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Process Evaluation of an Email-based Walking Program with Extension Educators

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This study evaluated the implementation process of an email-based walking program from the perspectives of program deliverers. Twenty-four Extension Educators participated in the process evaluation. We used an online survey to examine the perceptions of the implementation process of Get WalkIN', a twelve-week email-based walking program. Educators agreed that the provided program training and recruitment materials were sufficient for successful program delivery. Program implementation involved sending emails to program participants at least weekly. Educators also agreed that the program was easy to deliver and took twenty minutes or less to implement each week. Strengths and areas for program improvement are discussed. Suggestions included training on evaluation measures, inclusion of a process to send emails via tablets instead of only desktops, and ideas for engaging participants during program delivery. While the outcomes of this email-based program show positive behavior changes without face-to-face interaction between participants and Extension Educators, the face-to-face interactions familiar to Extension staff were still desired. Results will be used to improve implementation. Findings from this study can facilitate the development and implementation of other email-based Extension programs.

Keywords: physical activity, intervention, walking, evaluation, Extension education

Introduction

Cooperative Extension is firmly grounded in outcome evaluation. However, understanding and evaluating the implementation process is also a critical part of program delivery, especially since studies have shown that the implementation process can strongly affect program outcomes and document when and how programs were offered (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the implementation process of the email-based Get WalkIN' program from the perspectives of county-based Extension Educators and Nutrition Education Program Assistants (NEPAs). Email-based walking programs are not routinely offered through Extension (Balis et al., 2019).

The Get WalkIN' program has been described in detail elsewhere (Richards et al., 2016; Richards & Woodcox, 2018). Briefly, Get WalkIN' is a 12-week, theory-driven intervention in which participants receive 16 email messages targeting principles of self-efficacy, social support, and goal setting. In addition to the weekly pre-developed email messages, Educators are encouraged, but not required, to include tailored messages in their emails (when appropriate) that focus on local opportunities and events to foster walking or motivational messages for participants. Each email is written at a 6th- to 8th-grade reading level. Participants can choose how involved or responsive they would like to be with the Extension Educator. Participants can respond to questions posed in the email message or simply remain passive and read program materials. During the 2017-2018 program year, 511 Indiana residents from 31 counties participated in Get WalkIN'. On average, participants reported increasing their weekly physical activity by 70 ± 8.1 minutes after the program.

Methods

Participants

Program implementation was open to all Extension Educators across the state. Twenty-one Health and Human Sciences Extension Educators and five NEPAs, herein all referred to as Educators, implemented the Get WalkIN' program across 31 Indiana counties during the 2017-2018 program year. This evaluation study included 24 out of 26 (response rate of 92%) Educators who volunteered to implement the Get WalkIN' program between May 2018-November 2018 in 24 counties with 295 participants. The average age of the Educators was 45.5 years (range of 32-62 years). They had worked for Extension for an average of 10 years (range of 3-29 years). The counties were geographically diverse in location across the state, with 17 of the counties classified as metropolitan based on the population size of their metro areas, and the remaining counties classified as nonmetro (United States Department of Agriculture, 2016).

Measures and Analysis

Two aspects of the program implementation process were assessed: feasibility and usability. Feasibility is the extent to which the program can be implemented in a realistic manner without undue burden or costs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011). Usability refers to the extent to which intended audiences can understand and use the program information and instructions provided (CDC, 2011). An online survey platform, Qualtrics, was used for data collection. The survey was open for 30 days after program implementation ended.

Educator perceptions of feasibility were assessed with four rating scale questions and six open-ended questions. Rating scale questions (1 = *no*; 2 = *somewhat*; 3 = *yes*) included items on ease of the intervention training process and instructions, adequacy of provided program recruitment materials, ease of sending intervention email messages, and time needed to implement the intervention (0-10 minutes; 10-20 minutes; 20-30 minutes; >30 minutes). Open-ended questions

asked Educators what additional information would have been helpful for program training, sending emails, and recruitment. Educators were also asked to list the strengths and limitations of the program and what they would do differently if they implemented the program again. Intervention usability was assessed through two dichotomous questions (yes/no) and three open-ended questions. Educators were asked if they tailored any of the email messages. If yes, they were asked to describe the types of information included in the tailored messages. Educators were also asked if they received any feedback from their participants. If yes, they were asked to describe any feedback they received from participants. Educators were also asked to provide suggestions for future program implementation. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize feasibility and usability data. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Two researchers independently reviewed responses to open-ended questions and mutually agreed upon themes.

