

Joel's Reinforcement Library

NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

I Have to Smoke Because of All My Stress!

Stress is considered a cause for smoking by many people. Actually, smoking is a cause of stress. Recent correspondence dealt with reasons people give for going back to smoking: social situations, parties, alcohol consumption and stress. This month I wish to amplify on stress.

In January of 1979, Chicago and vicinity was devastated by a major blizzard. Heavy snows fell just after the New Year crippling the area. Additional snowfall continued throughout the week. During this time period I was barraged with phone calls from participants of the November, 1978 clinic claiming to be terribly nervous, upset and anxious from "not smoking." Curiously, most of them were feeling well during the month of December. They had occasional urges which lasted only seconds and were quite easy to overcome. What they were experiencing in January was different. Many felt that they were on the verge of cracking up. To them life was "just no good" without their cigarettes. Was the anxiety they were now experiencing really a side effect from giving up smoking?

To any outside observer the answer to the mysterious intensification of perceived withdrawal was obvious. In fact, if our ex-smokers listened to radio or television or read the front page of any newspaper, they would have encountered a story on cabin fever. By simply comparing their symptoms with those accompanying cabin fever they would understand what was happening.

Attributing the anxiety to smoking cessation was transference of blame. In fact, they were having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation - confinement due to the blizzard. They would have had the same anxiety whether or not they had given up cigarettes.

The above story illustrates an atypical time period in which numerous people experience similar complaints. In everyday life inherent problems exist. Work, family, friends, and money can all contribute to daily distress. Ex-smokers often think that if they just take a cigarette during a stressful episode the situation will be solved. For example, consider a person who finds he has a flat tire in a parking lot during a freezing rain. When encountering this kind of misfortune, the ex-smoker's first reaction often is, "I need a cigarette." What will actually solve this problem is changing the tire, and driving off in a warm car. What would a cigarette do to help this situation? It only makes the person see the flat tire longer and freeze more. This adds up to greater frustration. The first puff will probably reinforce the addiction to cigarettes which is a much greater crisis than the flat tire ever was. In fact, taking the first puff almost always results in a bigger problem than the crisis that "caused" them to take the puff. Even in a real catastrophe, such as a death in the family, injuries, illnesses, flooding resulting in major property loss, bankruptcy and so on, a cigarette will not solve the problem. It will just add another major problem to the originally bad situation.

Remember, smoking cannot solve problems of daily living. No matter what the problem, there is a more effective way of solving it than smoking. In fact, a smoker's health risks are a real problem that can only be solved if they - NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

Joel

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