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New study to offer free online counselling for rural and remote people struggling with gambling disorders

For people living in rural communities and experiencing problems with gambling, the support and resources available to help them are often limited. A new University of Lethbridge study is seeking to help those struggling with a gambling disorder by offering free online counselling.

Dr. Darren Christensen, the Alberta Gambling Research Institute Chair in Gambling and assistant professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences, and his research team (consisting of Dee Ann Benard, executive director, Alberta Rural Development Network, Drs. Chad Witcher, assistant professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, Rebecca Hudson-Breen, assistant professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, and Trent Leighton, assistant professor, Faculty of Health Sciences) will test a contingency management approach to treat problematic gambling.

“The idea of contingency management is to compete with the benefits, or the fun, people might derive from gambling,” says Christensen. “One of the aspects that is most difficult about addiction is that you can drink, gamble, get high or have sex, and the reward is immediate. The difficulty in counselling is that the benefits accrue over time.”

Contingency management offers an immediate benefit, or reward, to the client for remaining abstinent.

“It uses our preference for immediacy, except we’re reversing it and providing a reason for participants to remain abstinent and still get something immediately,” says Christensen. “The important issue is that you’ve got to provide people with things that they value as rewards, they have to be meaningful for them and if not, the rewards aren’t sufficiently strong enough to motivate change.”

He says the study is unique on two fronts. Contingency management approaches have been proven effective in substance abuse treatment but have not specifically targeted rural people. Secondly, by bringing counselling into the home via an online approach, it is reaching a segment of the population that is often shut off from counselling resources and support.

“Those in rural and remote communities may find it difficult to access services, so this is an area that’s not currently being addressed,” says Christensen. “Typically, they would need to come to a larger community centre to receive treatment. Also, gamblers often feel shame and a stigma about their gambling problem. They don’t want other people to know, especially family members, about their problem so making counselling available to them in their own homes, where they can talk to someone about their issues is potentially a very effective process.”

Funded by the Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse (CRISM) and in cooperation with the Alberta Rural Development Network (ARDN), the study will run for 12 weeks, with participants eligible for three counselling sessions per week. Participants must either use a personal computer that has a video camera or access an available computer from an ARDN affiliate. Following a screening and consent process, participants will be randomized and split into two groups, one which will receive contingency management coupled with counselling, and the other just counselling. In both instances, the counselling is free to the participant.

To participate, contact Dr. Darren Christensen at 403-329-5124 or darren.christensen@uleth.ca.

For more information on the study: <https://www.uleth.ca/healthsciences/gambling-counselling-internet>.

To view online: <http://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/new-study-offer-free-online-counselling-rural-and-remote-people-struggling-gambling>

For sound clips from Dr. Christensen, follow these links:

<https://soundcloud.com/ulethbridge/dr-darren-christensen-addiction>

<https://soundcloud.com/ulethbridge/dr-darren-christensen-contingency-management>

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