

Joel's Reinforcement Library

NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

I've Smoked for So Long and So Much, What is the Use in Quitting Now?

On the third day of a recent clinic, a woman participant in her late fifties who had been off smoking for just over 48 hours asked one of those questions that I have heard hundreds of times in past programs. "I have smoked so long and so heavily, what good will quitting smoking do for me now?" A few minutes of explaining the bargaining phase people go through when they are initially quitting smoking seemed to clarify why she was having such thoughts rationalizing why she didn't really need to quit.

A few minutes later, she told me a story about her personal family history, one that quite simply gave a better answer to her original query than I could ever have come up with. "My father was a chain smoker," she said. "He quit when he was 60 because he had a heart attack. Never smoked one after that. Even though he was a heart attack victim, after he quit smoking he felt better than he had felt in years. Much more endurance, greater vitality. He lived to the age of 95, bright and alert to the end."

On the sixth night I called her to see if she had made it through the weekend all right. "I feel so bad," she replied. "I had a terrible evening last night and I had a major problem dealing with a client at work this morning. I was just so upset from lack of sleep and frustration, I finally broke down and took a cigarette. I've been beating myself up for it ever since. I am more depressed now than I was before. Why am I beating myself up so, and what should I do now?"

I said she had two options, quit right then and face a potential full three day withdrawal or go back to full fledged smoking all over again. If she didn't make a decision, her body would automatically make the decision for her. Again she expressed the sentiment that she was beating herself up so badly and wanted me to explain why she was so upset with herself. She just couldn't believe that one cigarette could be so important to be making such a big issue.

A few minutes later, she told me the story of how her husband had once been off for

three years. One day while they were in the car together, for one reason or another he bummed a cigarette from her. She raised the issue with him of what good would a cigarette be after all that time, but he convinced her it was no big deal. What right did she have to protest anyway, she thought, she was a chain smoker herself. He finally got his way. He never stopped smoking after that day. Four years later she got a call at work that her husband had collapsed at her mother-in-law's home. By the time they got to him it was too late. He had died of a sudden and totally unexpected heart attack. She has little doubt that his last four years of smoking was a major contributing factor to his sudden and premature death.

So why was she now making such a big deal out of a cigarette? Once again, her own personal history was giving her a more powerful answer than I could ever have expressed. One cigarette, in a car a number of years earlier helped to end her husband's life. If he had known the implication that one cigarette would have had, he would never have considered the thought for more than a second. In retrospect, she had the opportunity to look back to that day and realize how a fleeting urge followed by poor judgment helped to end or shorten her husband's life.

With the kind of personal experiences she had witnessed associated with smoking, it is quite easy to see how she could be so hard on herself for what occurred earlier that day. She witnessed how smoking diminished the quality of her father's life and almost brought on a premature death. Equally important, she saw how quitting smoking vastly improved his health and general feeling of well being. She also witnessed how her husband's momentary lapse of judgment resulted in her suffering such a grave loss just a few years earlier. If he had the opportunity, he would surely have cursed the day he lit just one. She had the benefit of hindsight, which now was haunting her because she had made the same mistake that day he had made just a few years earlier. He never got the chance to quit again. She still had time to make a decision - and she was asking me what she should do now. Again, I feel her own personal experience and the immediate emotional reactions she was now experiencing were giving a more powerful answer to her question than I could. If she listened to her heart, I am sure it was telling her to - NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

Joel

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