

An ounce of promotion: A new program for Vancouver university students who think smoking is a drag

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The deleterious long-term consequences of smoking are plastered across cigarette packages and billboards across the country. Millions of dollars are spent by the federal government on treatment for smoking-related illnesses every year. But researchers know that with respect to health outcomes and cost: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! Empirically supported smoking cessation treatment for individuals with cardiac and respiratory diseases are gaining in popularity. Now, health promotion experts are interested in applying similar strategies to different populations.

According to the 2001 Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey, young adults aged 20 to 24 have the highest smoking rate of any age group in Canada. Fortunately, a new program at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University is aimed at helping university students kick the habit of smoking and butt out for their own reasons. The Vancouver Universities Smoking Cessation Program is free program for students funded by Health Canada. It is directed by David Aboussafy, Ph.D., R.Psych., Faculty Associate of the Institute of Health Promotion Research at UBC and Chair of the CPA Health Section along with Patricia Conrod, Ph.D., R.Psych., Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at UBC.

The program is a four-session, standardized small-group course designed to provide

university students with the motivation and tools to help them change their smoking behaviour. Developed in accordance with the 2000 Clinical Practice Guidelines for Treating Tobacco Use and Dependence (United States Department of Health and Human Services), the program is based on empirically-supported therapeutic procedures that have been developed and tested with a variety of client populations (e.g., pregnant women, adults with chronic respiratory disease, heart disease, diabetes). The program differs from other smoking cessation interventions that target only the action of quitting; it acknowledges that individuals are at different stages of readiness for change.

The goal of the program is not only to provide individuals who are ready to quit (or in the process of quitting) with effective strategies, it also includes motivational components to encourage individuals to consider quitting and provide assistance to those who want to move from contemplating quitting to preparing to quit. The program educates participants about the benefits and barriers to quitting and what improves the chances of quitting successfully. Participants determine their stage of readiness for quitting (thinking about it, preparing, planning, trying, maintaining) and build motivation based on their stage. Throughout the program, participants monitor their smoking behaviour as they plan and prepare for their stop date. The skills components of

the program include learning alternative behaviours in high-risk smoking situations, stress management techniques, managing withdrawal symptoms and relapse prevention and maintenance.

But does the program work? Preliminary outcome data from Dr. Aboussafy's pilot project targeting the smoking cessation needs of Vancouver area adult smokers with health problems (funded by the Tobacco Reduction and Control Branch of the B.C. Ministry of Health) is extremely favourable, with long term quit rates over 34% for participants who were followed for at least three months post-treatment. In addition, of those who did not become smoke free during the program, nearly 60% said they were now ready to attempt to quit, a fourfold increase from before the program.

Increased quit rates can translate into significant health care savings. The smoking cessation program is far more cost-effective with respect to terms of dollar cost per year of life saved than other standard

interventions (e.g., bypass surgery). Indeed, it appears that a penny of health promotion equals a dollar of "cure".

For more information about the Vancouver Universities Smoking Cessation Program, visit the website at http://www.psych.ubc.ca/clinic/smoking_cessation.htm or e-mail: stopsmoking@psych.ubc.ca.

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