
DETERMINANTS OF INITIATION OF NATURAL RECOVERY IN THE CASE OF SLOT MACHINE ABUSERS

Claudiu ȘTEFANI¹

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Abstract: *Participating in slot machine games is a growing phenomenon in Romania in the context of the development of this industry. Along with this expansion of participation are the problems associated with the abuse and addiction of these games. This paper explores factors associated with initiating and sustaining the process of natural recovery in the case of this category of addicts. In this context is the present research that aimed to determine the factors that support the motivation for recovery from abusive or addictive gambling in the case of slot machines players. In order to achieve the goals of this research, 21 interviews were conducted with players from the city of Alba Iulia and Sebeș. These interviews allowed us to gain a deep understanding of the motivations and life context of the subjects in which the problem was recognized and the recovery process began. The results obtained in the research showed that the impetus for initiating recovery came according to the results obtained from the participants' need to achieve certain personal goals in life, fulfilling social roles, significant changes in life, and the inconsistency between personal values and excessive gambling.*

Keywords: *addiction, natural recovery, slot machines, gambling*

Introduction

Slot machine games are the most popular gambling games in the Romanian profile industry, providing 70% of the profits of the gambling sector according to the data provided by the National Gambling Office. In Romania, according to the Association for the Prevention and Treatment of Addiction (Naghi, 2012) over 1 500 000 Romanians participate in various types of gambling such as poker, bingo, sports betting, roulette, slot machines and others and about 150,000 of them they developed addiction. A study conducted in Romania by GFK (2019), shows an average of 0.6% of gambling practitioners, a percentage located at the lower limit of the European average which is 0.5-2%.

¹ Lecturer, Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, e-mail: claudiu.stefani@uab.ro.

Excessive gambling mainly affects vulnerable groups of the population, being associated with other social problems. For this reason, a better knowledge of the phenomenon of addiction and the process of recovery of addicts has a great utility for improving therapeutic practices.

The Research Problem

The idea that recovery from various types of addictions can be achieved without professional help is increasingly accepted by specialists in the field. In his paper "The truth about addiction and recovery," Professor Stanton Peele of New York University said, citing the results of a Gallup survey that "*people are about ten times as likely to change on their own as with the help of doctors, therapists or self-help groups*" (Peele, 2004: 78). According to this author, the help of professionals is much less important than is believed in making changes in life, support came from a spouse (29%), parents or siblings (21%) or friends (14%). A study conducted by Wendy Slutke (Slutke, 2006) in the United States also showed that natural recovery might be common, 30-40% of players who crossed the border of entertainment recovered themselves without the help of professionals.

Given this recognition of the high share of self-recovery, addiction research has focused on identifying strategies used to overcome addiction, the factors and motivations that lead to initiating this process on their own and at the same time identifying differences in addiction. gender and lessons that can be learned (Petry and Weiss, 2009).

In this context, knowing and understanding the motivations that determine the initiation of the self-recovery process and the factors that support this process is very important for improving support for people addicted to slot machines and gambling in general.

Literature Review

Given the serious problems that gamblers face, it would seem obvious that there is a strong motivation for overcoming addiction, but this does not happen. On the contrary, most remain trapped in the addiction cycle of gambling: negative feelings associated with gambling losses, debt accumulation, the mirage of recovering losses, combined with the positive experience of socializing with friends and the need to keep up appearances, hiding the size of the participation to gambling to family, employer or others. British psychologist Jim Orford showed in his study on alcohol addicts that addiction also offers some benefits: relaxation, fun and pleasant social experiences (Orford, et al. 2013).

Studies on gambling have focused on several forms of motivation: motivation to participate in the game, stages of change and changing excessive gambling behavior.

An attempt to explain the genesis of motivation for behavior change in addicts is provided by Higgins (1998), author of Self-discrepancy theory. According to this

theory, the difference between the actual self and the ideal self produces feelings of shame, internalization, and depression, and creates the desire to annihilate cognitive dissonance.

