-related issue—not a personal failing. There should also be efforts to educate families and communities on how to respond supportively when someone discloses their gambling. Although initiatives like these should be promoted year-

round, there are high-risk times when public health organizations should increase outreach and other efforts (e.g., [Problem Gambling Awareness Month](#), which occurs during March Madness and its sports betting season).

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

While discussion forums allow for real-world insights into the experiences of people with gambling problems, participants might feel uncomfortable disclosing their true feelings, particularly their views on other gamblers' behaviors. Although the researchers received feedback on their interpretation of the forum discussions, they are still subject to [personal biases](#), which might have altered their understanding.

For more information:

Do you think that you or someone you know might have a gambling problem? Visit the [National Council on Problem Gambling](#) for screening tools and resources. For additional resources, including gambling and self-help tools, visit our [Addiction Resources](#) page.

— Nakita Sconsoni, MSW

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