What Makes Smoking So Addictive?

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Why Is Smoking Addictive?

I can remember my first cigarette, almost 20 years ago. I was shopping with friends at the mall. One of our friends had stolen a pack of cigarettes from her mother, and we hid behind a dumpster (yes, a stinky dumpster!) so we could try a cigarette.

None of us knew what we were doing. After a couple of inhalations on the cigarettes and coughing to the point of almost vomiting, we strutted back into the mall and spritzed on perfume so our parents wouldn't find out.

Over my middle school, high school and college years, I smoked several more cigarettes. Luckily, I never became a smoker – lucky because smoking is known to be highly addictive.

I was also lucky because as the years go by, we know more and more about how dangerous smoking is for our bodies and overall health. According to the CDC, smoking remains the most significant preventable cause of death in the United States – it kills over 480,000 Americans annually. Sadly, about 48,000 of these deaths are the result of secondhand smoke – people who may never have lit up in the first place.

Before we discuss the highly addictive nature of smoking, we'll discuss some very alarming statistics.

Statistics

Although anyone, from any socioeconomic level and race/ethnicity, can become a smoker, prevalence rates are more common in certain groups.

Native Americans and Alaska Natives are more likely to be smokers than any other race/ethnicity in the U.S., with 21.9% of the population being smokers. People with a GED, as opposed to a high school diploma, are also more likely to be a smoker, with 34.1%, and people below the poverty level are more likely to be a smoker, at 26.1%.

What About Other Countries?

It is estimated that in China, there are 300 million smokers, which is 25% of its population. "In China, about 3 million cigarettes are smoked every minute, and in a year that number exponentially increases to 1.7 trillion." A trillion cigarettes in a year, just in China? That means that worldwide, 5 million cigarettes are smoked annually, which equates to about 10 million cigarettes a minute.

And on the health front, in the U.S., 20% of all deaths are related to tobacco use. This means that about one person dies every six seconds from tobacco-related disease.

We've heard that smoking use is decreasing – which is true, to an extent. It has reduced by about 26% in Western Europe, but unfortunately, has increased at an alarming rate in the Middle East and Africa – by 57%! If

the smoking rate keeps climbing, we're set to see 1.6 billion smokers in the world by the year 2020.

So, knowing all this, why is smoking addictive?

Smoking and Addiction

The reason why smoking is addictive is pretty complicated and for all of its complexity it begins to act on the brain within seconds.

When you take a puff on a cigarette, the nicotine (which is known to be the addictive agent in the cigarette) is absorbed into the bloodstream. That nicotine is absorbed in seconds, making its way up to the brain. Once the nicotine has made its way up to the brain, it begins to work on specific receptors of the brain. Dopamine, a hormone, is released. With the release of dopamine, feelings of pleasure happen. However, the effect lasts only about 40 minutes.

What happens then? Well, you're going to want another cigarette to feel the feeling of pleasure, of course. When you continue this cycle, the brain actually "rewires" itself so that it needs the nicotine to function, and thus an addiction is born.

Carol Southard, an RN and tobacco treatment specialist at Osher Center for Integrative Medicine for the Northwestern Medical Group, notes that while nicotine causes the addiction, it is the additives to the cigarettes that are particularly dangerous. "People are afraid of nicotine, but they should really be afraid of what's being added." There are 7,000 chemicals in a cigarette, 70 of which are known carcinogens.

How to Quit Your Smoking Addiction

As we previously discussed, the effects of smoking are now well-known. The prevalence of smoking is going down in some countries, yet it is on the rise in others, presumably due to the addictive nature of tobacco.

We know why smoking is addictive. So what keeps people from actually quitting smoking? Well, it isn't for lack of trying! The CDC estimated in 2015 that 7 out of 10 adult smokers wanted to quit smoking entirely. In that same year, 5 out of 10 adult smokers had attempted to quit smoking and stopped smoking for at least one day. That year, 4 out of 10 high school smokers also tried to quit smoking.

It is likely that many people fail due to lack of support, lack of resources and nicotine withdrawal symptoms.

Your Options for Quitting

For help with smoking cessation, here are some ideas:

- Make an appointment with your physician. They can prescribe medications that can make quitting smoking easier.
- Seek a support group.
- Enlist your family and friends for support.
- Utilize the many telephone or online resources available. For example, call 1-800-QUIT-NOW; this is a free support service that can help set you up with a counseling and a quit plan, amongst other things. You can also go here for many resources.

Lifestyle Changes You Can Make Today

There are also some lifestyle changes you can make all together which may help you quit your smoking addiction. You can identify your reasons why you are smoking by asking yourself questions like the ones below:

- Do you find yourself smoking in only social situations?
- Does smoking distract you from your problems or current life situation?

- Is it habit to have a cigarette when drinking alcohol, coffee or after a meal?
- Does smoking give you something to do while waiting in traffic or walking down the street?
- Do you smoke to have something in your hands or mouth?

Addressing some of these questions may help you find ways to avoid smoking areas or your triggers. Here are some great alternatives to help cut down smoking or help make quitting easier:

- **Rethink your social activity.** Don't be afraid to say no to others when they ask you if you want to join them for a smoke break. You can tell them that you're trying to quit smoking. It can be challenging to spend time in these places and it is best to avoid them.
- **Find a something to keep you busy.** This can either be by reading a book, going for a walk, or taking up an interest you've always wanted to spend time on.
- **Chew gum or use a fidget cube.** Keeping your mouth and hands busy will help you avoid grabbing a cigarette and may reduce fidgetiness.

In Conclusion...

Whatever you choose to help you quit smoking, it's important to know that you can do this. You can stop. Don't give up and remember to not be hard on yourself because there are numerous resources out there to help you quit.