

Health Behaviour Change – what can we learn from those who have already made changes?

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Abstract

Aims: To understand what behaviours were considered healthy by members of the public, what health behaviour changes to try to become healthier were most likely to be attempted, and how common it was to seek to make such behavioural change. To also explore what factors encourage people to make and sustain health behaviour change.

Method: Face to face interviews were conducted with 1003 adults, predominantly in Greater London, in 2014-2016. 49% of those interviewed were male and 51% female. A semi structured interview schedule was used, which provided both qualitative and quantitative data. Basic demographic information was also collected.

Results: 87% of people interviewed reported trying to make a health behaviour change. Of these, 98% reported making changes known to be healthy (such as stopping smoking) and 2% chose other changes (such as detox). 69% seeking to make a change reported they had succeeded.

The most common reasons cited for seeking to make a change were to be healthier, fitter or feel better; to lose weight; or if they or someone close to them had experienced a health problem. The most common reasons cited for sustaining change were positive results; will power; knowing it is better for you; family or friends; or a health problem (their own or someone close).

Conclusions: Most people know the basics e.g. don't smoke, eat a healthy diet and get enough exercise. The public health challenge is therefore to encourage people to act on what they already know is good for them.

However, the health risks of alcohol may currently be underestimated. We shouldn't underestimate the desire to be healthier and fitter and feel better. For those with less intrinsic motivation there appear to be a number of identifiable trigger points in their lives when they seem likely to be more open to advice from health professionals.