

Words Matter

A language guide for respectful
reporting on gambling

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GAMBLING RESEARCH GLASGOW



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Why is language important?

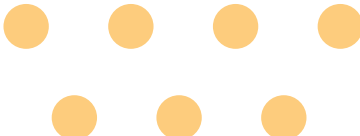
Language has the power to shape how we see the world and interact with one another. It's not just a means of communication; it's a reflection of our beliefs and values. Words like *addict* or *problem gambler* perpetuate stigmatising stereotypes and can lead to judgment, discrimination, and shame. Stigma associated with experiencing gambling harms can prevent people from seeking the help they need.

Language evolves alongside society, reflecting changes in cultural norms and attitudes. By using language that respects the dignity and humanity of individuals, we work towards a fairer and more inclusive society.

As discussions about gambling and its impact gain traction, guidelines on respectful reporting on gambling are needed. Such reporting should adopt a person-centred

approach which puts the person first and recognises that individuals are not defined by their experiences. This replicates the approach established by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence in their guidelines for how we talk about people.

Understanding the impact of language on perceptions and attitudes is essential for fostering empathy and driving social change. This guide supports ongoing efforts to promote sensitivity and inclusivity by outlining best practices and offering tips on how to avoid stigmatising individuals' experiences of gambling harms in reporting.



How were our guidelines produced?

To produce this guide, four workshops were held with 22 individuals with experience of gambling harm. Draft principles were shared with journalists, civil servants, NHS representatives, and civic society organisations. Researchers at the University of Glasgow facilitated these workshops and led in the design of this guide based on these discussions.

What this guide does and does not do



This guide is intended for academics, researchers, civil servants, politicians, journalists or others who have a public platform for discussing gambling harms. This guide doesn't cover every possible scenario of what to say or avoid. Rather, it offers suggestions for respectful reporting on gambling and its associated harms.

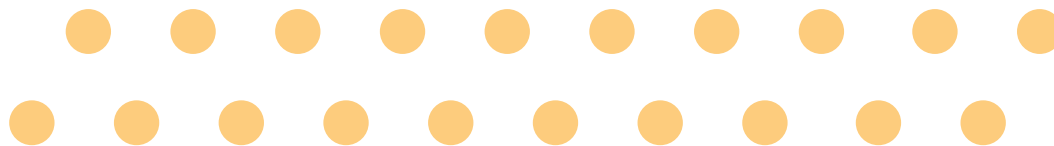
Language is nuanced and there's no universal rule that applies to everyone. What's considered appropriate depends greatly on the person and their situation. Moreover, language is dynamic and adapts with time. This guide represents current perspectives but should be continuously reviewed and updated.



8 Principles for respectful reporting:

- 1 Emphasise the person first (e.g., *person harmed by gambling* rather than *addict* or *gambler*). Avoid labelling people based on their experiences with gambling harm.
- 2 When reporting or describing an individuals' story, ask that person how they wish to be addressed or described and respect their choices.
- 3 Be aware of the context of the language you are using - some language is OK when used within a community to claim identity but is stigmatising when used by others e.g. *addict*.
- 4 Focus on why something happened, including the role of the industry and the risk inherent with their products, rather than focusing only on the actions of individuals.
- 5 Avoid language or reporting that sensationalises, stigmatises or victimises people who gamble and who are harmed by gambling.
- 6 Don't minimise the risks associated with gambling products. Acknowledge the scale and scope of risk associated with different types gambling products.
- 7 Recognise that gambling products risk harm to health and are addictive; products are designed to be addictive; gambling disorder is an illness; harms from gambling are wide ranging and go beyond more than money lost.
- 8 Use empowering language. People who have experienced harms from gambling can and do recover (e.g. talk about recovery, networks, communities of help and support, not helplessness and vulnerability).

