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OASIS: Online Support with a Human Face

OASIS is an online project designed to aid cocaine and alcohol users to check and regain control of their usage. It aims to determine if built-in social support boosts the effectiveness of online tools.

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Introduction

The theory of early intervention states that the earlier a person takes action to resolve problems caused by substance use, the easier it will be for them to resolve these problems.

The OASIS project aims to provide a means for cocaine and alcohol users to assess their use and take action to resolve problems earlier, should these be identified. It is a joint project between Crew(2000) in Scotland and Unity in the Netherlands; two organizations with decades of experience in providing information support and advice on drugs and drug related issues in nightlife settings.

The University of Maastricht is the third partner in this project with a focus on coordinating the research that forms a vital part of this project, ensuring that the results obtained are credible and form a solid base for future work.

Methodology

OASIS is an internet based project and the OASIS website, www.oasisonline.eu has two components; an assessment tool and the self-help tool. The assessment tool is the AUDIT questionnaire for alcohol users and a questionnaire based on the AUDIT questionnaire for cocaine users. Users visiting the site choose which substance they prefer to assess their use of, and receive a score and recommendations after completing the appropriate questionnaire.

If a problem is identified, the recommendations will contain a link to the self-help tool and an explanation of how this can help them.

The self-help tool, which forms the core of the second component of the OASIS website, is based on a similar tool created by Jellinek in the Netherlands. The tool harnesses several techniques used in drugs counselling and is designed to be simple and straight forward to use; empowering the service user to take charge of resolving their own substance use issues.

There are two versions of the self-help tool that are available to service users on the OASIS website: the basic self-help tool and one with support from peer mentors built in. Allocation to these tools is done randomly. Participants are not aware of the existence of the other condition in the experiment.

The version of the self-help tool with support from peer mentors contains additional features such as a chat room, e-mail and a text messaging service, all designed to enable the user to communicate with peer mentors and with the website when they are

away from their computer.

Peer mentors are trained and supported volunteers from the same communities of interest as the service users. Their primary function on the OASIS website is to add a «human element» to what is otherwise a completely automated resource. Peer mentors are there to be a source of encouragement, motivation and support for users, helping them to stick to the goals that they have set themselves.

The training which the peer mentors received was specifically designed for them to enable them to better support and guide service users through the self-help tool.

The OASIS project is a research project and aims to measure several aspects of this online service. Primarily, we examine the difference in the efficacy of the two versions of the self-help tool and whether there is a difference in the efficacy of the service between the two geographical test areas; Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

This difference will be measured not only in terms of the numbers of users completing the online course but how they maintain the changes they make to their use patterns over time.

Measurement of these variables has been done through employing a series of questionnaires; a baseline questionnaire completed before the user initiates the self-help tool, and follow up questionnaires three months and six months after finishing the course.

In addition to measuring behaviour, the questionnaires measure several social-cognitive determinants of behaviour; such as feelings of self efficacy, motivation to change use patterns, experienced levels of social support in their lives, as well as demographic data.

To facilitate potential users accessing the OASIS website and making use of the tools there, we have initiated several awareness raising activities. These include engaging with young people in nightlife settings, placing web-banners on popular nightlife websites and working with other agencies.

Of all these strategies, the web-banners seem to be the most effective in helping potential users find the OASIS website and to date we have had over eight thousand people logging on to the site.

Preliminary Results

The research phase of this project will run until April 2011 at which stage data analysis will commence in earnest. However, even at this early stage of the research phase we have already identified some interesting results.

We have had 2251 users use the website to assess their alcohol use and 1636 users assess their cocaine use. Of these figures we are finding that 43% of users screening alcohol use, and 62% of users screening cocaine use, are in the medium risk group. This



compares to 40% of those screening alcohol use and 12% screening cocaine use that are in the high risk group.

Of the total screening their use, 138 alcohol users (6,1%) and 73 cocaine users (4,5%) went on to use the self help tool on the website.

As the research progresses we will know more about how many of these users complete the self-help programme and the impact, if any, this has on their use.

Conclusion

The OASIS project is still in its early stages of research and as such there is only preliminary data available at this stage. However, from the number of users accessing the site so far it is hoped that as the project continues we will be able to harness a great deal of data from the users before the research phase ends in April 2011.

It is hoped that when the final data is collected and processed this project will add new evidence on the potential benefits of online early intervention services. Perhaps more important than this will be the findings produced by this project on the impact of the provision of social support on the overall efficacy of these self help tools. •



12th – 14th of December 2011

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