A case of gambling disorder and schizophrenia

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Objectives:

To understand the prevalence of psychiatric comorbidity in gambling disorder and their interaction.

Background:

Gambling disorder involves persistent and recurrent problematic gambling behavior, causing significant distress and problems with finances, work, relationships and potential legal issues. Classified as an addiction disorder in DSM-5, rather than an isolated condition, there is increasing recognition of comorbid psychiatric disorders, namely substance use, and impulse control, mood, anxiety and personality disorders. Comorbid psychotic disorder is less frequently reported, however they seem to share features that benefit from a better understanding.

Methods: Clinical case report and non-systematic review of the literature using the terms “gambling disorder” and “psychiatric comorbidity” at Pubmed.

Results:

Male, 59 years old, with psychotic symptoms since the age of 28, alongside with the development of pathological gambling behavior. This patient first came to the attention of psychiatric services at age 59, due to his difficulties associated with an increasing severity of betting frequency and ammounts. A longstanding direct relationship between gambling behaviours and psychotic symptoms was established retrospectively through clinical interview, and a diagnosis of Schizophrenia was made.

Discussion:

Individuals with psychosis were four times more likely to have a gambling problem than the general population⁴, presenting as well significantly higher gambling rates than any other psychiatric disorders³. In the other hand, up to 75% of disordered gamblers may have a co-occurring Axis I disorder⁴.

⚠ Clinicians treating Axis I disorders rarely screen for or treat comorbid gambling problems ⚠
DIAGNOSTIC OVERSHADOWING².

Responses to gambling in these individuals are not the typically observed²

- gambling as filling a need for activity
- as means of connecting with society/world
- greater involvement in gambling due to their symptoms of schizophrenia
- some experience a direct exacerbation of their psychosis by gambling

Hypothesis: This dual-diagnosis population could potentially share abnormalities in specific neurotransmitter systems, such serotonin, dopamine, or glutamate. Poor impulse control and cognitive deficits are salient features of psychotic disorders and may increase risk taking behaviours and the likelihood of financial losses and gambling related harm².

Studies show that chasing behavior may be a useful indicator of emerging disordered gambling risk, and overall impairment in other co-occurring disorders⁴.

Affects 1:5 schizophrenics¹

CONCLUSION

There is a bi-directional influence between schizophrenia and disordered gambling, these effects include exacerbation of symptoms of schizophrenia as a result of negative gambling outcomes, increased gambling involvement in order to escape the emotions associated with the negative symptoms of schizophrenia, and increased gambling involvement mediated by the individual's specific delusion. Proposed mechanisms for interaction between gambling and schizophrenia are shared impairments in impulse control and cognitive disturbances. The consequences of pathologic gambling can be devastating, particularly in patients with severe mental illness. Gambling behavior should be screened in patients with psychotic illness, allowing better treatment for this population. Asking patients who gamble about their tendency to go back to try to recover monetary losses may provide insight into whether a more comprehensive assessment and follow-up with regard to gambling disorder are needed.