A study by Johansen and colleagues (Johansen et al., 2019) identified three major sources of behavior change motivation for those who played online games: (1) empathy with concerned significant others, real or fictional, (2) cognitive dissonance due to positive feelings towards sports and athletics, (3) cognitive dissonance due to gambling among family members.

A study conducted from the perspective of Prochaska and Di Clemente's Transtheoretic model of change on 200 game addicts who were thinking of giving up the game in the next 6 months (contemplation stage) or 30 days (preparation stage) showed that higher autonomous motivation for quitting gambling predicted greater likelihood of being in the preparation stage compared to those with higher external motivation for change who were less likely to go further in the process of change (Kushnir et al., 2015).

The discrepancy between personal values and norms and self-destructive behavior such as substance or behavioral addictions may motivate a person to initiate change (Miller and Rollnick, 2013). This is the principle on which the Brief Intervention and Motivational Interview technique developed by William Miller works.

American psychologist Stanton Peele shows that an important role in motivating addicts to initiate behavioral change and overcome addiction is to pursue an important purpose in life. According to him: "when a habit or an addiction interferes with accomplishing a goal you want to attain, or something larger you are committed to, you are more inclined to quit" (Peele, 2004: 194).

Sophie Vasiliades and Anna Thomas (2018) conducted a study in the United States in which they tried to determine the process by which gamblers recognize problems and initiate the recovery process but also the experiences and factors that support this process. The results obtained showed that most participants initiated a natural recovery approach rather than resorting to professional services or support groups. The motivation for recovery was represented by the dissonance between the desired self-image and the reality caused by the abusive game and a life event or decisive intervention of someone affected by the excessive slot machine game of the individual.

Some authors (Granfield and Cloud 2001; Stall and Biernacki 1986; White, 2007) have highlighted two ways of recovering gambling addicts similar to the situation of substance addicts: avoid oriented and approach oriented. A temporal relationship between the two recovery pathways was also highlighted, informal recovery is initiated by the avoidance of gambling-related stimuli and harms, and maintenance recovery is predominantly achieved with approach-oriented strategies, including involvement with family, friends and pursuing personal goals in life (Stall and Biernacki 1986; White, 2007).

The negative effects of excessive gambling on significant people can also play an important role in motivating addicts to initiate the process of self-recovery (Choong et al., 2014).

Reaching rock bottom has been identified as another factor that provides the initial motivation for starting the recovery process and seeking resources to support this process (Reith and Dobbie, 2012).

Studies that have investigated the motivations and factors that determine and support the initiation of the self-recovery process have revealed mainly discrepancies between the ideal self and the current self distorted by gambling, the inconsistency between personal values, goals in life and addiction that interferes with their realization but and external factors such as affecting significant people in their lives or hitting the bottom that causes a backlash of trying to regain control.

Studies on the natural recovery of gambling addicts are still quite few and inconclusive. Most of them were done on some clients of the recovery services. Few are made on game addicts. In this context, there is a clear need to investigate more focused on the experiences of gambling addicts who have started a self-recovery process in order to better understand how the self-recovery process is initiated and supported.

Objectives and Methodology

In order to investigate the motivations for initiating the self-recovery process and the factors that support this process, we conducted a qualitative research. The aims of the research were:

1. To determine the context of the initiation of gambling;
2. Determine what the context was and how they became aware of the issue of the game;
3. To determine what were the motivations that determined the initiation of the self-recovery process;
4. To identify the factors that supported the self-recovery process.

The method used was the interview based on a semi-structured interview guide that contained a series of guided research questions. The main topics of the interview guide were the context of initiating gambling, the context and the way in which they realized that they have a problem with gambling, the motivations that generated the change in behavior and the factors that supported this process. During the interviews, additional questions were added depending on the course of the discussion.

The study was conducted on a group of 21 gamblers from the cities of Alba Iulia and Sebeş in Alba County, Romania. They were recruited using the snow ball method, starting from a few cases of gamblers known to the authors. Players over the age of 18 were accepted, identified themselves as abusive or addicted players and tried at least once to reduce playing time or give up completely. When we did not get any more information, we stopped looking for new people to interview.

