

# Some things you might miss when you stop smoking

A large section of the population have tried to stop smoking, only to find that it's more than just a physical addiction to nicotine that makes them reach for a cigarette.

This is because while most people start smoking in their teens for social reasons, smoking quickly becomes connected with specific feelings and situations. It is this emotional attachment to cigarettes that can be the most difficult to break.

Understanding the psychological role of smoking can make a big difference to your success at quitting.

## Smoking can be:

- a particular part of your daily life
- your way of dealing with stress and difficult situations
- an aid to concentration and observation
- a reward
- a way to pass the time
- a means of introduction and meeting new friends etc
- a way to feel part of a group
- an effective 'pause signal'
- a habit
- an enjoyable ritual
- a part of your identity.

**If you work out what smoking means to you and are aware of your triggers, you can put in place strategies to tackle them when you quit.**

## Smoking as a part of daily life

Smokers often say they use a cigarette as a reward for completing a task or activity, eg after washing-up or getting home from work. Smoking is used to punctuate the day, to show you have finished one thing before starting another. It provides a routine and helps organise your day by dividing it into more manageable units.

When you quit, you'll need to look for a new way of marking changes, eg making a drink at work or getting a glass of water.

## Smoking as a way to cope with difficult situations

Smoking can be a way to moderate negative feelings such as stress, nervousness and anxiety.

Using cigarettes as a form of self-medication to overcome these emotions strengthens a smoker's relationship with tobacco and slowly builds up psychological dependency.

It's also normal during a quit to feel moods and emotions more deeply, especially if smoking has been used as a way to blunt personal feelings.

If your quit is going to be successful, you'll need to take a different view and learn how to cope in other ways. If you don't, you'll reach for a cigarette the first time you feel particularly moody, nervous, etc.

Changing psychological habits takes time, and can be one of the most difficult things about quitting.

## Smoking can improve concentration and attention

Do you reach for a cigarette under pressure - when you need a little something 'extra'? Most smokers believe smoking improves concentration, but this improvement is due to the relief of withdrawal symptoms that come on between cigarettes.

A smoker's body needs a constant level of nicotine throughout the day. When these levels dip, it experiences mini withdrawal symptoms. So the increased concentration after a cigarette is your body's way of thanking you for satisfying its addiction.

This also means that poor concentration is one of the withdrawal symptoms of smoking. According to 'ASH', it affects around 60 per cent of smokers and usually lasts for less than two weeks.

Nicotine replacement therapy may help reduce this loss of concentration in the early weeks of quitting.

In the long-term, there is a whole host of smoke-free options for boosting concentration - from well-known pick-me-ups like caffeine and chocolate, lifestyle changes such as getting enough sleep or eating 'brain foods' (fish, essential fatty acids) through to behavioural strategies such as removing distractions.

## Smoking can be used as a reward

Smokers often use tobacco as both reward and motivator - for example, before a boring task or at the end of a hard day.

When you quit, you'll need to find new ways to treat yourself. Sit down with a cup of chocolate, read a magazine, run a bath or go for a walk - there are plenty of relaxing things to do other than have a cigarette.

It's also a good idea to put aside the money you save from not smoking to treat yourself to flowers, CDs, DVDs, books, clothes, theatre tickets, gym membership etc.

There are behavioural techniques to help with motivation. It may be enough just to ask yourself whether the time spent avoiding the task is better spent doing it and getting it out the way, or you may need to look at the root of why you need to 'reward' yourself in a particular situation.

If your job is getting on your nerves maybe it's time to look for a different one, or if a particular relationship is strained, maybe you need to think about how it could be improved - even if it means taking some time out.

## Smoking passes the time

In many situations, smoking fills in breaks and passes the time, especially 'dull' time such as waiting for a bus.

It can be comforting to hold a cigarette when you are uncertain about a situation - eg in a pub with people you don't know well or the first day in a new job.

A cigarette in your hand gives you something to 'do'. When you give up, you'll have to learn to fill time spent waiting a different way.

Finding a new way to cope with social awkwardness means working on your shyness and anxieties, eg with behavioural techniques that improve confidence.

## Company and communication

Tobacco can be a good way of meeting new people. Asking for a light or sharing matches can provide an easy opportunity to talk to strangers. You'll need to find other ways of starting up a conversation in these situations.

## Smoking and friendship

Smoking can make you feel part of a group, especially at work, and your partner and best friends might be smokers. Giving up smoking can mean big changes to start with, especially in your social life.

You'll have to say goodbye to those chats over cigarettes with the smoking clique at work, and if you're concerned about temptation, you may need to avoid the pub or drop smoking friends altogether in the early days of your quit.

It can also have a significant impact on your relationship if your partner still smokes and smoking has been a way you relax and enjoy time together.

## Smoking is an effective 'pause signal'

Few people will interrupt someone who's smoking, or ask them to put down their cigarette if in a hurry. You will need to find other ways of signalling to colleagues and family that you don't want to be disturbed.

## Breaking the habit of smoking

After a while, smoking becomes a habit, where certain situations trigger the urge to smoke.

If you stop smoking, you'll need to tackle these habits from day one - you might have a sudden impulse for a cigarette when the phone rings or your favourite soap is on TV.

It will take effort and some planning to break the association between a particular activity and smoking.

If you're thinking about quitting you could try some changes now. You could wait 10 minutes after a meal before you light up, or make a rule not to smoke at the dinner table, in the lounge or when on the computer.

All these strategies will help you separate the things you normally do from smoking.

## An enjoyable ritual

Over time you'll incorporate small rituals, for example the way you open a packet, hold a cigarette or exhale smoke. These rituals stay with you years after stopping, and are surprisingly easy to activate by crises, parties or meeting old friends and colleagues.

The satisfaction that comes from filling a pipe or rolling a cigarette are other things you'll have to do without if you give up smoking. These activities provide the opportunity for a little bit of relaxation and 'me-time' in your day-to-day life.

It can be hard at first to find a replacement for these moments, but looking at ways to reduce your stress levels as a whole will help rather than searching for a direct substitute.

## Smoking and identity

The label 'smoker' can be an integral part of your image - especially if you started smoking at an early age.

Think of your image as a smoker. You may be surprised at how many of your qualities you associate with smoking, such as being outgoing or outspoken or not following rules.

This association of cigarettes (and brands) with particular qualities has been fuelled by images in the media over the years. In adverts, TV shows and films, smoking has been associated with all sorts of qualities such as charm, allure, intellect, rebelliousness, strength and daring.

When you quit smoking you have to let go of these perceptions. Countering the positive images conjured up by ad men is one thing (if you think you're sexy try kissing an ashtray), but are you prepared for the effect on your identity?

You may worry whether you'll still be the same fun-loving person, or if smoke-free nights out will be a let down. The answer, of course, is that you can have a good time and not smoke, but this may seem as unlikely as having fun without drinking.

You need to think about your perceptions, because if you feel you're missing out when you quit, it's unlikely you'll stick with it.

Ex-smokers say quitting changes their self-image in a positive way. They no longer feel 'dirty', 'smelly' or 'controlled' by their habit.

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