

# Betting on good luck and 4-leaf clovers: Connection between impulsivity, superstitions

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Research led by the University of Cambridge has found a link between impulsivity and flawed reasoning (such as believing in superstitious rituals and luck) in problem gamblers.

Studying [compulsive gamblers](#) who were seeking treatment at the National Problem Gambling Clinic, the researchers found that those gamblers with higher levels of [impulsivity](#) were much more susceptible to errors in reasoning associated with gambling, such as superstitious rituals (e.g. carrying a lucky charm) and explaining away recent losses (e.g. on bad luck or 'cold' machines).

The findings were published today, 29 June, in the journal [Psychological Medicine](#). The research, funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC), took place at the National Problem Gambling Clinic which opened in 2008 and is the only NHS funded service for disordered gambling in the UK.

While gambling is a popular form of entertainment for many people, problem (or 'pathological') gambling is a recognised psychiatric diagnosis affecting around 1% of the UK population. Symptoms include a loss of control over gambling, [withdrawal symptoms](#) such as [irritability](#), and various [negative consequences](#), including gambling debts and family difficulties.

Dr Luke Clark, from the University of Cambridge's Department of Experimental Psychiatry, said: "The link between impulsivity and gambling beliefs suggests to us that high impulsivity can predispose a range of more complex distortions – such as superstitions - that gamblers often experience. Our research helps fuse these two likely underlying causes of problem gambling, shedding light on why some people are prone to becoming pathological gamblers."

The researchers, from the University of Cambridge and Imperial College London, compared 30 gamblers seeking treatment at the clinic with 30 non-gamblers from the general population.

The researchers asked the participants a series of financial questions involving trade-offs between smaller amounts of money available immediately versus larger amounts of money in the future (e.g. would you prefer £20 today or £35 in two weeks?) to test impulsivity. The gamblers were significantly more likely to choose the immediate reward despite the fact that it was less money. (Psychologists define impulsivity as a preference for the immediate smaller rewards on this task.)

Additionally, a questionnaire showed that gamblers were particularly impulsive during high or low moods, which are frequently cues that can trigger gambling sprees.

While aspects of the 'addictive personality' have been identified previously in studies of problem gambling, the novel finding in the British gamblers was that those gamblers with higher levels of impulsivity were also more susceptible to various errors in reasoning that occur during gambling, including an increase in superstitious rituals and blaming losses on such things as bad luck.

Like treatment-seeking gamblers elsewhere in the world, the group from the National Problem Gambling Clinic were predominantly male, and

experienced a moderate rate of other mental health problems including depression and alcohol abuse.

Dr Clark added: "There are promising developments in treatments for [problem gambling](#) such as psychological therapies and drug medications. We hope that our research will provide additional insight into the problem and inform future treatments."

**More information:** The paper 'Impulsivity and cognitive distortions in pathological gamblers attending the UK National Problem Gambling Clinic: a preliminary report', by Rosanna Michalczuk, Henrietta Bowden-Jones, Antonio Verdejo-Garcia, and Luke Clark, will be published online today, 29 June, on the Psychological Medicine website. The full paper can be viewed online at [journals.cambridge.org/psm/Clark](https://journals.cambridge.org/psm/Clark)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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