

Breaking the Chains: Smoking Cessation Struggles in Substance Users



Despite strides in tobacco control, cigarette smoking remains a major health issue, particularly among individuals with substance use disorders. Recent research highlights significant barriers faced by substance using patients when attempting to quit smoking, shedding light on the complexities of dual addiction management.

Key findings:

Intrinsic Challenges: Patients often struggled with easy access to cigarettes, severe withdrawal symptoms, and the intensity of their addiction, which were major deterrents in their quit attempts. Most experienced repeated quit attempts and brief abstinence periods before relapsing.

Extrinsic Barriers: In Singapore, the high cost of smoking cessation treatments, estimated between SGD200 to SGD300 per month, and the limited availability of services during non-work hours pose significant hurdles to quitting. Additionally, the influence of families and friends who smoked further exacerbate their struggles with quitting.

Psychological Factors: Many patients used smoking as a coping mechanism for stress relief, and experienced fear of failure and lack of confidence in quitting.

Impact on Recovery: Smoking is often perceived as a secondary issue, overshadowed by the primary addiction to other substances. This focus on primary substances can undermine smoking cessation efforts, as substance users may continue smoking as substitute for alcohol or drugs, complicating their recovery process.

Recommendations: To address these challenges, it is crucial to advocate for policies that reduce the cost of cessation treatments and enhance the availability of smoking cessation programs. Improving access to services, especially during non-work hours, and integrating smoking cessation with substance abuse treatment may improve outcomes. Educating patients about the importance of quitting smoking as part of their recovery and providing supportive interventions can aid in overcoming these barriers.

Study Reference:

Mahreen ZSH, Harjit Singh KK, Ng CWL, et al. Challenges to smoking cessation in patients with substance use disorders. Ann Acad Med Singap 2024;53:124-6.

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Why do young people self-harm?

– Early Stress, Coping and Resilience (ESCaR) study

Self-harm refers to the deliberate act of inflicting damage to oneself, regardless of the motive or the extent of suicidal intent. This behaviour includes cutting, burning, and scratching oneself. Self-harm is common and prevalent amongst adolescents and young adults, posing serious implications for their physical and psychological wellbeing. Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding of the aetiology of self-harm is crucial for developing effective interventions.

Previous studies have highlighted a **significant association between adverse childhood experiences, particularly childhood maltreatment, and self-harm**. Emotional dysregulation is proposed to be a key factor in the development of self-harm behaviour. However, research has yet to fully explore the role of neurobiological factors in this process, despite evidence showing the impact of adverse childhood experiences on neural structures and chemical responses in stress-response systems. The ongoing ESCaR study aims to address this research gap by **investigating how adverse childhood experiences interact with both neural structures and neuroendocrine systems to contribute to self-harm in young people**.

This study intends to recruit 180 right-handed youths between 14 and 25 years old from the Institute of Mental Health outpatient clinics and the community via social media. Participants will undergo MRI screening to understand their brain development and cognitive tasks to assess learning areas such as attention, memory, and inhibitory control. They will also answer questionnaires on resilience, emotional regulation, and physical development. Biological samples, including cheek swabs and stool samples will also be collected for analysis.

The findings of this study could bring novel insights into interventions for self-harm. Additionally, this study has the potential to explain the aetiology of self-harm in a holistic model linking developmental, psychological, and biological perspectives.

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