

Smokers and Non-smokers Differ in Their Beliefs About Their Addiction: Public Health Implications

Dear Editor:

Cigarette smokers' beliefs about recovery may have an impact on whether they attempt to quit.^{1,2} It is important for those trying to encourage smokers to quit to recognize how beliefs about recovery may differ between smokers and non-smokers. Such information can emphasize when extra support is needed or when information about effective means to quit smoking may increase motivation to change. The present study compared smokers' and non-smokers' beliefs about recovery in a sample of the Canadian general population.

A random digit dialing telephone survey was conducted between August 2008 and January 2009; 864 Canadians, 18 years and older, participated (response rate of 41%). Interviews were conducted in English or French. Respondents were asked a series of questions, including: 1) how much of a risk it was for someone to get addicted if they tried smoking cigarettes even once (1 = very low risk, 5 = very high risk); 2) if becoming addicted to smoking was the person's fault or society's; 3) whether dealing with the addiction was the person's responsibility or society's; 4) how likely a person was to be able to fix the addiction a) on their own without treatment and b) if they went to treatment (for each question, 1 = no chance, 6 = very large chance). To simplify the interpretation of the results, all questions were dichotomized such that the highest value on each question was compared to all other responses (e.g., very high risk of becoming addicted compared to all other responses). The survey concluded with a series of demographic questions. Results are presented as weighted values to be representative of the Canadian adult population (sample sizes presented as unweighted values).

Of the 864 respondents, 655 did not smoke and 161 were daily smokers (45 occasional smokers and 3 respondents with missing values on this question were excluded from these analyses). Table 1 displays the differences in demographic characteristics between smokers and non-smokers, with non-smokers being older, less likely to be male and more likely to be married as compared to daily smokers.

Daily smokers and non-smokers were also compared on their beliefs about addiction to smoking cigarettes (see Table 2). Compared to non-smokers, daily smokers were more likely to believe that there was a very high risk of becoming addicted if someone tried cigarettes, less likely to believe that it was the person's fault for becoming addicted, and more pessimistic about a smoker's chances of fixing their addiction both with and without treatment.

There are two useful findings from this research. The first is that smokers rate cigarettes as very addictive, even from the time they first tried smoking a cigarette. This information is potentially useful for primary prevention campaigns.³ If there were some way of communicating to people who have not yet started smoking that

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

	Daily Smoker (n=161)	Non-smoker (n=655)	p
Mean (SD) Age	43.6 (13.9)	48.2 (17.3)	0.002
% Male	49.7	39.1	0.02
% Married/Common law	51.6	69.7	0.001
% Some post-secondary education	60.5	67.2	N.S.
% Full-/part-time employed	65.6	67.2	N.S.

N.S. = Not significant, p>0.05.

Table 2. Comparing Smokers to Non-smokers

	Daily Smoker (n=161)	Non-smoker (n=655)	p
% Very high risk of addiction if try	46.3	27.5	0.001
% Mainly person's fault for becoming addicted	64.4	74.5	0.01
% Mainly person's job to deal with their addiction	73.8	77.3	N.S.
% Large chance of fixing addiction on own, without treatment	23.1	36.3	0.001
% Large chance of fixing addiction with treatment	45.3	67.8	0.001

N.S. = Not significant, p>0.05.

cigarettes can be very addictive for some people, then this could help to reduce the tendency for youth to experiment, believing that it is easy to stop, when in fact it often leads to committed cigarette smoking.

The second useful finding is just how skeptical smokers are about their chances of quitting. Both smokers and non-smokers are dubious about the chances of stopping smoking without treatment. However, current smokers are also quite pessimistic about the chances of stopping even with treatment. This finding emphasizes that ongoing support together with advice about different effective treatment options are needed in order to encourage smokers to try to quit – and to keep on trying if, at first, they do not succeed.⁴

Acknowledgements

Support to CAMH for salary of scientists and infrastructure has been provided by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. John Cunningham is also supported as a Canada Research Chair for Brief Interventions for Addictive Behaviours.

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