

Chapter 13

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Homecoming

How do we know when we're home? If you've ever moved, you know there's a big difference between moving into a house and having it feel like home.

The correct answer is, you are home when you feel it! Some feel at home in a couple of weeks while others need months.

A Silent Celebration

Amazingly, within 2 to 4 months the adjustment process transports most in recovery to a point where they experience that very first day where they never once "think" to themselves, "gee, I'd sure like a smoke," "dip," "chew," "lozenge," "vape" or "piece of nicotine gum."



Photo by Centers for Disease Control

After the first such day, such days become more and more common. Soon, they become our new norm in life, with the distance between the occasional "thought" growing further and further apart.

If it happens sooner or takes longer, don't fret! If sooner, enjoy it, If longer, patience, it's coming!

Long-Term Quiet and Calm

Imagine entire days, weeks, months, or eventually even years without your mind ever once feeling an urge to use nicotine.

Imagine living in a constant state of total comfort without any nicotine use related anxieties whatsoever - none, zero, nil, complete and total tranquility.

It's where hundreds of millions of comfortable ex-users reside today. Were any of them truly stronger than nicotine? Were any of them stronger than us? Or, is that just



Photo by National Institute on Drug Abuse

another lame use excuse?

After arresting my thirty-year dependency, my recovery evolved to the point of substantial comfort by about eight weeks, a few weeks earlier than most but later than some. It was then that I experienced my last major subconscious crave episode.

And about then when I started to notice that the once steady stream of thoughts of wanting were ever so slowly becoming fewer, shorter and generally less intense. During the first few weeks I worked hard to maintain a strong positive attitude while refusing to allow negative thoughts to infect my thinking and dreams.

While feeding myself large doses of positive thought, I also confronted and analyzed those remaining thoughts that kept inviting relapse. Soon, it was no longer a matter of trying to believe what I was telling myself. I did believe in the new nicotine-free me!

Although at times intense, I did my best to remain focused on the long overdue healing occurring within. I saw each and every day as a full and complete victory in and of itself. Today I was free. Today was about healing!

And there were lots of little gifts along the way. New smells, tastes, energy, extra pocket change, the whiteness emerging in my smile, pride, empty pockets, a bit bigger step, odorless fingers, hope, endurance, an ash-less world, new found time, long overdue self-respect, gradually lengthening periods of comfort, freedom and even a few extra pounds, it was simply me coming home to meet me.

Eventually the minor urges and periods of thought fixation became further and further apart. After two years of freedom I found myself going months without an urge. And the last time I experienced anything that can be fairly called an "urge" was in December 2001, two years and seven months after starting my journey.

Gradually Diminishing Thoughts and Urges

Most ex-users report that recovery was less challenging than expected. Many report cakewalks.

But it certainly wasn't for me. There were a couple of moments where I felt totally overwhelmed. Thank goodness such moments were few and brief.

The beauty of recovery is that with each passing day after peak withdrawal that the frequency,



Photo by Centers for Disease Control

duration and intensity of challenge is "generally" on the decline.

But like trying to watch a rose bud open, seeing the decline while living it can at times seem nearly impossible. Before we know it, the storms turn to breezes, with a possible gust now and then.

It's entirely normal during the first couple of years to experience occasional thoughts of wanting, or even encounter a remote, seasonal or infrequent use cue. It's also possible to retain a romantic attachment to using, a link capable of fostering desire until ready to let go.

One of the most popular discussions at WhyQuit's peer support group [Freedom](#) is entitled, "[Tell a newbie how many seconds a day you still want a cigarette.](#)" Below are messages posted to the discussion. Each opens by indicating how long the person had been nicotine-free. They then tell us how long each day they still want a cigarette.

Keep in mind as you read them that, for the most part, these are educated ex-users. It's likely that part of their reason for posting to this particular discussion was excitement over how much easier an educated recovery can be.

