

research snapshot

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Promoting couple therapy in substance use and gambling disorders

What this research is about

Couple relationships are an important component in the development and outcome of addictions, with evidence showing links between problem gambling, substance misuse, and couple conflict. Excessive gambling can cause strain in spousal relationships and parental role obligations. Substance use within a couple can influence one another's behaviour and likelihood of engaging in that practice.

Therapists can play a critical role in enhancing available couple-based services. Current services tend to overlook the intimate relationship aspect in addiction conditions. This article describes an initiative to build partnerships between health system decision-makers and researchers in the field. The goal is to promote a change in the current health system and increase opportunities for research and training in couple therapy services for substance use and gambling disorders.

What the researchers did

The researchers introduced a strategic initiative to raise the awareness of provincial health system decision-makers. Another aim was to build partnerships between decision-makers and researchers with the input of patients as end users. The idea was to address and resolve a significant research and treatment gap in mental health and addiction services for couples.

An integrated knowledge translation workshop was created to bring together diverse stakeholders. Integrated knowledge translation emphasizes the need for partnership in order to create knowledge together. The workshop was held over two days,

What you need to know

This article describes an integrated knowledge translation workshop that brought together 20 stakeholders from mental health and addictions over two days. Participants included decision-makers, researchers, past collaborators, and doctoral trainees. The workshop aimed to build partnerships, raise awareness of current gaps in couple and family supports, and promote a change in the current health system. Surveys were distributed to participants at the end of both days to evaluate the workshop. Survey questions were discussed in two 30-minute focus groups.

The survey and focus group results showed that all participants, especially decision-makers, valued the workshop. The workshop allowed for the exchange of information and a call for action among all parties who attended. From the focus groups, the researchers identified six components of the workshop that had made it successful.

introducing many issues around couple and family engagement in addiction and mental health services.

Twenty people participated in the workshop. Nine had decision-making roles in addiction and mental health streams (e.g. directors and clinical supervisors). Seven were researchers from various Canadian universities, as well as two doctoral students and two previous research collaborators. Three guests with experience seeking couple therapy for addictive disorders contributed to the workshop. At the end of day one, participants completed a survey to identify what they found most helpful, least helpful, and if any changes needed to be made. At the end of day two, they

completed a survey on whether workshop objectives were met. Two 30-minute focus groups were also held to explore the survey questions in greater depth.

What the researchers found

The day one survey showed that participants were highly satisfied with the workshop. The day two survey showed that participants felt the workshop had successfully achieved its goal of fostering meaningful discussions and exchange of ideas. They also felt that the workshop enhanced understanding of the need for couple and family therapies in addictions.

Two main themes emerged from the focus groups. The first was a new awareness. Decision-makers stated that they did not always have the time to keep up with research literature and that workshops helped to create awareness about the research-practice gap. Many changed their views on how they should provide treatment services. Traditionally, family members are not included in addiction services. From the workshop, they learned that family members are just as impacted by the addiction as the individual patients. Another finding was the surprise that decision-makers felt with the complacency of current health system regarding family engagement in treatment. The workshop highlighted to them that multiple organizational levels would need to be involved to create change. It also highlighted the need for connections across sectors.

The second theme was critical workshop components. Participants identified six characteristics of the workshop that made it effective: (1) knowledgeable and enthusiastic leader; (2) hearing patients' and their partners' stories; (3) a clear, single focus on the gap in couple and family supports; (4) commitment to action steps; (5) a unified vision with participants from diverse sectors; and (6) use of emotional, experiential and cognitive ways of engaging workshop participants.

How you can use this research

The workshop's success shows how diverse stakeholders must work together to form action-oriented partnerships. The researchers documented

actions that occurred within two weeks after the study. These included a research partnership on a couple therapy clinical trial and training and research opportunities for counsellors and graduate students.

About the researchers

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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

Learn more about GREO by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.

