

High hopes turn poker machine players into problem gamblers

There are around 300,000 problem gamblers in Australia. For gambling researchers, one of the biggest questions is why so many people seem unable to control their gambling behaviour, despite the harmful impact on their lives.

A PhD study conducted at the University of Western Sydney has revealed that problem gamblers have a higher and more enduring hope of winning than other people. It is this persistently high hope that clouds their judgement and leads to the impairment of their self control.

Dr Morten Boyer, a PhD graduate from the School of Psychology at UWS, says an inherent characteristic of gambling is that, despite the very small chance of winning, there is still always a chance.

"For problem gamblers, the perpetual, albeit small chance of winning, translates into a high level of hope which makes it seem irrational to stop feeding money into the machine," says Dr Boyer.

In this unique study, Dr Boyer conducted a series of in-depth interviews with regular electronic gaming machine players about their emotional experiences and expectations during a gaming session.

While previous gambling studies have considered problem gamblers to have inflated expectations of winning or illusions of control, the UWS study found that problem gamblers are aware of the extreme odds, as well as the financial implications of losing.

"This may be why the warning labels on poker machines which state the unlikelihood of winning are ineffective as a preventative measure," says Dr Boyer.

"At best, these labels may deter non-problem gamblers who have lower and less pervasive hopes of winning. At worst, they may in fact inadvertently promote hope by reminding gamblers of the ongoing possibility of winning."

Dr Boyer says the study helps to improve our understanding of gambling behaviour.

He says more research is needed to fully understand the experiences of hope during gambling; only then can a truly effective means of managing gambling behaviour be developed.

"It is interesting that hope, which is generally regarded as such a helpful construct associated with positive outcomes and success, can be so harmful when it comes to gambling," he says.

"Nevertheless, if problem gamblers are ever to beat the habit, their hope of winning must be reduced significantly."

Source: University of Western Sydney

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