

Simple feedback could be effective therapy for addictive behaviors

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As mental health care costs and problem gambling rates continue to rise, University of Missouri researchers are developing a personalized feedback tool that could serve as an effective and inexpensive way for people with addictive behavior-related problems to get the help they need.

Matthew Martens, associate professor of Educational, School and Counseling Psychology in the MU College of Education, and his team of researchers received a \$172,500 grant from the Institute for Research on Gambling Disorders to expand a successful "feedback based intervention" program to study college student gambling. Martens and his team have been developing and testing this type of intervention for alcohol issues, and the new grant will build on that study.

Intensive therapy, such as counseling sessions or extensive rehabilitation, isn't always necessary, and in some cases may even be counterproductive, for many people who are experiencing problems associated with addictive behaviors like alcohol use and gambling, Martens said. If effective, the personalized feedback would give therapists an inexpensive tool to help people modify their behavior before it escalates.

In these interventions clients answer a series of targeted questions. After completion, the clients receive personalized responses designed to raise awareness about their current behaviors versus more desirable behaviors. For example, it is typical for heavy drinking college students to

overestimate the amount of alcohol their peers drink. A client may think that drinking 20 drinks per week for a college student is normal, when actually, the nationwide average is much lower, Martens said.

With the rise of online gaming, more people are experiencing issues related to excessive gambling, such as missing appointments and classes or not meeting other responsibilities. However, most are not facing extreme issues, such as financial ruin, so intensive therapy, which can be very expensive, may not be necessary.

"The gambling questionnaire will prompt clients to answer questions about how their gambling compares to national norms, the negative consequences they have experienced, and the myths about gambling they may hold that are not true, which will then be used to develop the personalized feedback," Martens said. "To see all that feedback in one place can have a real positive effect."

In addition to the current alcohol and gambling questionnaires, Martens also is developing feedback based interventions that encourage physical activity in sedentary college students; alcohol interventions tailored to veterans returning from the Middle East; and a shorter, more focused alcohol intervention that includes a review of feedback and discussion with a clinician.

While similar questionnaires are available on the Internet, most of them are not associated with health care facilities. Martens believes that as research suggests that personalized feedback is an effective, low-cost intervention, more clinicians will adopt the practice.

More information: Martens' latest paper on alcohol addiction was published in the journal *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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