

# The WAGER, Vol. 31(7) - Photographing recovery: How lived experience can inform gambling harm prevention

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Across the world, rates of [help-seeking behaviors](#) for gambling problems are low, and those who do seek treatment often only do so after [several years](#). Most [interventions](#) for problematic gambling do not consider the broader [social determinants of health](#) that affect gambling harm. As a result, it is important to learn from those in recovery what motivates and discourages help-seeking. This week, The WAGER reviews a study by [Simone McCarthy and colleagues](#) that explored the lived experiences of those in recovery from gambling harm to inform harm prevention strategies.

## **What was the research question?**

What are the factors that influence recovery from gambling harm, from the perspective of those in recovery?

## **What did the researchers do?**

The researchers interviewed 13 adults from Victoria, Australia who self-identified as being in recovery from gambling harm. Participants completed a [photo elicitation](#) activity that was followed by an in-depth interview on their lived experiences. Participants started by taking photographs that reflected key aspects of their recovery, such as their experiences in seeking help and support, facilitators and barriers to their recovery, and social and environmental influences. The researchers used the photographs as discussion prompts for greater insight into one's journey with gambling recovery. Lastly, they used [thematic analysis](#) to identify key themes from the interviews.

## **What did they find?**

The researchers identified three themes (see Figure):

- **Rebuilding Identity and Connection in Recovery** describes recovery as a deeply personal process that emphasizes rebuilding connections and

creating feelings of belonging with people, hobbies, and places that are important to the individual.

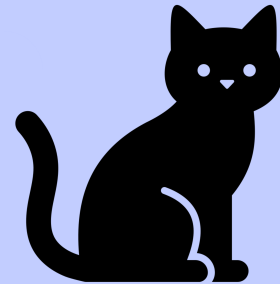
- **Navigating Structural Barriers and Everyday Triggers** describes the struggle of navigating recovery while gambling is normalized in society and everyday life is inundated with triggering advertisements that regulatory policies fail to effectively control. Participants discussed having to restructure their daily routines, such as by altering their routes or avoiding certain places that would expose them to gambling venues. Additionally, participants highlighted that support services and prevention initiatives were important parts of their recovery; however, many also noted gaps in the availability of support services, as well as disillusionment about the broader systemic drivers of harm, would continue to limit their individual recovery efforts.
- **Living With Grief, Loss and Ongoing Vulnerability in Recovery** describes the lingering everyday emotional impact and material loss from gambling that makes recovery an ongoing process marked by feelings of loss, grief, and vulnerability. Participants emphasized that they must learn to live alongside these feelings in order to develop new meanings in life.

## Themes from the lived experiences of those in recovery from gambling harm

### Rebuilding Identity and Connection in Recovery

**"I have to do something that is going to make a difference. I have to do meaningful work or I'm not gonna work."**

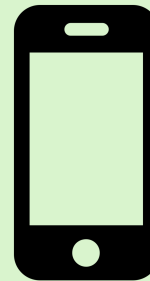
**"I take [the cats] out each day just for an hour or so, and just sit there and chill with them. I don't have a desire to be anywhere else. You know, 'Oh, it would be better to be at the pokies than this.' No, they mean everything to me."**



In reference to a photo of a pet who provided comfort and stability during recovery

### Navigating Structural Barriers and Everyday Triggers

**"Facebook has so many pop-ups that come up if you gamble on the horses or sport on TV, they're forever advertising all sorts of sports betting."**



**"Even though I had BetStop, the ads still popped up. It's a disgrace... It's a little reminder kind of thing. Like a slap in the face."**

In reference to a screenshot of gambling ads

### Living With Grief, Loss and Ongoing Vulnerability in Recovery

**"Now I still pull the [duvet] over my head because I battle with this gambling addiction everyday. At least I go 'Oh well, you trained hard yesterday, you can sleep in', right?"**



In reference to a photo of a gym bag symbolizing daily battles with gambling

**"I attempted to take my life again. This time I was knocked unconscious, and I don't know how long I was unconscious for. But when I did regain consciousness, my family, my kids, they just rushed to my head, and they were just spinning around in my head, and I decided there and then that I really need to change something."**

Figure. Themes identified from interviews with participants regarding their journey to recovery from gambling harm. Click image to enlarge.

### Why do these findings matter?

The findings highlight that for many people struggling with gambling problems, recovery is a nonlinear process determined by a broad range of individual, socio-cultural, environmental, and commercial factors. As a result, one's journey with recovery should be encouraged by [diverse pathways](#) like formal treatment, new

hobbies, or social support. Engaging with [social support](#) might include meeting with others in recovery, like [Gamblers Anonymous](#) members, or can include [online discussion groups](#), [peer recovery specialists](#), and [friends and family](#). Furthermore, the participants' frustrations with the overwhelming amount of gambling ads present in everyday life emphasize the need for regulators to better enforce [gambling advertising restrictions](#) and [harm reduction](#) systems like self-exclusion.

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

The study's results may not be [generalizable](#) to all countries as it was conducted in Australia which has an especially [heightened gambling industry and culture](#). Additionally, the majority of participants were aged 55+ years, which limits how much the results can be applied to younger people in recovery from gambling harm.

**For more information:**

Visit the [National Council on Problem Gambling](#) or [Gamblers Anonymous](#) to access information for individuals with gambling problems. Additional resources on gambling can be found on The BASIS [Addiction Resources](#) page.

— Justin Huynh, MPH

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