Self-Control and Problem Gambling: Differential Depletion and Replenishment of Self-Control Strength Among Problem and Non-Problem Gamblers

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Executive Summary

Why do problem gamblers persist in gambling, even when their gambling leads to severe negative consequences? Understanding the motivational process underlying the loss of self-control that leads to problem gambling is essential to designing successful interventions for problem gamblers.

Problems with self-control have been identified as key factors in problem gambling. A decade of research and dozens of studies support the conceptualization of self-control as a limited supply of willpower. Specifically, the strength model of self-control posits that acts of self-control rely on a common reservoir. Depleting self-control in one area of your life means that you will have less self-control left for other areas of your life.

Successful self-control requires sufficient motivation; if our self-control is depleted, we are more likely to engage in activities that replenish self-control and less likely to engage in further depleting activities. That is, attempts to conserve and manage self-control strength may lead us to engage in replenishing activities when we are depleted. Preliminary evidence suggests that the act of gambling may temporarily enhance self-control strength in problem gamblers. Thus, problem gamblers may use gambling as an enjoyable indulgence, thereby relieving tension and restoring self-control strength.

Using a sequence of activities designed to both deplete and assess self-control strength, study one demonstrated that problem gamblers have chronically low self-control as compared to lower-risk gamblers. In a laboratory setting, study two demonstrated that engaging in gambling replenishes self-control in previously depleted problem gamblers.

Our findings suggest that problem gamblers may use gambling to refuel self-control strength in other life domains. We suggest that interventions for problem gamblers should focus on developing adaptive ways for gamblers to fortify and replenish their self-control strength.

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