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Being a long-term user of nicotine replacement therapy

Interpretative phenomenological analysis of former smokers' experience of continued nicotine dependence

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Background

During recent years a gradual shift in the application of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) has taken place from NRT-products only being recommended to achieve smoking cessation, to now including smoking reduction, and long-term substitution of tobacco with NRT has taken place. This has been promoted as a way of achieving harm-reduction in highly nicotine dependent smokers who are unwilling or incapable of quitting all nicotine products, as continued use of NRT is widely accepted as being far less hazardous than continued smoking. To our knowledge no previous research has been done, regarding long-term NRT users' experiences with continuing the use of NRT. Results from a survey study among long-term NRT-users, who had used NRT for 12 months or more, found that out of 92 former smokers 88 % wished to quit using NRT. The primary causes stated for wishing to quit were being tired of feeling addicted, cost of NRT products and fear of adverse health consequences.

Aim of study

- To get a thorough understanding of the lived experiences of nicotine dependent long-term NRT users.
- To investigate what motivates or discourages quitting NRT.

Method Semi-structured interviews with long-term NRT-users, who had used NRT for at least 12 months, used a minimum of 10 pieces of acute acting NRT per day and who had expressed a wish to quit NRT. The interviews covered the following themes:

- The decision to quitting smoking.
- The expectations the participants had had to using NRT as aid for achieving smoking cessation.
- Their reasons for wishing to quit or sustain NRT-use.
- Their perspectives on the future concerning their NRT-use.

Results The results cover interviews with seven long-term NRT-users, as the investigation is ongoing. Themes that have emerged through the first seven interviews are illustrated below with headlines and quotes from the participants.

Conclusions

- None of the participants expected that they would ever begin smoking again.
- All the participants described dependence as an integrate part of themselves.
- Reasons for feeling motivated or discouraged to quit NRT were very individual and ranged from reaching an acceptance of dependence and NRT being a lesser evil than smoking, to wanting to break free from dependence and quit NRT, and experiencing the cost of NRT as a genuine financial burden.

Cost of the products

"Because it would save me money (...) When I buy it on sale I use 400Dkr (54€) a month, and that is genuinely a lot of money for us. That is a great incentive for me (to quit, red.)
(Henry 67, NRT-user for 10 years. Current use 10 2mg nicotine gums per day)

"I spend 12,000Dkr (1600€) a year on nicotine gum. We could go on an extra holiday couldn't we? (...) And I sometimes think about that, why that can't motivate me (...) But I can't. It's very strange. I don't know what can motivate me"
(Sue 51, NRT-user for 13 years. Current use 18 2mg nicotine gums per day)

The impact of health-professionals

"While we talked about the elevated cholesterol I mentioned to my physician that I used nicotine and he said "That's bad for your heart". That was all it took. Sometimes it just takes one small sentence for us to change humans to change in some strange way. So now I only use half; 16-17-18 pieces per day"
(Sue 51, NRT-user for 13 years. Current use: 18 2mg nicotine gums per day)

"In this period after I quit smoking I have had two emboli, and my heart-doctor has told me, more than once, that "as long as you don't use more, then it makes no difference" (to her health, red.)
(Betty xx, NRT-user for 10 years. Current use: 10 2mg nicotine gums per day that she divides in halves)

"Choose your poison" feeling more or less dependent on the gum

"I am also a sober alcoholic. That was worse (compared to quitting smoking, red.) So I know what addiction is. And I am also very aware of when I am ready to quit (NRT, red.). And that is not now"
(Laura 51, NRT-user for 3 years. Current use: 10, 2mg chewing gum per day)

"And then the downside is, that they become better at making good flavours. Because, if they tasted awful, then you would of course eat less. I used to chew those called "Mint" and was tremendously pleased with them. Until I was introduced to those (ice-mint, red.) by a colleague. Why, they tasted heavenly in comparison! (...) At that point I actually began using more (...) Because it became to be pleasurable"
(Sue 51, NRT-user for 13 years. Current use: 18 2mg nicotine gum per day)

"The feeling you have as a smoker at the end of a party, where there are no more cigarettes and you smoke the cigarette buds from the ash-tray. It's exactly the same for nicotine gum"
(John 47, NRT-user for 3 years. Current use: 15-30 2mg nicotine gum per day)

Being prone to dependence

During a vacation in USA i thought that this would be a good opportunity to quit (...) But when i ran out of gum, all of a sudden i felt like smoking. I didn't miss the gum, I just felt like smoking. And then i said to myself, here i'm drawing the line. I refuse to begin smoking again"
(Meredith 59, NRT-user for 6 years. Current use: 10 2mg nicotine gums per day)

"Rather use nicotine gum then start to smoke again, because I have a clear dependence-thing in me, which I think, and feel, that there is something that I have to have. That I find it hard to replace, and I don't know what to replace it with. Red wine is unpopular in hospitals also, so in that regard nicotine gum is easy"
(Rene 45, NRT-user for 14 years. Current use: 10 2mg nicotine gums per day fluctuating up to 20)

"It's not the cost or the packages lying everywhere. It's the dependence on having to have some sort of stimulant" (On the motivation to quit NRT)
(John 47, NRT-user for 3 years. Current use: 15-30 2mg nicotine gums per day)

Relapsing to smoking

My mother was old, and when I visited her I often helped her light her cigarette, because her hands trembled. And I really didn't like it anymore. I didn't want to inhale and I disliked the taste"
(Meredith 59, NRT-user for 6 years. Current use: 10 2mg nicotine gums per day)