

TWITTER EMPOWERS PATIENTS TO SEEK AND TO SPEAK

The ability to write something meaningful in 140 characters, including a shortened URL, is the basis of Twitter. Over 500 million tweets go out every day to individuals who enjoy the simplicity, functional design, and speed of delivery that twitter offers, along with the ability to connect with others, collaborate and share ideas.

To say that Twitter is viral is to understate the facts. Twitter was launched in March, 2006. By the fall of 2013, there were over a billion registered twitter users who generate more than 500 million tweets daily. A Twitter survey released on the last day of 2013 showed that 46% of the registered twitter users are on the site every day. In fact, Twitter has become the go-to place for many issues worthy of discussion about politics, commerce, entertainment, technology, healthcare. The ability to retweet someone else's tweet and to send messages to people based on tweets merely expands the reach.

Twitter's open platform enables rapid dissemination of your message. Over time on Twitter there have been over 50,000,000 healthcare tweets; over 5,000 comments, and there are more than 1,000 common healthcare hastags. These tweets come from individuals, hospitals, physicians and other providers, health advocates, patients and caretakers. They offer advice and resources on every imaginable health topic from information about procedures and surgeries, to public policy and population management, to patient commentaries. For example when I was scheduled for a hip replacement, I found a comprehensive information packet tweeted by a hospital that described the procedure and compared hip replacement pricing at various institutions.

As a breast cancer patient I found information on just about every possible concern from ongoing clinical trials, to the latest medications, what foods to eat and why yoga was good for breast cancer patients.

Among the key uses of twitter for healthcare are:

Drug safety alerts from the FDA.

Exercise management and encouragement.

Weight management and support.

Daily health tips from authoritative sources.

Disease-specific tips and alerts.

Population health information.

Live tweeting about surgical procedures.

Tracking patient trends.

Checking hospital ratings with other health care consumers.

Patient sharing.

Recently, there was controversy, aired extensively in the press, and on twitter about Lisa Adams, an American metastatic breast cancer patient (@LisaAdams). Lisa tweets hundreds of times each day about her experience with her disease and her treatment. In her tweets she gets right into graphic descriptions of what it is really like to experience this disease, in the hope that this information will help others.

A UK journalist who interviewed Lisa, published an article in the Guardian indicting her for being so public about her disease. This article caused a furor that occupied the media and the tweeting public for many days. Lisa's story exemplifies an engaged patient who is using this social medium as a way to get out her message and connect with others.

Clearly, Twitter poses unique challenges when it comes to healthcare, including issues of patient privacy and confidentiality, HIPAA regulation, and litigation concerns on the part of providers who are reluctant to share too much.

Using Twitter in healthcare also presents some technical issues. For example,

Hashtags on Twitter (#...) are often misunderstood which can result in misuse of this tool for content discovery. Twitter hashtags for healthcare should help to categorize your content on a consistent basis and extend the reach of your tweets to others. Hashtags help expand your audience with like-minded individuals. The rule of thumb is to use no more than three hashtags per tweet. They should be those which are commonly recognized by others.

Some widely used healthcare hashtags are:

#Patient

#PatientExperience

#HealthTalk
#patientengagement
#nurses
#digitalhealth
#HealthReform
#Healthcosts
#meaningfuluse
#ACO
#physician
#MedEd

Twitter chats is another way to connect individual who have common interests in healthcare. A Twitter chat is a live discussion that occurs for a half-hour to an hour at the same time every week, moderated by a host and centered on a particular topic identified by a hashtag.

Anyone who is interested can participate in a Twitter chat. They serve as another way to connect people, build thought leadership and provide a forum in which new ideas can germinate.

Twitter takes participatory medicine to a new level. It is a no holds barred avenue for every patient, provider and caretaker to express ideas, share experiences and learn from the wealth of information that is available at no cost or obligation.

[NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS THAT WORK FOR THE LONG HAUL](#)

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These are the weeks that everyone is making their New Year's Resolutions. An interesting study reported in the University Of Scranton Journal Of Clinical Psychology in December, 2012, indicated that 62% of Americans make New Year's Resolutions and only 8% are successful in achieving their resolutions. Of those who make resolutions, only 75% make it through the first week; 46% fail after six months.

Ambitious plans to quit smoking, lose weight and exercise, more, obtain gym memberships, avoid junk food, cut down on alcohol, and

quite smoking are among the most common resolutions – all leading to a healthier lifestyle. These good intentions are hard to maintain. However, if you set the right expectations from the beginning and work with a friend, spouse, partner, or professional coach so that you have support, you may have more success in keeping your resolutions this year.

Here are some tips and guidelines to help you along the way:

1) Set realistic goals

a. Instead of deciding that you will never eat your favorite junk food or desert, decide to keep your food splurge to once a week and have a modest portion.

b. Instead of deciding you will stop drinking all alcoholic beverages, make it a policy to have one or two glasses of wine or beer during the weekend.

c. Instead of saying that you will go to the gym or workout every day, resolve to work out three days a week to start, and increase that routine if you can. Find an exercise regimen that you enjoy.

2) Make a plan and write it down

a. Set a weight loss goal of a pound a week that is realistic and manageable. If you record what you eat each day you will also see where you are succeeding or failing to keep with the plan.

b. Set a work-out goal and calculate the specific hours and times when you realistically can get to the gym or get out for a brisk walk or run. Enter your exercise schedule in your calendar and view it like an important appointment that you do not want to miss unless there is a dire emergency.

c. Look at the combination of what you are eating and how much you are exercising to help you lose weight and become more fit.

d. When it comes to cutting down on alcohol or stopping a smoking habit – seek the advice of a professional in the beginning and get the guidelines that will work long term.

3) Get support

Changing behavior is a difficult, arduous process. Talk with a spouse, friend, or family member to get their support. This means that person agrees to have you call or visit to talk about your plan regularly and

coach you. Alternatively, seek a partner who will embark on the same restricted diet or exercise program and promise to give each other support. A third alternative is to get yourself a professional coach to.

4) Reward yourself

Use a reward system for each milestone reached. After you lose the first five pounds, exercise regularly for month, quit smoking for two weeks, go shopping and buy yourself a clothing item or accessory that makes you feel good.

5) Be patient

Changing long term habits takes time. Don't allow anything to derail your resolve to improve your health. If you are new to exercise, you are going to feel sore and uncomfortable. Ride through it. Setbacks are inevitable but you cannot give up. Be one of the small majority who succeeds in your New Year's Resolution no matter the hurdles in front of you.

6. Don't compare yourself to others

If you and a friend embark on this diet/fitness program together, support one another but do not compare results. Your bodies are unique and individual and the speed at which the fat is burning off or the ability to lift more weights is not a contest. You will make progress if you keep at it and follow the regimen at your own personal pace.

7. Do Not Hesitate to Ask Questions

Before you embark on your new program, seek the advice of your doctor or a nutritionist. If you have questions look for information on credible web at sites such as mayoclinic.com where you will find extensive data on foods, vitamins, minerals, benefits and risks of certain substances and of exercise, yoga and meditation. If you are beginning a new gym program, seek the advice of trainers and get yourself a workout routine that meets your personal body requirements and ability. If you are trying to quit smoking, talk to a doctor or counsellor for safe medication aids that can help you wean off slowly.

8. Squelch the power of inertia

Too many of us tend to continue doing what we've been doing and don't make an effort to change our behavior in a healthy way. Make

the resolution to change and adopt more healthful behaviors. Use technology to help achieve your goals, including smart phone apps or web sites where you can track your progress and get informational and educational tools. Some of the most popular smart phone apps for weight loss (most of them free) include: *Lose It*, *Fooducate*, *Lovcavore*, *Edomondo*. Some of the popular smart phone apps for tracking exercise include: *My Fitness Pal*, *Cardio*, *RunKeeper*, *SportsTracker*. It's never too late. Make that resolution and keep it going!