Mindfulness is a spiritual or psychological faculty described in the healthcare literature as an intentional engaging of a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. The practice of mindfulness derives from Buddhism and has been used for over 2,500 years to reduce ‘craving’. Throughout the last decade, there has been growing scientific interest into the potential utility of mindfulness as a treatment for addictive behaviours. In what follows and using gambling addiction as an exemplar, we explore the practice of mindfulness in terms of its relevance to clinicians working in the field of addiction recovery.

PROBLEM GAMBLING: THE PROBLEM.

The most recent British Gambling Prevalence Survey published in 2007 by the UK Anti-Gambling Foundation revealed that 15% of UK adults meet the diagnostic criteria for problem gambling. This was a statistically significant increase of 50% since the previous BGPS study published in 2007. Gambling addiction is linked with a broad range of health problems including substance use disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders and sleep disorders. Also, problem gamblers account for at least 30% of gambling-related expenditure and are particularly at-risk for debt and bankruptcy. Problem gambling has serious medical, social and economic implications. UK charity GamCare estimates £1.5 billion as the cost to our economy.

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MINDFULNESS INTERVENTIONS: A THIRD WAVE APPROACH.

‘Second-wave’ cognitive behavioural therapies have in recent times been regarded as the ‘treatment of choice’ for treating problem gambling. Cognitive-behavioural approaches share a common mechanism of functioning via the restructuring of maladaptive belief systems and maladaptive core beliefs. In effect, clients are empowered to control and modify ‘false’ cognitions and to ‘self-intervene’ at the level of individual thoughts and feelings. CBT has been advocated for the treatment of problem gambling, but relapse rates for problem gamblers can be as high as 75% and there is a scarcity of high-quality CBT trials reporting long-term follow-up data. Over the past decade, mindfulness has been integrated into ‘third-wave’ cognitive-behavioural approaches. Rather than a deliberate attempt to control and modify distorting thoughts and emotions – as happens in traditional second wave CBT approaches – third wave approaches operate via a mechanism of acceptance and transformative present-moment awareness.

MECHANISMS OF ACTION.

Proposed mechanisms for effects of mindfulness on problem gambling and addictive behaviour centre on the acceptance, non-reactive awareness and ‘unfiltered present-moment-experiencing’ of mental urges, sometimes referred to as ‘lure’. ‘Lure’ is akin to the ‘here and now’ and is a key component of mindfulness. In effect, clients are empowered to control and modify ‘false’ cognitions and to ‘self-intervene’ at the level of individual thoughts and feelings. CBT has been advocated for the treatment of problem gambling, but relapse rates for problem gamblers can be as high as 75% and there is a scarcity of high-quality CBT trials reporting long-term follow-up data. Over the past decade, mindfulness has been integrated into ‘third-wave’ cognitive-behavioural approaches. Rather than a deliberate attempt to control and modify distorting thoughts and emotions – as happens in traditional second wave CBT approaches – third wave approaches operate via a mechanism of acceptance and transformative present-moment awareness.

Research exploring the potential utility of mindfulness as a treatment for addictive gambling has shown that higher levels of mindfulness are associated with reductions in severity of (i) gambling involvement, (ii) overconfidence and risk willingness, (iii) reward and sensation seeking and (iv) thought suppression. Clinical case studies also demonstrate that problem gamblers who receive mindfulness training show reductions in gambling urges, frequency and expenditure. Non-religious interventions also include improvements in levels of depression and anxiety, along with greater awareness and regulation of gambling-related feelings and thoughts. These outcomes are consistent with findings from studies assessing the effectiveness of mindfulness for people with substance use disorders (where interventions such as mindfulness-based relapse prevention have been shown to reduce craving).

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MINDFULNESS AND ADDICTION: sending out an SOS

Research exploring the effectiveness of mindfulness as a treatment for addictive gambling shows very promising demonstrable outcomes, as do clinical case studies, report Edo Shonin, William Van Gordon and Mark D Griffiths of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University.

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