

Joel's Reinforcement Library

NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

Understanding the Emotional Loss Experienced When Quitting Smoking

In her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified five distinct phases which a dying person encounters. These stages are "denial," "anger," "bargaining," "depression," and finally, "acceptance." These are the exact same stages that are felt by those mourning the loss of a loved one as well.

Denial can be recognized as the state of disbelief: "This isn't really happening to me," or "The doctor doesn't know what he is talking about." The same feelings are often expressed by family members and friends.

Once denial ceases and the realization of impending death is acknowledged anger develops. "Why me?" or "Why them?" in the case of the significant others. Anger may be felt toward the doctors, toward God, toward family and friends. Anger, though, doesn't change the person's fate. They are still in the process of dying. So next comes bargaining.

In bargaining, the person may become religious, trying to repent for all the sins that may be bringing about their early demise. "If you let me live, I will be a better person, I will help mankind. Please let me live, and I will make it worth your while." This stage, too, will come to an end.

Now the patient, becoming aware he is helpless to prevent his impending fate, enters depression. The patient begins to isolate himself from his surroundings. He relinquishes his responsibilities and begins a period of self mourning. He becomes preoccupied with the fact that his life is coming to an end. Symptoms of depression are obvious to anyone having contact with the patient in this stage. When the patient finally overcomes this depression he will enter the last stage, acceptance.

The patient now reaches what can be seen as an emotionally neutral stage. He almost seems devoid of feelings. Instead of death being viewed as a terrifying or horrible experience, he now peacefully accepts his fate.

As stated above, these stages are not only seen in the dying person but likewise in the family members mourning the loss of a loved one. However, on careful observation we can see these same stages in people who lose anything. It doesn't have to be the loss of a loved one. It could be the loss of a pet, the loss of a job, and even the loss of an inanimate object. Yes, even when a person loses her keys, she may go through the five stages of dying.

First, she denies the loss of the keys. "Oh, I know they are around here somewhere." She patiently looks in her pockets and through her dressers knowing any minute she will find the keys. But soon, she begins to realize she has searched out all of the logical locations. Now you begin to see anger. Slamming the drawers, throwing the pillow of the couch, swearing at those darned keys for disappearing. Then comes bargaining: "If I ever find those keys I will never misplace them again. I will put them in a nice safe place." It is almost like she is asking the keys to come out and assuring them she will never abuse them again. Soon, she realizes the keys are gone. She is depressed. How will she ever again survive in this world without her keys? Then, she finally accepts the fact the keys are gone. She goes out and has a new set made. Life goes on. A week later the lost keys are forgotten.

What does all this have to do with why people don't quit smoking? People who attempt to give up smoking go through these five stages. They must successfully overcome each specific phase to deal with the next. Some people have particular difficulty conquering a specific phase, causing them to relapse back to smoking. Let's analyze these specific phases as encountered by the abstaining smoker.

The first question asked of the group during the smoking clinic was, "How many of you feel that you will never smoke again?" Do you remember the underwhelming response to that question? It is remarkable for even one or two people to raise their hands. For the most part the entire group is in a state of denial - they will not quit smoking. Other prevalent manifestations of denial are: "I don't want to quit smoking," or "I am perfectly healthy while smoking, so why should I stop," or "I am different, I can control my smoking at one or two a day." These people, through their denial, set up obstacles to even attempt quitting and hence have very little chance of success.

Those who successfully overcome denial progress to anger. We hear so many stories of how difficult it is to live with a recovering smoker. Your friends avoid you, your employer sends you home, sometimes permanently, and you are generally no fun to be

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with. Most smokers do successfully beat this stage.

Bargaining is probably the most dangerous stage in the effort to stop smoking. "Oh boy, I could sneak this one and nobody will ever know it." "Things are really tough today, I will just have one to help me over this problem, no more after that." "Maybe I'll just smoke today, and quit again tomorrow." It may be months before these people even attempt to quit again.

Depression usually follows once you successfully overcome bargaining without taking that first drag. For the first time you start to believe you may actually quit smoking. But instead of being overjoyed, you start to feel like you are giving up your best friend. You remember the good times with cigarettes and disregard the detrimental effects of this dangerous and dirty addiction. At this point more than ever "one day at a time" becomes a life saver. Because tomorrow may bring acceptance.

Once you reach the stage of acceptance, you get a true perspective of what smoking was doing to you and what not smoking can do for you. Within two weeks the addiction is broken and, hopefully, the stages are successfully overcome and, finally, life goes on.

Life becomes much simpler, happier and more manageable as an ex-smoker. Your self esteem is greatly boosted. Your physical state is much better than it would ever have been if you continued to smoke. It is a marvelous state of freedom. Anyone can break the addiction and beat the stages. Then all you must do to maintain this freedom is simply remember - NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

Joel

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