Can the Internet help combat obesity at the workplace?

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Approximately 66 percent of adults in the United States are overweight or obese, 32 percent are obese, and 5 percent are extremely obese.[1] Obesity was associated with approximately 112,000 deaths in the year 2000 in the United States.[2] The rate of overweight and obesity among American adults continues to rise each year, and, unfortunately, behavioral treatments are generally ineffective unless maintained indefinitely.

What part can the Internet play in fighting the obesity epidemic?

The Pew Internet & American Life Project reports that 73 percent of adults in the US use the Internet with 80 percent of those users searching for health information online, in particular topics such as diet and fitness. The Internet is an attractive delivery system for weight loss interventions because it can house programs that are participant-tailored, intensive and long-term at a modest cost. In addition, the Internet can be used at a time and place convenient to the user, such as the workplace.

Internet Weight Loss Programs and the Workplace

As obesity is re-conceptualized as a chronic disease that may benefit from disease management, employers and insurance providers are implementing programs to encourage employees/insured to maintain a healthy weight and to lower company costs associated with overweight and obesity. Ricci and Chee estimated the total annual cost of health-related lost productive time (i.e., work absence plus reduced performance at work) in obese workers was approximately $42 billion collectively or $1600 per obese worker per year.[3] Employers, such as the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas who began to cover 80 percent of their employees' cost to join Weight Watchers Corporate Program, which offers both the standard weight watchers program, as well as their online program, are

proactively managing this problem. Joining them are a range of participating companies (large, small, for-profit, non-profit) such as Verizon Wireless, Gilspar, Inc. and Rutgers University and providers such as CaloriesCount.com and DietWatch.com, which can be placed on corporate intranet to promote wellness and healthy lifestyles among employees.

Do Internet weight loss programs work?

Very few Internet weight loss programs have been evaluated using randomized controlled trials (RCT). Of the commercial Internet weight loss programs, only eDiets.com has been tested in a published RCT.[4] Findings showed that website users lost less weight than those who used a behavioral weight loss manual. Research on three noncommercial programs that were implemented and evaluated in research settings showed more promising results.[5] All three found increased weight loss for website users compared to those who did not use the website. Success appears to be related to a couple of key components present across programs: 1) promotion of self-regulations skills (i.e., planning, self-monitoring, problem solving, goal setting and self-incentives); and 2) use of social networks (i.e., family, church, sororities/fraternities, sports groups and internet groups). Success also appears to be related to how often the program was used by participants. Data from the eDiets.com study showed that the amount of weight website users lost was related to their frequency of website use.[4]

How is Jefferson using the Internet to fight the obesity epidemic?

There is a demonstrated need for obesity programs that are long-term, low-cost, convenient and shown to be effective through evaluation. Dr. Christopher Sciamanna of the DHP is developing and testing a new website www.achievetogether.com that aims to assist participants in identifying, reviewing and modifying a personalized list of reasons and motivations to lose weight and weight-loss strategies. Essentially, the website works with individuals to fine-tune their self-regulations skills helping them to plan, self-monitor, problem solve and create goals and self-incentives. Second, the website acts as a forum allowing users to post or share their lists of reasons and strategies so that users may expand their own lists to include what has worked for others. In this way, the program incorporates a social network, showing users that they are not alone in their

strive to lose weight, that maintaining weight loss is a life-long process, that others have achieved success and that there are multiple strategies that can lead to success and be integrated into their existing plan. As weight loss interventions can be expensive and often fail when stopped,[4, 5] our goal is to create a website that is effective, engaging and inexpensive, making it a long-term solution for employees and an economically feasible option for employers. We invite interested readers to explore the website at http://www.achievetogether.com. We are interested in your feedback. Please email any comments to chris.sciamanna@jefferson.edu.

References

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