

Partners in Quitting: A Text Message-Based Smoking Cessation Program

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Partners in Quitting is a free, six-week smoking cessation program via text message that aims to eliminate common barriers to access such as cost and transportation and to provide participants with evidence-based, comprehensive solutions in order to quit smoking. Text message-based interventions for smoking cessation have been shown to increase long-term quit rates.¹ A recent study analyzed the text message smoking cessation program, Text2Quit, and found biochemically confirmed (defined as a salivary cotinine level ≤ 15 ng/mL) repeated point prevalence abstinence rates of 11.1% in the intervention group vs. 5.0% in the control group.²

The text messages for *Partners in Quitting* are sent and received through an online platform created by CareMessage, which is a nonprofit IT company that connects health institutions with innovative health communication programs that are mobile- or web-based. We at the George Washington School of Medicine and Health Sciences have been recruiting clients from Bread for the City, an institution that provides a variety of social services to patrons of the Washington, DC area. Clients are usually introduced to our service via their physician at the Bread for the City health clinic, or they hear about it via word of mouth. Before clients begin the program, medical students sit down with each of them to have a motivational interviewing session. If they chose to participate in the research aspect of the program, they also fill out a pre-survey that we use as a tool for measuring our program's effectiveness and quality improvement. We try to ensure that each client is at least in the contemplative stage of change and seems motivated to make a serious attempt to quit smoking.

Once the program begins, participants receive daily text messages, first preparing them for their "Quit Date" and then helping them to stay abstinent. The messages contain tools to help recognize triggers, fight cravings, improve cessation skills, and find ways to substitute smoking for healthier activities. Many of the messages are interactive, pose a question to the client, and generate a response depending on the client's answer. Participants also have the opportunity for personalized counseling in real time through the "Text Me" program. The number of text messages sent to clients per day depends on their progress in the program, with message frequency or quantity increasing as the "Quit Date" draws near. For example, during the time when they are near their "Quit Date," they will receive up to 7 messages per day, but most days average around 3-5 messages. Clients are also given handouts with lists of everyday items that have been proven to help with cravings, such as water bottles, flavored toothpicks, pretzels and other crunchy snacks, and sugarless gum. We are currently working on obtaining nicotine replacement therapy to offer to our clients.

To date, we have had 23 clients complete the program and 5 clients withdraw from the program. We enroll clients on a rolling basis and have been averaging about 1-2 clients enrolled per week. The program has a 100% user activation rate, meaning all clients, even those who ended up opting out, engaged in the program at least once.

Our most challenging task was post-program follow-up. Many clients never showed up to take the post-survey, so we have very limited data on program effectiveness at this point in time. So far, based on making calls to previous clients, two

clients have confirmed that they have not smoked a cigarette since they participated in *Partners in Quitting* and have attributed their abstinence directly to the program. Numerous clients also stated that they are smoking fewer cigarettes than they were before the program began and that they are more aware of their smoking behaviors. One former client said: “[The texts] always seem to come at the right time. I found them very helpful and saved the good ones so I could read them again later.” Another client discussed the bi-weekly in-person meetings that were held at Bread for the City: “I was already pro/con on whether I should or shouldn’t...the moment I came in, very positive, well maybe this is that sign I was looking for.”

Our main goals for the upcoming year are to increase enrollment via a formal referral system with the assistance of the healthcare personnel at Bread for the City. We will also be focusing on

strategies to increase participation and follow-up. We will be providing more opportunities for counseling and support offered one-on-one, over the phone, or in a group setting.

Smoking cessation is challenging for so many people, with a high incidence of relapse, and we believe that *Partners in Quitting* can aide clients during this crucial time by providing continuous support, information and resources, and direct outlets to counseling opportunities.

References

1. Whittaker, Robyn, et al. "Mobile phone-based interventions for smoking cessation." *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 4 (2016).
2. Abrams, Lorien C., et al. "A randomized trial of Text2Quit: a text messaging program for smoking cessation." *American journal of preventive medicine* 47.3 (2014): 242-250.