

Gambling addiction: Better treatment from linguistic analysis of patients' stories

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For the first time, new research conducted by SISSA and by the University of Roma Tre identifies narrative markers of gambling addiction and paves the way to innovative approaches for therapy and

prevention.

How do people affected by pathological gambling tell their story? What information can we extract from their narratives? For the first time, a study conducted by SISSA—Scuola Internazionale Superiore di Studi Avanzati—and by the University of Roma Tre has analyzed in detail the words and linguistic constructions used by people suffering from gambling. The researchers identified several characteristic elements of their emotional and [cognitive state](#) in the different stages of the disorder. The study, published in *Addictive Disorders & Their Treatment*, opens up new scenarios for the development of recovery and prevention paths based on linguistic skills.

Sharing [personal experiences](#) with friends or relatives, through storytelling, is an exercise that many of us do every day. Yet [personal narratives](#) are by no means a trivial process. They help us to order and give meaning to our story, allowing us to integrate the different aspects of our psychic experience, of the different times—past, present and future—in which our mind lives.

The words that an individual uses when they narrate a fact or describe an inner condition reflect their psychological states and represent their particular cognitive and emotional style, personality traits, as well as any symptoms of psychological disorders they may suffer from. That is why the story of self is also an important access route to emotional and cognitive processes used in research and therapeutic contexts.

For the first time, a group of researchers of SISSA and of the University of Roma Tre analyzed the narratives of patients suffering from gambling addiction in order to identify the most common problems and provide possible innovative treatments.

In particular, the scholars interviewed 30 individuals suffering from a

gambling disorder and undergoing therapy in public services in the Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia. The interviews, done in a semi-structured form, dealt with various aspects of their experience with gambling, from the compulsive trait, to the attempts to control desire, from addiction triggers to those useful for achieving abstinence and regaining control.

The investigators went on to analyze the words used by the patients with LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count), the most widely used software for computational linguistic studies. "We identified different linguistic markers of the emotional and cognitive problems of gamblers, which vary in the different phases of the addiction," says Stefano Canali, researcher at the Interdisciplinary Laboratory of SISSA and at the Cosmic Lab of the University of Roma Tre, responsible for the study. "The most evident among all is the total absence of words and sentences referring to the future. This is probably both an indication and a cause of the difficulty gamblers have in thinking about the effects of impulsive and risky behavior on their future."

Another narrative marker identified by the study was the contemporary use of expressions in first person and in passive form to talk about their relationship with gambling. "It is as if the subject feels as being an 'agent' and responsible for the [gambling](#) behavior and, at the same time, as being 'acted upon', dragged by desire and automatism. This narrative contradiction is a clear indication of a fragmented self," states Canali. "Lastly, these indicators are accompanied by an extreme difficulty to describe emotional experiences connected with the desire to gamble and the loss of control. This narrative deficit seems to improve with the therapeutic route."

"This is a [pilot study](#) which has allowed us to show the importance of language analysis in understanding the psychological functions involved in addictions," Canali concludes. "Clinically speaking, narrative markers

can be a new support tool in the therapeutic process, as well as a possible means to recognize individuals at risk. Furthermore, they pave the way for the use of techniques to strengthen narrative skills as complementary strategies in the treatment of addictions, similar to those which are being tested for example with patients suffering from autism."

More information: Daniela Altavilla et al, Linguistic Analysis of Self-Narratives of Patients With Gambling Disorder, *Addictive Disorders & Their Treatment* (2020). [DOI: 10.1097/ADT.0000000000000229](https://doi.org/10.1097/ADT.0000000000000229)

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