Letter to the Editor

Planning prompts as a means of increasing preventive screening rates

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In the U.S., 18,800 lives could be saved annually if those advised to obtain colorectal screenings based on national guidelines complied (Zauber et al., 2012). Subtle suggestions embedded in a decision-making environment can change people’s choices (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Past research has shown that prompting people to form plans about where and when they will complete an intended behavior increases engagement in activities ranging from voting to vaccination (Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006; Milkman et al., 2011; Nickerson and Rogers, 2010). When plans are formed, they link intended behaviors with a concrete future moment and course of action, creating cues that reduce forgetfulness and procrastination. We studied whether planning prompts increase completion of important tasks (like getting a colonoscopy). A blank yellow sticky note was attached to the top of the control group mailing. For the planning group, the mailing was identical, except the sticky note contained a six-word planning prompt:

“Don’t forget! Colonoscopy appointment with [Dr. Name]”

We analyzed colonoscopy medical claims of study participants from the time of the mailings through February 2011. The 7.2% colonoscopy rate of the planning group was significantly higher than the 6.2% rate of the control group (Table 1), a relative increase of 15%.

If planning prompts reduce forgetfulness as hypothesized (Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006), they should help forgetful sub-populations most. Fifty-four MTurk respondents were asked which characteristics they believe are associated with forgetfulness. All of the identified characteristics (male, older, parent, lower insurance coverage, ignoring previous reminders) are associated with larger planning prompt treatment effects.

A forgetfulness proxy, constructed by summing indicators for these characteristics (calculated for age and coverage by dividing by their respective ranges), has a significant positive interaction with the treatment effect on colonoscopy receipt (p < 0.05).

Our results show that planning prompts, at no additional cost and without restricting choice, can increase follow-through on unpleasant and temporally distant health behaviors like colonoscopies.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests.

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