

Becoming a non smoker

Once you have quit, there are two major tasks associated with staying quit.

The first task is making it through the first month or so, the biggest period of adjustment. This involves successfully resisting temptations to smoke and is dealt with in the Advice Sheets Dealing with Nicotine Withdrawal and Getting Through The Early Days.

The second task of quitting is learning to be comfortable as a nonsmoker in the long-term, the topic of this Advice Sheet. A nonsmoker is somebody who has no real regrets about giving up smoking, and doesn't see any good reason for ever starting again. They know they can enjoy life and cope with any problems that arise just as well, if not better, than when they were smoking. Learning to become a nonsmoker may take many months. It involves getting used to doing things without smoking, and accepting that the things you used to enjoy about smoking are now in your past. You can continue to enjoy life without cigarettes.

Over the first year of having quit, ex-smokers slowly learn to be comfortable as a nonsmoker. The people who are successful are those who continue to make staying quit a priority in their lives. In the paragraphs below we list some of the common challenges you may experience during this time, so that you are familiar with them and can prepare yourself in advance.

A key idea of this program is that the way in which you think about smoking affects the number of cravings you will get. For instance, dwelling on how much you miss smoking will bring on cravings in much the same way as thinking about food can make you hungry. In contrast, thinking about the good things about quitting will minimise cravings. The idea is to try to 'get smoking out of your head'.

AVOID OVER-CONFIDENCE

Research suggests that having confidence in your ability to quit and stay quit can help you get through the early days and weeks of quitting.

How confident are you that you can:

- Always cope, at least as well as when you smoked?
- Find replacements for everything you got from smoking?
- Enjoy life more than when you were a smoker?
- Become a permanent nonsmoker?

There is a risk though of overconfidence, particularly once you've been quit for several weeks or longer. If you're no longer struggling with withdrawal symptoms or daily cravings, and adjusting well to being a nonsmoker, you can easily begin to feel that the work is behind you. At that point there is a possibility that you may let your guard down. You may find yourself taken by surprise if you have unexpected thoughts of smoking, or toying with the idea of having 'just one'. It is important to remember that you can get occasional strong urges to smoke even years after you have quit. However, if you resist them, they will go away. Don't be fooled into "just having one", this usually leads you into a full relapse back to smoking.

MISSING ACTIVITIES THAT YOU VALUE

When you begin to feel you are getting temptations under control (or have been quit around a month), it is time to begin to reflect on whether you really are missing anything by being a nonsmoker.

For these things, work out whether you can find a satisfactory replacement, that is, get what you miss in other ways. There really isn't anything you can't do just because you don't smoke.

Nonetheless some activities, like socialising with friends, may take a bit of time to get used to. For example, there is no reason why you shouldn't join smoker friends when they go out to smoke. Yet if you really don't think you can find ways to replace smoking, then have a think about the suggested strategies in the following sections. There is a solution to every problem - seek out alternatives and find one which suits you best.

Remind yourself that you won't need to give up any of the activities you value. Nevertheless, you will need to act differently in these situations to protect yourself from being tempted to smoke. We know how hard it can be changing routines and habits, but remember that often only a small change can make a big difference. When you do go into high risk situations, enter them with a clear plan and a positive attitude. Be upfront about not smoking, and don't apologise for your new life choice. Stick at it and you'll find the long term benefits will far outweigh the short term costs!

MISSING THE EXPERIENCE OF SMOKING

Many people do miss smoking. In fact, they liken quitting to losing an old friend, or feeling as though a part of them has gone missing. If you feel this way, rest assured that it's quite normal. After all, if you have smoked for many years, it's understandable that you may subconsciously think of cigarettes as being an extension of yourself. It is perfectly normal to grieve this loss for a while. Try to convince yourself that this supposed friend is really a ruthless enemy, and that there are great benefits from quitting. This will help the grieving process pass more quickly, and you will feel less pain in letting go (see Understanding Your Smoking, for exercises to test yourself out).

Each time you decide not to smoke, be extremely proud that you were strong enough to put yourself first and didn't listen to the enticing, deceiving voice of your addiction. The best thing to do if you miss smoking is to continue working on alternatives to your smoking routines. Deal quickly with temptations to smoke by doing something else. This is a battle between you and your addiction, and you are going to win!

For the experiences that you have come to enjoy, you will need to leave these behind. Accept that they were good, but that they belong to a past time in your life. Some of the exercises in the Advice Sheet Understanding Your Smoking might help.

CHANGING YOUR IDENTITY

Once you have reached a point where you know you can survive without smoking, you need to check to make sure you are not still holding on to a sense of having lost something from your life. You also need to check whether, if circumstances change, you might think you need to smoke. Challenging and overcoming such beliefs is important for starting to feel really good about yourself.

Quitting involves a slow shift in identity from smoker to a nonsmoker (or ex-smoker, if you prefer). This process continues for many months after you quit. At first not smoking can feel uncomfortable. This often takes people by surprise. It can help to recognise that it took you a while to learn to be a smoker. So it makes sense that it may take a while to learn to be comfortable as a nonsmoker.

