

Joel's Reinforcement Library

NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

I Can't Quit or I Won't Quit?

"I don't want to be called on during this clinic. I am quitting smoking, but I don't want to talk about it. Please don't call on me." This request was made by a lady enrolling in one of my clinics over 20 years ago. I said sure. I won't make you talk, but if you feel you would like to interject at anytime, please don't hesitate to. At that she got mad and said, "Maybe I am not making myself clear-I don't want to talk! If you make me talk I will get up and walk out of this room. If you look at me with an inquisitive look on your face, I am leaving! Am I making myself clear?" I was a little shocked by the strength of her statement but I told her I would honor her request. I hoped that during the program she would change her mind and would share her experiences with the group and me but in all honesty, I wasn't counting on it.

There were about 20 other participants in the program. Overall, it was a good group with the exception of two women who sat in back of the room and gabbed constantly. Other participants would turn around and tell the two to be quiet. They would stop talking for a few seconds and then start right up again with just as much enthusiasm as before. Sometimes, when other people were sharing sad, personal experiences, they would be laughing at some humorous story they had shared with each other, totally ignorant of the surrounding happenings.

On the third day of the clinic, a major breakthrough occurred. The two gossips were partying away as usual. There was one young woman, probably early twenties who asked if she could talk first because she had to leave. The two gossips in back still were not listening and kept up with their private conversation. The young woman who had to leave said, "I can't stay, I had a horrible tragedy in my family today, my brother was killed in an accident." Fighting back emotions she continued. "I wasn't even supposed to come tonight, I am supposed to be helping my family

making funeral arrangements. But I knew I had to stop by if I was going to continue to not smoke." She had only been off two days now. But not smoking was important to her.

The group members felt terrible, but were so proud of her, it made what happened in their day seem so trivial. All except the two ladies in the back of the room. They actually heard none of what was happening. When the young woman was telling how close she and her brother were, the two gossips actually broke out laughing. They weren't laughing at the story, they were laughing at something totally different not even aware of what was being discussed in the room. Anyway, the young woman who lost her brother shortly after that excused herself to go back to her family. She said she would keep in touch and thanked the group for all of their support.

A few minutes later I was then relating some story to the group, when all of a sudden the lady who requested anonymity arose and spoke. "Excuse me Joel," she said loudly, interrupting me in the middle of the story. "I wasn't going to say anything this whole program. The first day I told Joel not to call on me. I told him I would walk out if I had to talk. I told him I would leave if he tried to make me talk. I didn't want to burden anyone else with my problems. But today I feel I cannot keep quiet any longer. I must tell my story." The room was quiet.

"I have terminal lung cancer. I am going to die within two months. I am here to quit smoking. I want to make it clear that I am not kidding myself into thinking that if I quit I will save my life. It is too late for me. I am going to die and there is not a damn thing I can do about it. But I am going to quit smoking."

"You may wonder why I am quitting if I am going to die anyway. Well, I have my reasons. When my children were small, they always pestered me about my smoking. I told them over and over to leave me alone, that I wanted to stop but couldn't. I said it so often they stopped begging. But now my children are in their twenties and thirties, and two of them smoke. When I found out about my cancer, I begged them to stop. They replied to me, with pained expressions on their faces, that they want to stop but they can't. I know where they learned that, and I am mad at myself for it."

"So I am stopping to show them I was wrong. It wasn't that I couldn't stop smoking - it was that I wouldn't! I am off two days now, and I know I will not have another cigarette. I don't know if this will make anybody stop, but I had to prove to my children and to myself that I could quit smoking. And if I could quit, they could quit, anybody could quit."

"I enrolled in the clinic to pick up any tips that would make quitting a little easier and because I was real curious about how people who really were taught the dangers of smoking would react. If I knew then what I know now - well, anyway, I have sat and listened to all of you closely. I feel for each and every one of you and I pray you all make it. Even though I haven't said a word to anyone, I feel close to all of you. Your sharing has helped me. As I said, I wasn't going to talk. But today I have to. Let me tell you why."

Then she turned to the two ladies in the back of the room, who actually had stayed quiet during this interlude. Suddenly she flared up, "The only reason I am speaking up now is because you two BITCHES are driving me crazy. You are partying in the back while everyone else is sharing with each other, trying to help save each other's lives. She then related what the young woman had said about her brother's death and how they were laughing at the time, totally unaware of the story. "Will you both do me a favor, just get the hell out of here! Go out and smoke, drop dead for all we care, you are learning and contributing nothing here."

They sat there stunned. I had to calm the group down a little, actually quite bit, the atmosphere was quite charged with all that had happened. I kept the two ladies there, and needless to say, that was the last of the gabbing from the back of the room for the entire two-week clinic.

All the people who were there that night were successful at the end of the program. At graduation, the two ladies who had earlier talked only to each other were applauded by all, even the lady with lung cancer. All was forgiven. The girl who lost her brother also came for the graduation, also smoke free and proud. And the lady with lung cancer proudly accepted her diploma and introduced one of her children. He had stopped smoking for over a week at that time. Actually, when the lady with cancer was sharing her story with us, she had not told her family yet that she had even quit smoking.

It was a few days later, when she was off a week that she told her son. He, totally amazed said to her that if she could quit smoking, he knew he could and stopped at that moment. She beamed with joy. Six weeks later she succumbed to the cancer. I found out when I called her home just to see how she was doing and got her son on the line. He thanked me for helping her quit at the end. He told me how proud she was that she had quit and how proud he was of her, and how happy she was that he had quit also. He said, "She never went back to smoking, and I will not either." In the end, they had both given each other a wonderful gift. He was proud her last

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breath was smoke free - she NEVER TOOK ANOTHER PUFF!

Epilog: I normally say you can't quit for someone else, it has to be for yourself. This incident flies in the face of this comment to some degree. The lady with lung cancer was quitting smoking to save her children from her fate, to some degree undo the lesson that she had taught years earlier. The lesson that she "could not stop." It was that at the time she "would not stop." There is a big difference between these two statements. It holds true for all smokers. The lady in this story proved years later she could quit too late to save her life, but not too late to save her sons. Next time you hear yourself or someone else say, I cannot stop, understand it is not true. You can quit. Anyone can quit. The trick is not waiting until it is too late.

Joel

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