The method of analysing the data obtained from interviews was the content analysis through we identified themes and patterns regarding the initiation of gambling, the

context and awareness of the problem, the motivations for initiating the self-recovery process and the factors that supported this process.

Research Results

The context of gambling initiation

The context can be defined as the social circumstances or events that influenced the initiation of gambling. Play is a social activity and the initiation of the game is done in the context of social interactions (Reith and Dobbie 2011). The context in which the game was initiated helps us understand the needs and problems of the individual who determined and maintained participation in the game and the requirements for changing this behavior. The results obtained in the interviews are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The Context of Gambling Initiation

Social context of gambling initiation	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>
1. Socializing in networks of friends	"I first played slot machines in a lottery agency in Petrila, when I was 12 years old. It was close to school and I went with the boys after school. Nobody told us we weren't allowed. That's how we used to spend our time together.", man 28 years old.
2. Lack of leisure opportunities	"After I finished my program at school, I went to the bar next to the block where I live. I know everyone there, one always stops me from drinking a beer. You don't have much else to do. The first time I played with the machines, I did it with ambition. I was sure that I would be lucky and give it to the others, but it wasn't like that. Unfortunately, out of ambition, I continued, a stupid ambition.", man 54 years old.
3. Spatial proximity of gaming rooms to the respondents' living, working or shopping area	"The games room was right next to my block. I passed her hundreds of times at work or at home, ignoring them. But one day it happened and I went inside. I met a lot of acquaintances. And that's how I started playing machines. The devil put them in my way ...", man, 33 years old.
3. Chance and curiosity	"I came to a Casino in Bucharest by chance a few years ago, I liked the atmosphere, the lights, the music, it was select. At home I tried to relive the atmosphere there. It wasn't the same, but the game of machines caught me and I became a loyal customer.", man 35 years old.
4. The influence of the family	"My parents gave me all kinds of games when I was little, the house was full and I used to play. When I got older I discovered slot machines, I was used to playing, so I started playing", woman, 26 years old.

Source: own representation

The most common situation is socialization within the group of friends in which the interest in the game is acquired and the pleasure of playing develops. The way time is spent by the group of friends offers opportunities to play slot machines and learn the necessary techniques.

Lack of leisure opportunities is a constraint that causes some people to accept the offer of gambling organizers. The retirees were among the respondents who justified gambling to the slot machine as a leisure option. The search for a way to spend free time is the context of starting the gambling, especially for retirees.

The proximity of the game rooms is a factor that may explain the initiation of playing at slot machines. The game rooms are meeting and socializing spaces at community level.

Chance and curiosity were also mentioned as the context in which they started playing the machines. Some players accidentally discovered slot machines, liked the atmosphere in the game rooms and felt the need to experience the game.

In the case of other players, the initiation of the game took place in the family context where they learned the taste for gambling and where they also had the model of the parents who played.

Awareness and recognition of the gambling problem

Awareness and recognition of the problem of excessive gambling precedes and determines the impulse for action. For this reason, knowing the context and how this has been done allows us to better understand the motivation for change. The answers received from interviews showed us the following warning signs:

1. Inability to stop playing;

“It's a misfortune for me, there are times when I don't play on machines, but I can't do without gambling. Now I put these tickets in the Polish lottery, sometimes I win, but here I don't think it's such a big loss.”, man 28 years old.

2. Accumulation of debts that have exceeded revenues:

“If you can't stop playing when you win, you lose for sure. And I couldn't stop. I borrowed money, I ended up totally neglecting myself and I was in constant depression because after I had large sums earned, because I couldn't stop, I lost them very quickly every time I earned working days in a row.”, man 30 years old.

3. Chronic fatigue, lack of energy for other activities:

“For a while I couldn't, I felt drained of energy like a lemon, I couldn't do anything else”, women 31 years old.

4. Incongruence with self-image:

“I wondered why I couldn't stop. And it wasn't the addiction, but the fact that I was stupid and I didn't understand that playing daily I was getting worse and worse and with the debts I lost my dignity.” man, 29 years old.

