

**Evaluating *Dry January*, a month-long alcohol-free campaign in the UK
“Participants experience real benefits from going dry for a month”**

THE ESSENTIALS

For the first time, a month-long alcohol-free campaign was run in France. Organised by a collection of not-for-profit organisations, “Dry January: Le défi de Janvier” took place in January 2020. Evaluations of a similar campaign in the UK help shed light on the advantages of an alcohol-free month.

Interview with

Dr. Richard De Visser,

Professor of psychology at the University of Sussex with expertise in health behaviour research.

La Santé en action: What motivated Alcohol Change to put together a campaign inviting participants to take a month-long break from alcohol?

Richard De Visser: *Alcohol Change* is a non-governmental charity whose mission is to reduce alcohol harms by improving knowledge, shifting cultural norms, reducing harmful consumption, and providing support and treatment to those in need. They first launched *Dry January* in 2013, inspired by other month-long challenges, such as Stoptober, England’s national stop smoking campaign. The response from the public has shown that there is actually an appetite for these kinds of challenges. The idea with *Dry January* was to give people an organised opportunity to stop and think about their own drinking in a supportive environment, with tips and advice, and, ultimately, to experience some of the benefits of taking a break from alcohol¹.

S. A.: As a researcher, why were you interested in evaluating this campaign?

R. D. V.: I was interested in exploring the motivations to participate in *Dry January*, and how participation can help people make healthy decisions a few months down the road in terms of alcohol consumption. So I contacted *Alcohol Change* to see if I could put together an evaluation of the 2014 campaign, and I’ve continued to organise annual evaluations since then.

S. A.: How would you describe early reception to Dry January?

R. D. V.: I would say there have been mixed responses. Amongst the general public, some people were excited to have a campaign motivating them try a month without alcohol. Others questioned the point of *Dry January*, saying that as soon as the campaign was over, people would just go back to drinking as much as or even more than before. In the media, there has been concern that participants would consist predominantly of light drinkers. However, we have actually found that we get a really broad spectrum of drinkers participating [1]. Today, messages in the media remain mixed on the subject, with some saying that we should support people who do *Dry January*, while others argue that the campaign is just out to ruin our fun.

S. A.: And how did the alcohol industry respond?

R. D. V.: At the beginning, the industry was less accepting of the campaign as there was fear that bars and pubs would lose a lot of revenue. Since then, a lot of these places have recognized that there is a market for people who want to have non-alcoholic beverages. Some bars have managed to thrive because they have realized that the alternative to not drinking alcohol isn’t not drinking, it’s drinking something else!

S. A.: What were the primary results of the campaign?

One of the first outcomes we observed was related to people's experiences of health and well-being. The majority of participants reported experiencing benefits during the campaign, in terms of sleep quality, physical health, energy, and concentration. In 2018, 71% of participants said that they slept better, 70% had generally improved health, 67% had more energy, and 58% lost weight during *Dry January* [2]. So that's really good, because it means that people experience real benefits from not drinking, and that's a motivation to participate.

When we talk to people 6 months down the road, they are drinking significantly less than before in terms of number of drinking days per week, units consumed per drinking day, and their frequency of drunkenness per month [2; 3]. Part of this is because they have experienced the benefits of not drinking so much, which ties into the third point I want to make. After participating in the campaign, people have a greater feeling of control over their drinking [3]. By taking a month off alcohol, participants have to develop and demonstrate to themselves and others that they can actually not drink in situations where they normally would. As a result, we have found that there is a significant increase in the amount of control people feel they have when it comes to saying no to alcohol. This is a kind of psychological benefit that helps explain why participants are drinking less after *Dry January*. Such an increase was observed not only amongst participants who succeeded in doing a whole month without alcohol, but also amongst those who did not, which is really encouraging [3]. We have also found that these benefits are not happening in the rest of the population, so it's really taking part in *Dry January* that influences how people think about alcohol, and their sense of control over their drinking [4].

S. A.: What is the strength of this campaign?

R. D. V.: It's that it provides a lot of support, especially psychological support. Over the years, we have examined the support the campaign gives to participants via daily e-mails, an online blog, Facebook groups, a mobile phone app, and an official guide to a month off booze [5]. We have looked at what people use, what they find useful, and what could be improved. Using surveys and interviews, we have been able to help Alcohol Change provide support that matches people's needs. So when people sign up, it's not just them saying "I'm doing *Dry January*", and off they go on their own until the end of the month. People can actually sign up for the support they need, following the experiences of other participants or benefiting from advice cultivated by Alcohol Change about what to do when they have cravings for example.

S.A.: What are the weaknesses of Dry January?

R. D. V.: There have been questions about helping people who do not feel that they can take on the challenge of doing a whole month without alcohol. At some point, it is important to note that *Dry January* is not a solution to all health issues around drinking. There are a number of people for whom *Dry January* would not be appropriate, and who need professional help to reduce their drinking. However, there are clearly a lot of people who are interested in thinking about their drinking and developing some skills, and *Dry January* seems to work quite well for them. Something that has also been suggested as a bit of a criticism is that people will experience rebound effects, that they will make up for not drinking in January by drinking a lot in February. We have actually shown that this is not the case for the majority of participants six months after *Dry January* [1], and that rebound effects are observed more among participants who were not able to complete the challenge [3].

S. A.: Has the campaign evolved?

R. D. V.: What has changed is that the concept has become very popular. Participants explain that when they say that they are doing *Dry January*, people know right away what they are talking about [1]. Also, *Alcohol Change's* response to participants' needs has improved. Thanks to both qualitative and quantitative evaluations, our understanding of the different profiles of participant, in terms of their levels of alcohol consumption, their reasons for taking part, and the different forms of support they need, has vastly improved [1; 3; 4]. These evaluations also confirm that month-long alcohol-free campaigns like *Dry January* are really effective in changing attitudes towards alcohol, and even the amount of alcohol consumed. They have also helped identify ways to make such campaigns even more effective. The issue that remains is ensuring that the necessary levels of support are maintained, and that this support helps the largest number of people interested in participating.

Interview conducted by Jalpa Shah, research coordinator in the Department of Health Prevention and Promotion (Addiction Unit) at the French Public Health Agency.

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1. In 2015, Public Health England (PHE) helped finance *Dry January* to increase the diffusion of the campaign. With a budget of £500 000 invested in radio, press and social media advertising, a calendar of Facebook events as well as partnerships with employers, PHE's involvement helped triple the number of registrants from 2014 to 2015.

References

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