- 4 days: "My experience so far has been tough but tolerable. I'm 35 and have been smoking a pack/day since 17. Up until 4 days ago, I felt completely powerless in the face of nicotine, like I was especially weak to its powers - but reading has helped me to realize that nicotine has done the same exact thing to all of us." Gus
- 5 days: "I think there are probably 150 seconds in my current days that I want a cigarette, and I have to remind myself, I am a non-smoker and the reasons why and that smoking a cigarette is stupid and will do nothing but harm me. My dad died in December of lung cancer." Darla
- 6 days: "I probably only get one real crave a day now. The first two days I had really bad cravings at all the usual times that I would light up. Third and fourth days seemed like I only had 2-4 bad craves. Day 5 through now it seems like its just one. And even that one crave isn't that big of a deal. However, I do get those 'pangs.' Not pangs of "need" though. It's more like I'm just missing something and a second of sadness comes over me...then I just realize that 'Oh yeah, I would have been smoking a cigarette now!'" Casey
- 7 days: "I think about smoking maybe once or twice a day for 1 or 2 minutes. I'm so turned off by smoking that some days I don't think about smoking at all and I am only one week in." Gina
- 8 days: ""Even though it's been just over a week I can honestly say I don't really CRAVE a cigarette anymore. I'm not saying I don't think about them, I've been an addict for 24 years. But I don't crave them. I don't want them. Time spent remembering them, probably a couple of minutes a day, but when you consider that I use to spend over 3 hours a day abusing myself with them and much of the rest of the time wishing I wasn't abusing myself, that's small potatoes! As one of my favorite quotes says: 'I'd rather be an ex-smoker who occasionally thinks about a cigarette than a smoker who is obsessed by them!'" Pheonix
- 10 days: "Ten days now and I still think about it a few times an hour for a few seconds. But I'm mostly thinking about how I don't smoke anymore! Very simple! Maybe once a day, I get blind-sided with a very strong and powerful thought of "I have to have a cigarette,

NOW!" My responding thought is "But, I don't smoke anymore" and it's GONE!

HAHAHA! The "gotta smoke" thoughts are getting rather wimpy. There seems to be absolutely NOTHING behind them! It's a beautiful thing :-)" Glynda

- 13 days: "Still haven't wanted one and it is day 13, yes on a Friday, lol, I have thoughts like 'gee I would have just lit up,' 'again,' 'another instance.' What is more amazing is the thoughts that come 'I HAVEN'T THOUGHT OF A CIGARETTE!' Not craves, thoughts." Tagsgirl
- 13 days: "For the past two days I have actually gone hours without thinking about a smoke. Hours! That has not happened in a long time. I look forward to the time when I can go for days without hardly a thought of those nasty little things." Tubes
- 14 days: "I think about cigarettes about 3 times a day, they last about 3 minutes each, which is the actual time it took to smoke one cigarette. I don't want one, it is just a thought that does not last long, and it goes away. I feel awesome and now have a much better life with my children and husband." Barbara.
- 15 days: ""I've been nico-free for 2 weeks, 1 day and now only have 4 or 5 urges each day. This is a definite improvement over the constant craves of the first 3 days! I know I have to be patient ... and also try to enjoy each victory over every urge that I defeat!" Judy
- 16 days: "Surprisingly, only a couple of times a day, for not more than 30 seconds each time. Averaging about a minute-and-a-half on the usual day. Also, these are just habit-driven thoughts; thinking about smoking on the way to the car, but I'm perfectly fine once I get there, or thinking about having a cigarette before bed, but knowing that I sleep so much better without it. These are just thoughts; by facing them, they have no power over me!" MichelleNC
- 17 days: "I think about a cigarette several times a day, but only one or two of those is an actual "want" and not just a thought. That's a change from actually crying for want of a cigarette on day two, to shrugging off a couple of little wants in the course of a day in just over two weeks' time ...awesome." Stef
- 18 days: "I don't think about smoking very much, maybe 10-20 seconds a day. But I do think about not smoking a lot !!!!!!" Rob
- 18 days: "Probably about 4 minutes thinking about it, maybe 30 seconds with a bit of an empty feeling, craving something that might be nicotine." Maisie
- 19 days: "I smoked for 40 years, at least a pack a day. Am I having craves? Yes. Are they easier or harder than I thought they would be? Easier. Do they become less and less in duration as time goes by? Yes they do! I have craves about 4 to 5 times a day lasting seconds." Jill
- 21 days: "I crave a cigarette maybe once a day. It lasts about 45 seconds. I feel sooooo much better since I quit!!! The craves I can handle..." Ah0304
- 22 days: "I never want one. Oh, I may occasionally think I should be having one. But I can't say I want it. Even those thoughts have become rarer and rarer. I have been totally amazed at how quickly I went from needing one every couple of hours (if I was doing good) and having no desire for one. I am thrilled to be smoke free." Leigh
- 23 days: "Some days I don't crave at all, and the most is just once and it last for a few seconds." Suez
- 24 days: "I am into my 24th day and honestly I don't even think about cigarettes unless I see someone smoking or smell it and then I think how nasty and disgusting it is! After smoking