5. The threat of job loss:

“I started to be late for work or even to be absent, the boss threatened to fire me. I realized that it was not a joke, I already had debts and I had to pay them”, women 26 years old.

6. Compromising the relationship with the life partner or other significant persons:

“I realized that gambling was a problem when I lost my friends, I couldn't pay the bank loans and that I could lose my family and my life”, 37-year-old man.

7. Failure to achieve personal goals in life:

“Financially, maybe I managed to be zero, but I realized that after months, I did not work at all, I did not progress in other areas of life and I am still zero or even minus”, man 37 years old.

8. Chasing losses or wins:

“As a player, you have this idea in your head that you go back to the game and get your money back, the more you lose the more you want to go back to get it back, but I was convinced that it's just an illusion. So I wasted a lot of time and money and just gained stress, nerves and more. When you understand that you can end the game, I think it is possible without playing”, man, 38 years old.

Warning signs were recognized as indicators of a problem by participants, their family members, friends, or employers. If the warning signs appeared in all cases there were differences in terms of whether the gambler recognized the problem (self-recognized pathway), or whether another person confronted them with their problem or a significant uncontrollable event compelled the gambler (and others) to recognize the severity of the problem (externally recognized pathway).

The answers received from the interviews showed us that the warning signs were not recognized from the beginning, there was a period of denial or ignorance. Players sought to keep up appearances and hide the scale of the problems created by excessive gambling. Recognition of the problem arose over time after a significant degree of severity was reached. This was the turning point in initiating the recovery process.

Motivations for initiating the self-recovery process

In the addiction literature, problem recognition is treated separately from impetus for behavior change. In the case of the alcohol addiction overcoming model, self-awareness is followed by the implementation of informal behavior change strategies (Mohatt et al., 2008). The results obtained from the interviews show the following situation (Table 2):

Table 2: Motivations for initiating self-recovery

Motivations for initiating self-recovery	Illustrative quotes
1. Achieving personal goals in life	"I understood that gambling deceives me, steals my time and money, makes me lose things important to me and does not give me opportunities in life. I wanted to work, to make money, to have family, children, to be in line with the world.", man 51 years old.
2. Restore self-identity	"I thought it wasn't hard to let go, I looked in the mirror and told myself that this was not the man I was. I promised to leave, I want to resume my business and the profits I once had, I want to be normal, I want to be smart.", Man 30 years old.
3. Changing the life circumstances	"I fell in love and had a serious relationship with a girl I later married. She made me give up gambling. Otherwise, who knows what was chosen of me, I was lucky with her." Man 34 years old.
4. The search for a new, more satisfying and fulfilled life	"If I were to summarize in one sentence, I got rid of the addiction to the game when real life began to seem more beautiful, more attractive and more challenging than life in the game." Woman 30 years old.
5. Life events	"My best friend died. That upset me. I realized I could die too. I swore then that I would give up completely.", Man 33 years old.

Source: own representation

The most important factor that motivates the initiation of the process of self-recovery in gambling is the pursuit of personal goals in life whose achievement is endangered by gambling addiction.

The inconsistency between the authentic self and gambling self appears in many of the answers received as an important factor for initiating the process of self-recovery. This conflict seems to occur when increased participation in gambling intensifies and begins to harm the integrity of the self.

Changing living circumstances, mainly playing new social roles such as husband / wife in the case of the young or grandparents in the case of the elderly also seem to play an important role in the genesis of the motivation for change.

In other cases, the urge to overcome addiction came from the need to change one's life in order to enjoy a new quality of life that addiction denies.

Maintaining relationships with significant people in their lives appeared as a motivating factor in situations where these relationships were valued by respondents.

The motivation for initiating the self-recovery process for gambling addicts came from many sources and was not always activated immediately after the problem was

recognized. In most cases, a significant worsening of the player's situation was needed, which accumulated over time until a turning point appeared when the change could not be postponed.