Findings

Twenty-one of 24 (87.5%) Educators responded "yes" that the program training, which included an instructional video and written materials, was adequate, while three of 24 (12.5%) Educators responded "somewhat" adequate (see Table 1). In the open-ended question, asking what additional material or information would have been helpful during program training, two Educators suggested providing information about how to obtain results about their participants post-intervention. In addition, one Educator requested material on how to include Get WalkIN' implementation into their annual review metrics. All Educators also stated that the provided recruitment materials were at least somewhat sufficient for program success. In the open-ended question, asking what additional recruitment material would have been helpful, four Educators requested more information on how to reach more participants. One Educator requested materials be translated into Spanish while another Educator requested more social media posts. Educators also listed questions on what time of year was easiest to recruit participants and how early they should start recruiting for program participation.

All Educators ($n = 24$) stated that the pre-developed email messages were easy to send to their participants. In the open-ended question asking what additional information or material specific to sending emails would be helpful, one Educator requested instructions on how to send the email messages from a tablet versus a desktop computer. Two Educators reported some confusion on the sequential ordering of the emails to be sent, while another Educator requested guidance on specifically which emails they should tailor. The majority of respondents ($n = 17$) stated that the Get WalkIN' program took less than 10 minutes to implement each week.

Seventeen Educators (70.8%) reported adding material to the program emails. Of those Educators who tailored the program emails, seven educators reported adding information about local walking opportunities and events. In addition, one Educator included personal stories about her own walking routine and how she overcame barriers to being active. To create a sense

of connection between Educators and participants, seven Educators added personal notes of encouragement and motivation to the email messages. Two Educators also included photos taken during their own walks in their messages and asked participants to send in their photos as well. Educators also reported sending invitations to meet up at local events such as the county fair or local parks for a walk.

Additionally, Educators were asked if they specifically received feedback from their program participants about the Get WalkIN' program. More than half of the educators ($n = 14$, 58.3%) stated their program participants sent feedback that included notes of appreciation of the program, photos of them walking, success stories, and personal ways they overcame barriers. Several Get WalkIN' program participants reported to Educators that they felt the emails were motivational and that they would use what they learned to maintain their behavior change. A number of program participants also reported to Educators that they had seen a difference in their health, weight, or energy since starting Get WalkIN'.

Table 1. Educator Process Evaluation (N = 24)

Feasibility Questions	*n (%)*
Program training was adequate	
Yes	21 (87.5)
Somewhat	3 (12.5)
No	0 (0)
Provided recruitment materials were sufficient	
Yes	20 (83.3)
Somewhat	4 (16.7)
No	0 (0)
Pre-developed emails were easy to send	
Yes	22 (91.7)
Somewhat	2 (8.3)
No	0 (0)
How much time did it take to implement the program each week?	
<10 minutes	17 (70.8)
10-19 minutes	4 (16.7)
20-29 minutes	2 (8.3)
≥30 minutes	1 (4.2)
Usability Questions	
Did you tailor any of the email messages?	
Yes	17 (70.8)
No	7 (29.2)
Did you receive any feedback from your participants?	
Yes	14 (58.3)
No	10 (41.7)

When asked to discuss strengths of the Get WalkIN' program, nineteen Educators reported that the email format of the program was the main asset. In addition, ten Educators stated the ease of implementing the program and the flexibility of the program for both Educators and participants as important strengths. Additionally, Educators said that more frequent emails sent

the first four weeks of the program were important to keep participants' interest. Five educators also reported that they reached participants who typically did not engage in health programs due to the location or timing of traditional face-to-face Extension programs.

When asked to discuss how the Get WalkIN' program could be improved, five educators stated they would like to pair the emails with in-person walking groups to help with maintenance of behavior change. Three Educators also indicated it would be helpful to receive more feedback from participants about how the program was working. One Educator suggested adding an online log for participants to document their walking time. Suggestions for the use of social media were also provided. These included creating a social media group for their counties or creating a state-level social media group to allow participants to post photos of their walks.

When specifically asked what Educators would do differently during their next implementation of the program, five educators stated they would add an in-person component. Suggestions for the in-person component ranged from a kick-off celebration to monthly walking groups. Four educators also stated they would start recruitment earlier and expand their marketing to enhance the reach of the program. Educators also suggested promoting this program through local workplaces or local government offices to reach broader audiences.