for 37 years that is pretty amazing ... of course there is an occasional trigger but not on a daily basis!" Bev

- 25 days: "After just three weeks I am down to once or twice a day. I have even gone entire days without thinking about it! After 19 years of smoking up to two packs a day, that's pretty amazing to me." Joe
- 26 days: "I do think about smoking every now and then, but I definitely don't think as much about smoking as I did when I still smoked 30 cigarettes a day." Klinka
- 26 days: "I would say I probably think about a cigarette 3 to 5 times a day (which is down from like a million!! haha) and I actually 'want' a cigarette 1 time a day. This is fantastic to me! I was so scared that I would fight for the rest of my life like I was in the first week, but have come to realize this simply is not true." Amy79
- 29 days: "This has gone textbook as described on this site. Today I have one crave a day but everyday it gets a little more vague." Phillip
- 30 days: "After one month I still think of cigarettes. The thoughts are in 2 forms. The first is not a crave but just thinking about a situation or activity that relates to smoking. It doesn't bother me at all. This happens about 3 to 4 times a day. The second is the crave. It only lasts about 10 to 20 seconds. The craves are not as bad as they were a few weeks ago." John
- 31 days: "It's still early in the recovery process so I'm not going to say I don't think about them...because I do, but in all honesty it's not really that much. The thoughts come quickly from time to time, but they leave just as quickly." Abu Daud1
- 32 days: "I don't have cravings. Ever. I sort of feel like having a cigarette maybe 2-3 times a day for a total of about 60-90 seconds (at most). That's about 1 1/2 minutes a day." Matt
- 32 days: "I work with smokers and dippers all day. Every time I saw someone smoking I would think Hmmm ... time for a smoke and actually go for my pocket to get one out and then remember- I can't! This went on for the first two weeks and I was wondering if this was how it was going to be for me forever. I had smoked a pack plus a day for 30 years it was so much a part of my life that I figured I would always feel the urge to smoke when I saw someone else smoke. After the 2nd week I was feeling much more confident and determined and when I thought about smoking it was that I was sooo ... glad that I didn't anymore. Now after four weeks plus I think about smoking maybe 20 seconds a day and it's never an urge to smoke, it's a sense of something missing but not missed. The [law of addiction](#) is the first thing I think of when I think about smoking and I know that as long as I remember that I will Never Take Another Puff." Ginz
- 34 days: "1-3 minutes per day on average I still want a cigarette. It's not a craving that happens during the first 3 days, not an itch that goes for 1-3 weeks after you quit. It's just a small thought." Levaser
- 37 days: "The thought of smoking is not even a daily occurrence anymore. When I do think of it, it is not an urge but just a thought. It does get better. At one time I didn't think it would but it did." Saree
- 38 days: "I can honestly say that I never want a cigarette. Sometimes I will get a random thought about having one, but it is quickly gone once I remind myself that I don't smoke any more." Jason
- 45 days: "It has been at least two weeks since I actually WANTED a cigarette. What I have now are vagrant thoughts about smoking that pass in a matter of a few seconds--and I have actually had one day where I realized the next morning that I hadn't thought about smoking

