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Book review: A cognitive behavioural therapy programme for problem gambling: therapist manual

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Book Review

A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Programme for Problem Gambling: Therapist Manual

Namrate Raylu & Tian Po Oei, 2010

Routledge, UK: ISBN: 978-0-415-54816-8 (pbk); 978-0-203-85042-8 (electronic); RRP £29.99;

Preface xii-xiii; 1-253 pages

Research suggests that the majority of problem and pathological gamblers do not seek formal treatment. Barriers to treatment seeking include shame, fear of stigma and denial of the severity of gambling problems. However, as problem gambling is associated with a range of negative consequences including financial difficulties, crime, employment disruption, family breakdowns, stress, anxiety, depression, and physical illness it is highly likely that at some stage problem gamblers will meet with one or more health or mental health professionals. If such professionals have the judiciousness to enquire about and discover a gambling problem, a significant therapeutic opportunity is gained but only if the therapist is trained specifically to manage gambling problems. This therapist manual aims to assist therapists (and clients) in understanding gambling behaviours, as well as to provide practical advice on techniques that can be used to change these behaviours.

Based on the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) this manual's therapy program is based on empirical evidence from treatment outcome trials, available literature, and the authors' own extensive experience with problem gambling clients. The manual is written for professional health workers with some background training in health and social sciences as well as some knowledge of CBT. It may also be useful for therapists specifically trained in problem gambling therapy, although more as a reference resource as some chapters may be too detailed and overly simplified for those with extensive knowledge of the problem gambling literature.

Substantively, the manual provides an overview of the relevant literature on gambling and problem gambling including contributory factors and a critical review of various treatment techniques in use. In respect to the latter, the authors provide detailed summaries of ten treatment sessions and three elective sessions covering their aims, session content, and practical and home exercises. The prescribed program consists of four main parts; the first part includes assessment, psychoeducation and motivational work. This is followed by basic cognitive and behavioural self-management and coping strategies to stabilise (stop or control) excessive gambling. The third part of the program aims to teach clients a wider range of coping skills to make positive changes in their gambling behaviour and other areas of life, challenging dysfunctional thoughts, managing negative emotions, relaxation and imaginal exposure techniques, problem solving and goal setting skills. Finally, the fourth part focuses on relapse prevention and maintaining therapeutic gains. Elective sessions include assertiveness skills training, financial and debt management and working with significant others for clients who need additional assistance in these areas.

The outlined sessions provide an appropriate level of detail such that any therapist familiar with CBT techniques would be able to work with clients with gambling-related problems. Further details on relevant concepts and practical matters, for example how to assist suicidal clients, understanding concepts of stages of change, motivational interviewing and controlled gambling, are provided in the appendices along with worksheets for in-session and take-home exercises. These details make it very practical for a mental health professional to be able to work with problem gambling clients without having to be extensively retrained or creating their own practical exercises.

However, although there is a limit to the detail and necessary information that can be included in any one treatment manual, some further details could be emphasised to assist therapists without experience with problem gambling or addiction clients. For example, although the authors state that the manual focuses just on managing gambling and not related issues, a client that only has gambling and no co-morbid issues is extremely rare. Consequently, additional practical advice and coverage on the management of co-morbid conditions would have added strength to the manual. On a related note, the role that gambling plays in a client's life must be assessed to address unresolved client needs following cessation of their gambling. For example, it is not uncommon for clients to develop other unhelpful coping mechanisms after they stop gambling to manage negative emotions or fill empty hours that gambling used to occupy. It is important that therapists identify these potential problems and work with clients to obtain appropriate life balances and the management of any continued underlying issues.

As some clients have difficulty examining and challenging cognitions and completing homework tasks, various levels of suggested exercises should be provided. The importance of motivational work is stated, and therapists are instructed to "review home exercises" and "troubleshoot problem areas or reasons for non-compliance", but it should be noted that motivational work may be required beyond the first few sessions. Attrition rates for problem gambling treatment are generally relatively high due to reasons of motivation, costs of compliance, desire to solve problems unaided or resolving the immediate crisis that may have resulted in treatment seeking. Therapists should be encouraged to assess motivation levels throughout therapy and modify sessions accordingly to maintain interest and enthusiasm for treatment completion.

Overall, this manual provides a comprehensive treatment program to assist therapists in working with problem gambling clients. The sessions are logical, based on sound conceptual reasoning and empirical evidence where available, is clearly presented. Practical advice, strategies and exercises are offered. This manual may be very helpful for health and mental health workers working in areas where they are likely to encounter problem gamblers. It is an appropriate reference source with an up-to-date review of the literature for therapists who completed training more than a few years ago and very useful for students or clinicians in training or workers in related fields who are likely to encounter problem gamblers.

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