Sometimes quitters report that as part of the change to a nonsmoker identity they feel more thoughtful or inward-looking than normal. Sometimes they even feel a little withdrawn from others. This may be because they are going through an experience of change that is quite personal and a little difficult to put into words. It is really important to keep in mind

that if you're feeling like this, it will pass. It can help to focus on what you are enjoying about having quit. Remember to reward yourself for your success, and practise seeing yourself as a contented nonsmoker.

Some people take the opportunity of quitting to make a range of changes in their life. They take on a different style of living. Having kids is one time when other things force such a change, and quitting can go along with that type of change. If this is you, then in the short term quitting can be easier as you will be spending less time in situations where you used to smoke. However, be on guard if you decide to return to your old lifestyle. You may be tempted to resume smoking.

Other people do not want to change their lives when they quit. They want to continue doing things they enjoy and some of these have been associated with smoking. If this is you, then you will have more work to do learning to enjoy your lifestyle without cigarettes. This takes time and effort.

Some people who quit report with pride that while quitting was one of the most challenging things they have ever done, it was a life-changing experience. They say that it has put them in touch with inner strengths and given them unexpected confidence. They now feel they can tackle other life challenges.

THE ROLE OF SMOKING IN COPING WITH STRESS

Many recent quitters reach a point where they know they can survive without smoking. In spite of this they still hold on to a belief that it is a good way of dealing with stress. If a highly stressful event occurs, they are at risk of returning to smoking. Challenging such beliefs is important for starting to feel really good about being a nonsmoker or an ex-smoker.

If there are particular situations in which this sense of loss is most noticeable, then it can be important to systematically experiment with alternatives.

It may be that part of finding a satisfactory replacement may involve training yourself to cope in different ways in situations where you might have previously turned to a cigarette. Some examples include regular exercise, relaxation techniques, and positive thinking.

It can also make a difference to directly challenge any sense of loss by continuing to reward yourself for your progress and deliberately planning activities you enjoy.

FEELING BAD WHEN THINGS AREN'T GOING WELL

We know how much of an issue negative feelings can be in staying quit. A lot of the problem here is that people believe smoking is an effective coping tool. That is, they still hold onto this belief even when they have stopped smoking. If you feel this way, we would like you to challenge this belief, and continue to challenge it with the hard facts:

- **Smoking does not help you to relax.** It increases your heart rate and therefore can't be physically relaxing. This rise in your arousal levels makes you feel more in control. However, this does not last, and over time, relying on cigarettes to feel better can reduce your capacity to cope effectively. Things stay bad for longer than they would have if you didn't smoke.

- Another reason smoking is linked to stress reduction is that slowly exhaling a deep breath (even one polluted by smoke) triggers a natural relaxation response. This stress reducing aspects of the act of smoking can be achieved without the cigarette. Try deep breathing and letting out the air by itself. There are lots of other strategies for dealing with stress in the short term in the Special Resource Dealing with Stress.

If you are finding it difficult to cope in the longer term we suggest you spend some time learning more effective stress-management techniques. There are a range of courses around, as well as good material in self-help books available at the local library, or on the web. Smoking definitely does not help in the longer term.

For many people, coming to realise that they can cope better without cigarettes is one of the great revelations of quitting. However, this takes time and it requires you accepting that the immediate relief a cigarette provides is not an indicator that it helps beyond those first few moments.

Another important thing to do is to plan for future disasters. Imagine a terrible situation and think to yourself "What will I do instead of smoke if that situation ever arose?" When you have an answer, keep it in mind as your strategy. It may be something like spending time with a really close friend who doesn't smoke, or doing some relaxation exercises. By doing this, the plan is already in place in your mind. Keep reminding yourself that smoking isn't a good solution to any problem, and you'll not look towards it if a disaster strikes.

If you take our advice and try out these strategies, you'll find it much easier to stay quit for good. The last thing you want is to relapse months or even years down the track, because you still held the false belief that smoking might help you cope with an emergency.

LONG-TERM HIGH RISK SITUATIONS

There are some situations which may not occur until months or even years after you have quit. They include:

- a highly stressful event (see previous sub-section),
- the first set of birthdays and anniversaries since you became a nonsmoker, and
- any historical smoking situations, including catching up with friends you haven't seen since you were a smoker (e.g., school reunions).

It's important for you to know that in these situations you may experience a return of some thoughts of smoking. These are 'memory' cravings rather than your body needing nicotine, but they feel just as real. This is normal, and is simply part of remembering that the last time you were in this situation you were a smoker. For some people these memory cravings catch them by surprise. They find themselves having a cigarette. Knowing in advance what these 'memory cravings' are can help you to develop a plan. You have learnt how to handle so many other situations without smoking. Remember you have the skills to work out strategies for these situations as well. As always, it is important to be prepared.