- at all. That's after 45+ years as a smoker of at least 2 packs a day." Cliff
- 46 days: "I am a newbie at just 1 month, 2 weeks, 2 days. I still think about smoking quite often. I would say at least a half an hour a day. I was worried about this but now that I have written it down I realize that it really isn't too bad, considering I used to think about smoking about every half hour or so. But I do realize that I think much more about not smoking than I do about smoking." Steve
 - 47 days: "I maybe spend 2 minutes out of an entire day thinking about cigarettes. I no longer obsess about them, and I find the act of smoking, well, filthy. I haven't yet had those wondrous days where there are no thoughts at all, but I've come pretty close." Diana
 - 51 days: "How often a day do I think about cigarettes? Not very often. If I do think about cigarettes it is only for a few seconds a day but today I spent zero seconds thinking about cigarettes." Herman
 - 58 days: "I think about smoking most days but spend NO time wanting to smoke now. There is nothing I want back about nicotine and cigarettes." Doc
 - 60 days: "...thought a few times of having a smoke but it's a passing thought now, it has little strength." Dave T
 - 67 days: "Thoughts have completely dropped off to random, fleeting, a split second if I choose to notice them. Occasionally, there is a new trigger but relatively easy to deal with now that I'm no longer struggling." Ilona
 - 69 days: "On a usual day, I don't want a cigarette at all. Sometimes I have a craving or two, and they last for about 3 seconds each. Then they're gone. It's brilliant!" RedSunFlower
 - 71 days: "I'm 58, smoked since 16, a pack a day, have been nicotine free for 71 glorious days and I don't want them, don't need them, don't miss them and rarely think of them. I don't even remember smoking." Sarah
 - 72 days: "I only think about cigarettes on the weekend at a nightclub when a smoker stands next to me and I have to move because it smells so bad." Rochelle
 - 74 days: "Maybe 3-5 seconds every couple of days. Seriously, it does get so much easier." Beth
 - 77 days: "I am amazed at how quickly I went from needing a cigarette every hour or less to going days without wanting one at all. I was a very heavy smoker (3 to 4 packs a day) and I expected years of wanting to smoke. I had my first day without any urges at least 2 weeks ago. I can't remember the last time I wanted a cigarette. At least a few days ago. For the last 3 or 4 weeks the rare urges have been so easy to deal with that I think they pass without me remembering I had one. I know I can get through 3 minutes without nicotine, so why dwell on it?" Jim H
 - 86 days: "Once every two weeks for about 3-5 minutes." Diane
 - 105 days: "Three and a half months in I want a smoke 0 seconds. There are still occasional triggers I run across, but I would say that is about once a week and 10 days now, and getting longer in between. I have achieved comfort. P.S: My wife still smokes, so it is possible to be around it and not want it." Roy
 - 108 days: "Rarely, very rarely, do I even think about smoking. I am not quite four months quit and I had smoked for 40 years. To me that is absolutely incredible! Quitting is so much easier, and so much more rewarding, than I ever dreamed it could be. And I know I'll never go back to a life of feeding the addiction." Stella
 - 4 months: "...maybe six or seven seconds of "thoughts" a week. I'm one very happy

