

Quarterly News & Updates

Summer | 2026

Welcome to the Division on Addiction's Summer Quarterly Newsletter!

Announcements



We are thrilled to announce that we will be partnering with [dfusion Inc.](#) on a new Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) Phase I grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse! For this project, which will develop and pilot test *Level Up: A Game-based Learning Intervention to Prevent Problem Gambling*. *Level Up* will be a theory-based, science-driven intervention for high school students blending educator-facilitated instruction, digital simulations, educational game elements, and more. Educators who are interested in informing *Level Up* should contact Dr. Heather Gray at hgray@cha.harvard.edu.

Upcoming Events



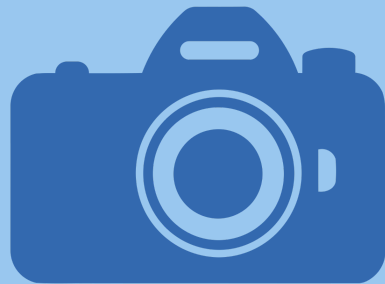
Dr. Sarah Nelson will be presenting on the topic of “How Accountability Courts Can Address Gambling and Gambling Disorder Risk in Justice-Involved Populations” at the Council of Accountability Court Judges 2026 Annual Training Conference on September 15th. Learn more and register [here](#).

Dr. Heather Gray will be presenting a webinar on the topic of “Problem gambling and suicidality - An urgent public health issue” for the International Center for Responsible Gaming (ICRG) on September 17th. Learn more and register [here](#).

Dr. Timothy Edson will be presenting on the topic of “Loss Chasing: From clinical origins to behavioral risk detection” at the 27th Annual ICRG Conference on Gambling and Addiction on September 28th. Learn more and register [here](#).

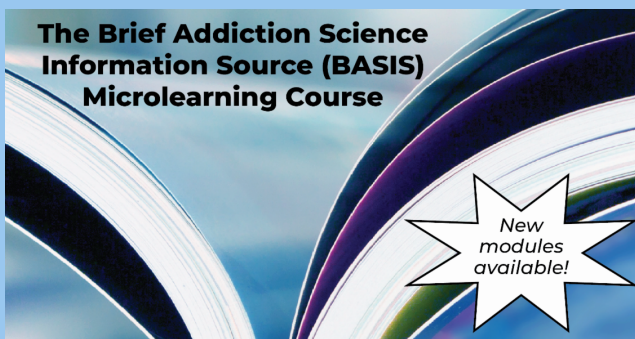
Division on Addiction 2025 Annual Report

The Division on Addiction is proud to release its 2025 Annual Report! This report highlights the work of our faculty and staff to reduce the burdens of addiction through research, education, training, and outreach. Click [here](#) to see what we accomplished last year and access previous years' reports.



Expressions of Addiction is now available to view on our website! *Expressions of Addiction* is an exhibit of original photographic portraits that depict people during various stages and expressions of addiction. Its goal is to use visual stories to increase public awareness and understanding of addiction. Click [here](#) to view the work.

Professional Education Corner



We're proud to announce that four new modules have been added to The Brief Addiction Science Information Source (BASIS) Microlearning Course. The new modules cover recent scientific findings that offer new insights

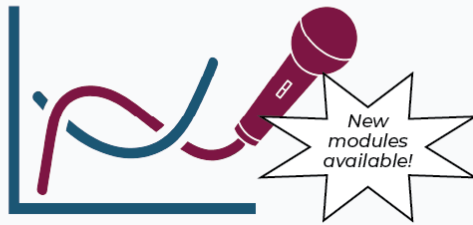
Dr. Heather Gray will be presenting on the topic of "Best Practices in Treating Gambling Disorder Comorbidities" for students and staff at William James College on September 30th, and on the topic of "Responsible Drinking and Its Measurement" on November 18th.

Dr. Sarah Nelson will be presenting on the topic of "From Roadside to Healing: Mental Health and Impaired Driving in Tribal Communities" at the National American Indian Court Judges Association's 57th Annual National Tribal Judicial and Court Personnel Conference on October 14th. Learn more and register [here](#).

Dr. Sarah Nelson will be presenting on the topic of "The Computerized Assessment and Referral System (CARS)" for students and staff at William James College on October 28th.

into gambling, drinking, smoking, and substance use. Click [here](#) for more information about this free continuing education opportunity!

Gambling & Recovery Podcast Science Accelerator Course



Three new modules have been added to the Gambling & Recovery Podcast Science Accelerator Course. Click [here](#) to learn more and enroll for free! This course was created in collaboration with Jamie Salsburg, Mark Checkwicz, and the *After Gambling Podcast*.

Did you know?



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When people try to cut back on an addictive behavior, they sometimes start engaging in a new addictive behavior. This is called addiction substitution. Researchers explored addiction substitution in one study of U.S. adults. They found that about one-quarter of them had recently tried to reduce or stop their drinking. Of that group about 78% had "substituted" other substances – like sweet snacks (62.8%), savory snacks (51.3%), nicotine (35.9%), or cannabis (28.2%) – for alcohol. Only substituters reported using illicit drugs. These findings suggest that behavioral substitution is a common coping mechanism for the stress of curbing problematic behaviors. Addiction providers should consider proactively educating patients on the risks of substitution and screening for the underlying risk factors, like mental health disorders, that could raise the risk. Read more on [The BASIS](#).

The Need for Benchmarks to Advance AI-Enabled Player Risk Detection in Gambling

Research Spotlight



In an effort to mitigate harm from gambling, some regulators require online gambling operators to detect customers whose gambling patterns indicate high risk for harm. These customers can then be offered responsible gambling tools, such as cool-off periods and loss limits. Many operators use AI, specifically Machine Learning (ML) algorithms, to fulfill this requirement. But how do we know if these ML-based systems are effective? [Dr. Kasra Ghaharian and colleagues](#) recently took the first steps to answering this question by proposing a Performance Benchmark framework. Performance Benchmarking is used in many industries for measuring a set of processes, metrics, and outcomes against industry standards or best practices to identify areas in need of

improvement.

During Performance Benchmarking, analysts typically test out their emerging ML algorithms on industry-wide, standardized datasets. For instance, the [“Vending Bench” simulated environment](#) offers a chance to explore which AI agents – Claude, Gemini, ChatPGT, etc. – could best operate a vending machine business. A fundamental step to creating a Performance Benchmark framework for player risk detection is to establish guidelines for benchmark datasets in the online gambling realm. Ghaharian and his coauthors suggest that datasets should capture a broad enough set of gambling behaviors to sufficiently test a variety of ML models. They propose three core, flexible dimensions that should be included in any industry-wide benchmarking dataset: (1) the length of time covered, (2) a player’s gambling engagement level, and (3) the type(s) of gambling product being used. Such details are essential because player risk is complex and often fluctuating. Beyond establishing benchmark datasets, a Performance Benchmark framework must also consider how the target outcome variables (e.g., gambling problems) are defined and measured, and how the data and benchmarking test results are collected, curated, documented, made usable, and validated, to promote transparency, efficiency, and ethical AI usage.

Dr. Sarah Nelson, Director of Research at the Division on Addiction, is one of the paper’s co-authors. She says, “Writing a conceptual paper is always daunting, and even more so with so many authors involved! But I really like how this turned out. My interest in this area and involvement in this project grew from an initial unease with the ubiquitous and imprecise reference to AI throughout the industry, to a deep-dive into the pitfalls and biases of AI-based risk detection systems, to the good fortune to be invited to contribute as part of this team of authors. I believe this collaborative work provides a transparent and precise approach to evaluating these systems and the contexts within which they are used.”

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