Tips



| Try This | Don't Use | Why? |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A person harmed by gambling A person experiencing gambling harms A person in recovery from gambling addiction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problem gambler Gambling addict Recovering addict Compulsive gambler | <p>These labels come with significant stigma and should be avoided in third party reporting. Individuals are more than just the harm they have faced.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gambling Harmful gambling products | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problem gambling Responsible gambling Safe or safer gambling Compulsive gambling | <p>Differentiating between gambling behaviour according to the level of “problematic-ness” or “safeness” obscures the wide-ranging risks associated with gambling. The risk of harms from gambling increases from relatively low levels of consumption and anyone can be at risk from harms. Terms like responsible gambling put focus on the individual alone and obscures the responsibility of the industry, who produce and provide the products that generate harms.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gambling harms are widespread Many people are harmed by gambling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The framing that many people enjoy gambling recreationally but only a minority are harmed Only a tiny number of people who gamble are harmed | <p>The common belief that only a small minority of people who gamble experience harm, while most do not, is not supported by empirical evidence. In reality, a significant proportion of people using many gambling products face harm and many more are harmed when impacts on family, friends and communities are considered. Reporting should recognise this and address prior misconceptions on the scale of harms.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone is at risk of gambling harms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The framing that some people are more vulnerable to gambling harms due to their individual characteristics | <p>Some groups face more risk of gambling harms for a range of reasons. Fundamentally, anyone who gambles can be at risk of experiencing gambling harms. Risk of harm from gambling is not an inherent characteristic of an individual. Suggesting so is stigmatising.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask individuals where you are reporting their experiences what language they wish to be used to describe them / their experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not label individuals according to your own assumptions (i.e. using terms like addict, problem gambler etc) | <p>Context drives the power and meaning of language for different individuals and their communities. People's individual circumstances shape their self-identification. Individuals should retain the autonomy to choose how they define their experiences of harm. Do not impose your own labels on people.</p> |



Additional principles for reporting survey/research data

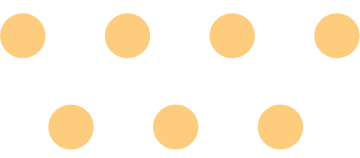
Overall:

Adopt person-centred language: referring to people who gamble; people with gambling disorder; people experiencing gambling harms; people harmed by gambling.

Reporting of harms:

Whilst not perfect, the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) is commonly used to measure adverse consequences from gambling, including identifying those with a score of 8+ as experiencing “problem gambling” and captures those who are experiencing adverse consequences from their gambling. This creates an issue for respectful reporting as stigmatising language is hardwired into the PGSI. Where possible, the term “problem gambling” should be avoided. Its use should be limited to instances where it’s essential to specify the outcome measure used in the research reports being referenced.

Population prevalence estimates under-estimate the risk associate with products among those who use them and use them regularly. Whilst not everyone is harmed by their gambling, gambling products have the potential to generate harms to anyone and the full scale of this risk should be recognised. Presenting experience of harms among those using different products gives a better representation of the scale of risk associated with them.



Additional guidance for uses of imagery

Respectful reporting should be cautious with the imagery attached to stories. Images should fit the tone (in keeping with our principles) of the article. Caution should be given when including pictures featuring gambling companies which may serve as de-facto advertisement. When images of people are used, these can reinforce incorrect stereotypes about who is more likely to gamble or more likely experience harms. It is important to remember that anyone can be harmed by gambling. Portraying particular stereotypes therefore has the potential to generate shame and stigma among people who do not recognise themselves from the portrayals in the pictures.

Adopting the guidelines

We understand that not everyone will follow these guidelines. Some organisations or commercial entities may be less likely to uphold the principles outlined here and some may attempt to discredit them. Greater awareness of the underlying motivations of different entities is needed.

The experience of gambling harms can be devastating for individuals and their families. Gambling harms are strongly associated with suicidality. Shame and stigma, reinforced by the language we use, stops people asking for or getting the help and support they need. By changing our approach to language, we can help to foster a climate in which the stigma of gambling harm is reduced. This in turn can mean more people get the assistance and support they need, potentially saving lives.