- camper." Pat
- 5 months: "I sometimes get hooked into a romantic thought about smoking, a memory, but it is merely a thought and not a desire or a need or a want." Moira
 - 5 months: "I smoked for 38 years, in the end at 3 1/2 packs a day. Stopped cold turkey on Jan. 11, 2012, my first attempt. I now have smoking thoughts just a few times per week, and they're not 'dwelling' thoughts - they just last 1 or 2 seconds or less. I'm very proud of my progress." VoltMan
 - 6 months: "I'm thinking that I'd like a cigarette for 6 seconds a week. When I smoked, there were probably at least 2 occasions each day when I wanted to smoke but couldn't, because I was in a no-smoking office or a restaurant or on a train. Each of those occasions lasted say 30 minutes average. That amounts to 25,200 seconds a week when I was suffering significant anxiety and withdrawal symptoms, far worse in intensity than any discomfort I have suffered from not smoking since I stopped." Marty
 - 7 months: "Never a want, need or crave ... Passing thought? Maybe a couple times a week." RJW
 - 8 months: "Thinking about a cigarette is no longer a daily activity. If I have a thought it is weeks apart and lasts for only 5 seconds or less. I treat the thought like a pesky, dirty fly and swat it from my mind! Freedom is sweet!!!" Jrock413
 - 9 months: "Zero. I do still think about them once in awhile, but never want one. My hard won freedom is too precious at this point to throw away over a lousy puff." Roy
 - 10 months: "I have not wanted a cigarette even once for many months now. Even a couple of unexpected triggers did not result in my wanting a cigarette, just the realization that a brief craving is a minor annoyance NOT a desire to smoke!" JefferyRW
 - 10 months: "I have not wanted to have a cigarette is many months now. I have no craves at all and there is only an occasion (every 3-4 weeks) that I will think for a second, 'Wait, something is missing,' only to smile as I realize I would be having a cigarette if I was still living in my addiction. But I do NOT want to smoke. It is only a reminder of how chained I was. I was a heavy smoker for so long, I thought I couldn't stop! Yes, comfort does come. Much faster than I thought possible. The rewards are so plentiful, I am full of gratitude." Endura
 - 10 months: "When I think about cigarettes (which is hardly ever), I am grateful that I don't have to buy them, roll them, smoke them, cough after them, wake up in the morning feeling tight in the chest after smoking too many of them, smell my clothes, hair, skin after smoking them, worry about my health after smoking them, feel shame and guilt after smoking them ... you get the point. Freedom is HUGE! Best thing I've ever done." Lara
 - 11 months: "I might have had a thought about having a cigarette a few days ago but I'm not sure. It could be my old age kicking in. They pop into my head and out again so rarely and so quickly they don't even register anymore." Pat
- 1 year: "Today is exactly 12 months since I had my last puff. This is the greatest gift I have ever given myself, and let me assure you, I NEVER think of having a smoke, but think often of how free I am. If you think I'm just a strong person, let me tell you how weak I am. I am an alcoholic and a compulsive gambler. I am as weak as can be to my addictions. But today I choose not to puff." Steve
- 1 year: ""It's been a long, long time since I last wanted one - months, I suppose. The cigarettes, urges and craves have simply vanished out of my life. I stay prepared, and with

the knowledge gained here I'll always be ready for an urge, but the truth is, I think it's over now. I don't want cigarettes any more, that's all there is to it." Susanne

- 1 year, 2 months: "I haven't wanted a cigarette for a very long time, I do however think about smoking fairly often but only because it is a reminder of how wonderful it is to be free!!" Lucie
- 1 year, 3 months: "zip, zero, nada!" Melrose
- 1 year, 4 months: "I think about having one on what probably amounts to about 6 seconds a week!" Annies1
- 2 years: "I am very happy to report that I don't ever have urges anymore. If I think about nicotine at all, it's about how proud I am" to be free. Whelen
- 2 years: "I never thought I could stop smoking or that I would completely stop thinking about cigarettes - but I have and its wonderful!" Sally
- 2 years: "I never think of smoking really. I think I had a fleeting thought one spring day when I was having a glass of wine and standing on the deck." Jeff
- 2 years: "ZERO!" Melrose
- 2 years: "I can truthfully say that I just do not think of smoking. I never thought I would be able to say that, but it's true!!" Vicki
- 3 years: "Null, nix, none, nothing, zip, zero ... honestly, my nicotine-related thoughts are annoyance at the smell of cigarettes if I can't avoid it." Meg
- 3 years: "A few times in the past year the thought of smoking crossed my mind." Joseph
- 4 years: "How many seconds a year? None!!!" Laura
- 4 years: "I never think about smoking, except the occasional wish for a friend or acquaintance to know the peace that comes with never taking another puff." Kevin
- 5 years: "I came to this website over 5 years ago struggling with addiction like everyone else. Had tried stopping many times in life, but cigarettes always came back to me until I educated myself. Now I can happily say I am still free from my addiction, and I never want a cigarette." JazzLady
- 7 years: "My family smokes. I never desire it even if they're around me smoking." Anne
- 10 years: "Every so often -- maybe once every 3 or 4 months -- I'll pass by someone who's freshly lit up, and there will be a fleeting nostalgia. Never lasts for more than a few seconds, and I'd definitely never describe it as wanting a cigarette. Maybe a bit like a poison dart frog... curious to look at, but I don't have any desire to lick its skin." OBob

It's been more than a decade since I've experienced anything that could be considered a crave. During that time there have been a couple of darting thoughts, none of which lasted long enough to grab.

