Coffee, Cigarettes and Recovery

by ELLIOTT REDWINE

Coffee and Cigarettes — Are They Still Drugs?

There is a popular joke among those in recovery that you can locate a 12-step meeting by the large group of people smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee outside the building. What is it that makes coffee, cigarettes and recovery such a tight-knit trio? After all, many consider nicotine and caffeine to be drugs so wouldn't that imply that these individuals in recovery are not sober?

What makes this joke so true among those in recovery? Why do clean and sober addicts and alcoholics rely so heavily upon their nicotine and caffeine fixes? Can you still consider yourself sober if you are a cigarette smoker and coffee drinker in recovery?

The Prevalence Of "Sober Drugs" in Recovery

Cups of coffee are available at almost every 12-step program and there is always a member to bum a cigarette off of when the meeting is over. Though some members do not indulge, it often feels like a large majority of those in 12-step programs do.

With the anonymous nature of programs like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, it is difficult to gather entirely accurate data. Anonymity is important to most of those in 12-step programs and to participate in a study may potentially be considered breaking anonymity.

A study documented in the National Center for Biotechnology Information surveyed members of Alcoholics Anonymous in Nashville, Tennessee in 2007 to find the prevalence of coffee and cigarettes among members there. As the sample population was small, the results must be taken with some skepticism and the understanding that it does not apply to the fellowship of AA as a whole. It does provide interesting information on the influence of cigarettes in the lives of recovering alcoholics in Nashville, TN, though.

Of the 294 surveyed, over half of the members, or 56.1 percent, smoked cigarettes. Additionally, 78.8 percent of those who smoked reported smoking at least half a pack of cigarettes per day and 60 percent were highly dependent upon them. Additionally, of the members surveyed, 33 percent drank four or more cups of coffee per day, usually for the stimulating effects.

Nationwide, only 15.1 percent of Americans smoke. Of the evidence gathered, the surveyed members consumed cigarettes at a much higher rate than the general American public. It would be interesting to gather data from a wider pool across various 12-step fellowships to find out the prevalence of coffee and cigarettes on a larger scale.

Can You Still Consider Yourself Sober If You Drink Coffee or Smoke Cigarettes?

Caffeine and nicotine, although drugs are not considered mind-altering substances. They do provide a small "high" which tends to make their use so popular with those in recovery, but they do not provide the high that

drugs or alcohol do. No one makes a poor or dangerous decision because they drank a cup of coffee or smoked a cigarette.

However, there are still mixed opinions among members of 12-step programs as to whether or not those who drink coffee and smoke can be considered sober. Certain members insist that “a drug is a drug” and that all addictive substances should be avoided. Others feel that getting sober is hard enough and those in recovery should be allowed their small vices as long as they don’t lead to anything harder.

For most people who adhere to each fellowship’s traditions, how you work your program of recovery is your own business. No one can tell you what to do with your sobriety and you are the only one who can determine whether your coffee or cigarette use is a problem. Just as no one can make you get sober, no one can make you quit drinking coffee or smoking cigarettes.

Are Cigarettes in Recovery Worth the Health Risk?

Some argue that when you get sober, you do so to have a healthier life. If you’re trying to live a healthier lifestyle, why would you risk it further by smoking cigarettes? People today are inherently aware of the health risks associated with smoking. After all, lung cancer is the most prevalent form of cancer; 1 in 4 deaths from cancer are due to lung cancer. Although non-smokers can get lung cancer, the risk is much higher for smokers.

Another health risk associated with smoking is a chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD. Behind heart disease and cancer, COPD is the third highest cause of death in the US and smokers make up about 80 percent of all COPD-related deaths. Although its symptoms can be managed, COPD cannot be cured.

In addition to these deadly risks, there are also everyday downsides to smoking such as a suppressed sense of smell, decreased ability to taste, breathlessness and lingering odor. Only you can decide whether or not the benefits of smoking outweigh the negatives.

Should You Continue Smoking and Drinking Coffee in Recovery?

If coffee and cigarettes help keep you sober, then it is a good idea to keep them around. Though it’s not a great idea to lean on them throughout the entirety of your recovery, they help those who are new to sobriety.

If you are struggling with your nicotine and caffeine consumption, it would be good to talk with either your doctor or your sponsor. Doctors offer help from a medical perspective and can provide treatments while your sponsor can provide experience with the situation. Look honestly at your situation and decide for yourself.