Factors that support the process of self-recovery

Recognizing the problem of gambling makes people responsible for the recovery process. However, supporting this process requires the mobilization of individual resources. Recognizing the problem is not immediately followed by the beginning of the self-recovery process, some of the problem players continue to make significant efforts to hide their gambling from others for a number of reasons, including to continue gambling without judgment or obligation to stop. This delays the mobilization of resources to support the recovery process. The onset of the recovery process is facilitated by a number of factors. In this regard, in the present research we obtained the following results:

Table 3: Factors that support the process of self-recovery

Factors of recovery process	Illustrative quotes
1.Support from family and friends	<i>"My friends, few and very close, were there for me to offer me a part of life lived in the true sense of the word. Their presence and especially their unconditional acceptance helped me to get through the trials and tribulations that might have crushed me."</i> , Man, 34 years old.
2. Self capacity	<i>"But because the debts per month that are higher than my income I started to despair and lose even more money. But recently I think I have gained the strength not to enter a game room. All I have to do is work harder to pay off the debts I have."</i> Man, 23 years old.
3. Accountability to others	<i>"For me, family is important, I have nothing else more important. Do my kids need me and I'm a bastard who gives all his money to the slot machine? I told myself this wouldn't happen again. I want to be where I need to be, this nonsense has stolen many years of my life. It doesn't matter, maybe they saved all the other years of my life."</i> , Man 45 years old.
4.Involvement in meaningful activities.	<i>"I had discovered my vocation and passion for psychology. It was still a kind of game, only it was a real life game. To write books, to make a website, to meet new people, to work with people, to grow and evolve in real life. It's just that you can't save and resume if you screw it up."</i> , Woman 31 years old.

Source: own representation

The most important factor that supported the self-recovery process in the case of the interviewed subjects was the support provided by family or friends. This support has helped to restore social relations and especially to prevent relapses.

An important role in supporting the process of self-recovery seemed to be, according to the answers received, the ability of individuals to regain control over their own lives. Gambling addiction caused the reverse reaction of regaining freedom from gambling.

Taking responsibility for others was present in the cases of those who were married or who intended to get married. In order to reach this decision, however, it was necessary to aggravate the problems generated by gambling to the point where they could no longer be hidden and a change became necessary.

A more special situation encountered in the case of the interviewed respondents was that in which the experience of gambling addiction led to the discovery of a personal vocation that generated goals to pursue in life that served as a motivation for change and a support to support this approach. of recovery.

Discussions and Conclusions

The present study was conducted on gambling addicts in Alba Iulia and Sebeş who tried on their own to overcome this addiction. They self-appreciated as problematic players, clearly going beyond the entertainment area and entering the area of abusive and addictive play. Some of them managed to get rid of addiction, others continue the fight. The recovery process is by its nature one that contains multiple trials and relapses. The responses received from the interviewed respondents provided us with relevant information about the experience of gambling players who have seen their lives devastated by addiction and who have managed to begin a recovery process on their own.

Key findings in the current study regarding the motivations for initiating the self-recovery process highlighted the role of social support and the pursuit of personal goals in life as the main motivational factors. These findings are consistent with similar studies conducted on alcohol and drug addicts (Granfield and Cloud, 2001; White, 2007; Peele, 2004). The desire to restore self-identity in engaging in the process of self-recovery also seems to have played an important role. Players caught in the trap of addiction have reached a critical moment in which they no longer recognize themselves in the image of gambling players, enslaved to this game of chance and felt the need to regain the freedom to restore their true self and control over own life.

In other cases, especially for young people without a purpose in life for whom gambling was only a means of spending time and fun, the negative experience of addiction was an opportunity to reflect on their own lives and find goals in life. This seems to be the main trigger of the behavior change process.

The research conducted on gambling addicts in Alba Iulia and Sebeş brought some relevant information about their experience in initiating the self-recovery process. A strong point of the research was that the sample was one close to the gambling community in Romania and not one based on the clients of a recovery clinic. On the other hand, among the limitations of the research is the fact that we did not address a number of relevant aspects of the self-recovery process such as assessment of relapse

capital, lapse and relapse events, relationship with other destructive behaviors or other types of addictions, the influence of social capital or social status and others. It remains for future research to analyze these aspects and to improve the knowledge of the phenomenon of natural recovery so useful for therapeutic practice.

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