Maybe someday an urge or crave will occur again. Maybe tomorrow. But if so, I'm certain that I'll wear a smile during the entire brief encounter, as it will be a long overdue reminder of the amazing journey I once made.

"What should I call myself?"

While the exact moment of transition from use to non-use is clear, what we call ourselves once use

ends is not. Are we an ex-user or non-user, ex-smoker or non-smoker, an ex-dipper or non-dipper? And when have we earned that title?

Regarding former smokers, the primary choice is between non-smoker and ex-smoker. Clearly, non-smoking applies as soon as use ends. We are in fact non-smokers. But there's a major distinction between being a never-smoker and non-smoker, a distinction the term non-smoker fails to declare.

Never-smokers don't have to worry about relapse. Chemical dependency has not permanently grooved and wired their brain for nicotine.

This critical distinction between non-smoker and ex-smoker applies equally to oral, nasal and transdermal nicotine users. If staying free is important, remembering that we are different can have as a protective effect as a self-reminder of our vulnerability.

While both a non-user and ex-user, I always refer to myself as an ex-smoker or former smoker as doing so reminds me that I remain just one powerful puff of nicotine away from three packs-a-day.

Initially, my mind rebelled against the thought that I wasn't fully "cured." I wanted to be like the average never-smoker. I thought I'd earned the right to hide among them. But an article by Joel teaching this point ("What should I call myself?") compelled critical thinking. Soon resistance and disappointment passed as I found myself wanting to embrace both the term ex-smoker and the world of ex-smoker-hood.

I love my freedom. I love residing on this side of the bars. So why wouldn't I want to remind myself of exactly what it takes to stay here?

If you want to consider yourself a non-smoker or non-user that's fine, you truly are. But be careful not to totally entrench your thinking in non-smoker-hood.

Also don't forget that certain legal documents, such as a life or health insurance policy application, may demand disclosure that we are ex-smokers. Failure to fully disclose our prior use status could later result in coverage concerns.

A related question is when should we see ourselves as being an ex-user or non-user? When do we cross the line from "trying to stop" to having done so? It's one of the most wonderful self-realizations of our entire journey. It's a deeply personal moment that's different for each of us, the crossing of a self-defined threshold.

For me, it occurred when my fears subsided to the point that I knew for certain that this was for keeps, that I wasn't going back. I'd already told the world I'd stopped but the difference now was that I actually believed it.

I'd already surrendered three decades of control to inhaling this chemical. Now, even if I were diagnosed with lung cancer tomorrow, I'd take comfort in one sure-fire fact. I would not die with

my true killer still circulating inside.

The time before such conviction arrived was not some preplanned dress rehearsal. Starting out, I didn't foresee some magic moment in the future where success would become certain. In fact, the most frightening moment of all was the decision to stop putting nicotine into my body.

I didn't think I could do it. I thought I would fail. Everything after that first brave step was a journey of confidence that transported me from just one moment and challenge at a time to a deep seeded conviction that I will never ever use nicotine again!

Anyway, if here, welcome home! If not yet home, baby steps and it won't be long. And once here, never forget that we get to stay so long as we remain committed to a single principle ... no nicotine today!

Breathe deep, hug hard, live long,

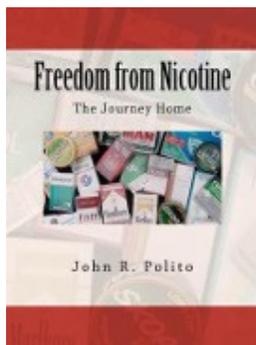
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial 'J' and a cursive 'ohn'.

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