Educators were also specifically asked what advice they would give to their Educators considering implementing Get WalkIN' in their communities. One Educator stated that the "Get WalkIN' program was easy to implement," and they would encourage other Educators to implement the program. Another Educator suggested adding reminders to your calendar, specifically stating which email should be sent on which date. Two Educators recommended that future Educators recruit from existing Extension programs to reach more participants while two additional Educators recommended starting recruitment earlier and recruiting as broadly as possible.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the implementation process of the Get WalkIN' program from the perspectives of county-based Extension Educators and NEPAs. Health and Human Sciences Extension Educators and NEPAs work with a variety of populations— individuals and families—of varying ages with their programs. These Educators work in both rural and urban counties, and most of the individuals they serve tend to be of middle socioeconomic status. In contrast, NEPAs work with limited resource populations. Therefore, it is important to note that Educators in both areas indicated that the Get WalkIN' program includes adequate training and recruitment materials and is easy to implement across a broad range of audiences. Educators also agreed that the email nature of program delivery could increase the accessibility of the program to broader Extension audiences.

Results of this evaluation indicated that the email format was a strength of this program because it reduced barriers associated with the delivery of traditional face-to-face Extension programs. Most participants, even those residing in rural counties, have a cell phone that would allow them to access email and the internet, even if they do not have access to a computer at home or reliable internet service (Pew Research Center, 2019). The email-based nature of the Get WalkIN' program allowed participants to access the information on the go without having to schedule time to attend a traditional in-person Extension program. Educators consistently stated the Get WalkIN' program was easy to implement with a minimal time commitment.

Educators were encouraged to tailor the email messages to include county-specific information, although they were not required to do so. While 70% of Educators chose to add tailored messages, based on the survey design, we are unable to determine what factors contributed to the 30% of Educators who chose not to tailor their messages. Of those Educators who did tailor the email messages, they stressed that the ability to tailor messages to bring in a more local connection was very important to the program. While Educators did not change the pre-written content of the email messages, they could add information below the message body. This allowed them to somewhat personalize the program for their audience.

It is recognized that online program delivery could be viewed as ineffective or impersonal by some Educators. In addition, there is a learning curve involved when using technology in new ways. In-service training could be conducted to address some of the nuances of online program delivery. Training topics could include sending email from tablets or mobile devices since more staff are out in the field doing work rather than being at their computer to send messages, scheduling messages to auto-send, tailoring/personalizing messages to participants for their counties to engage them more, sharing best practices or examples of things that Educators have done that work and are worth replicating, and using Facebook live or other social media avenues to engage/market to possible participants.

There are also strategies that can be implemented to get Educators more comfortable using technology in new ways. For example, it is possible to infuse more tech-focused activities into programs to slowly make a leap from all in-person programs to managing/teaching online programs. In addition, Cooperative Extension can hold office hours with university technology staff to help Educators become more comfortable with using technology to make programs more engaging. Furthermore, as was done with this program, it is important to engage more educators in the process of program development rather than merely teaching them how to use newly developed programs.

While the findings of this process evaluation are encouraging, the limitations in this evaluation study should also be considered. The sample of Educators in this study volunteered to implement a new Extension program, and therefore, their evaluation may not be representative of all Educators. For example, the Educators included in this evaluation study may be more

passionate about physical activity promotion than other Educators or could have a strong social media presence, which may increase the attractiveness of implementing an email-based program. Implementation of this program will continue to be on a volunteer basis. In addition, we asked Educators about what they viewed as strengths and areas of program improvement, but these questions did not necessarily get at why Educators felt this way. A more in-depth investigation with in-person interviews could be warranted to garner further insights into their experiences with program delivery.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Educators reported that the email-based Get WalkIN' program is feasible and usable for a broad Extension audience. The flexibility and low time commitment of this program was highly valued by the Educators. Educators reported that the email-based nature of this program was a strength suggesting that more email-based health promotion programs could be implemented through Cooperative Extension. Thus, there is work to be done within Extension to increase comfort with new mechanisms of program delivery. In summary, data collected through this evaluation study provided an understanding of the strengths and limitations of implementing Get WalkIN'. The use of email to deliver this program is a low-cost, high-impact way to engage Educators and community members in physical activity promotion. These findings will allow improvements to be made in the implementation process of the program.

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