

Smoking: Preventing Relapse After Quitting

Each situation presents a learning opportunity. Think back to the last time when you quit. What situation caused you to go back to smoking? How did you handle the first cigarette you had? How did you feel about it or think about it? How you handle a “slip” can determine whether the “slip” turns into a relapse or not.

What You Should Know about Relapse

After you have quit, you will encounter many situations that will tempt you to smoke. Let's take a look at the more difficult situations you will face in staying smoke free.

Social situations / Celebrating - Celebrating with your friends or being in social situations, particularly around others who are smoking, may result in you letting your guard down and triggering a relapse.

Relaxing after meals or work - People often have strong associations between relaxing after a meal or work and smoking. Be aware that you may be tempted to smoke when you are trying to relax or wind down the day.

Negative Feelings - People frequently relieve stress or cope with other problems by smoking. Negative emotions such as pressure, frustration, anxiety, depression or worry can easily lead to relapse if you are not prepared to cope with these feelings in some other way.

Alcohol - Alcohol is usually strongly associated with smoking. Furthermore, when you drink, you become less inhibited and are more likely to give in to your cravings to smoke.

Withdrawal Symptoms - Although short-lived, nicotine withdrawal symptoms can be very unpleasant and lead to relapse.

Did you know?

- One-third of relapses occur with alcohol
- Two-thirds of relapses occur when other smokers are present
- Negative situations and social pressure are the two most important causes of relapse

Abstinence Violation Effect

Feelings of failure after slipping are so common that there is even a term for it: the Abstinence Violation Effect or AVE. This refers to the very powerful feelings of guilt, helplessness, self-blame, depression, loss of control and failure that often come when a new ex-smoker slips and has a cigarette. Many new ex-smokers associate a “slip” with failure. As a result, these feelings can lead to the decision to give up.

If this should happen to you, you want to consider these factors:

- A slip does not undo all the success you have had so far.
- A slip does not mean that you are weak, but perhaps that this is a very difficult situation for you and you still need to learn how to deal with it more effectively.

Setbacks and Slips

If You Have Set a Quit Date but Have Not Followed Through

It is possible you were not quite ready to give up smoking. You may still have your doubts about being able to cope with the stress in your life without cigarettes. Or, perhaps you have concerns about withdrawal symptoms. It will help to list the reasons you were not able to follow through with your quit date.

- Explore your motivation. Take a closer look at your reasons for quitting. Do these reasons outweigh the reasons to smoke?
- What are the things you can do that will improve your belief that you *can* quit? Are you concerned about withdrawal?
- Get better at quitting by getting better at cutting down. Take another look at your smoking patterns and cut back by not smoking the cigarettes that are least important to you.

If You Slip After You Quit Smoking

If you slip, it is not the end of the world and it does not mean you cannot quit smoking. Remember, a slip is not a relapse! A slip is just a mistake that you can learn from and it does not make you a smoker again.

If you slip, do the following to get back on track immediately:

- **STOP** - Do not finish the cigarette or the pack - throw it away immediately.
- **LOOK AND LISTEN** - Think about the situation. What was it about that situation that made you want a cigarette? Where were you? With whom? What were you saying to yourself?
- **COPE** - Take action. Use the most appropriate coping strategy that will get you out of the high-risk situation immediately.

- **DO NOT BEAT YOURSELF UP** - Think of it as a “slip”, not a “relapse.” Just because you have a cigarette, or even several cigarettes, does not mean that you have reverted to being a smoker. A slip is a mistake, but one from which you can learn and become stronger in the future.
- **RECOMMIT** - Recommit yourself to not smoking and go on from there. Set a new Quit Date.
- **LEARN** - How could you handle it differently in the future? Remember, having a plan of action is the best way to avoid future difficulties. Review your handouts and useful strategies.
- **CONGRATULATE YOURSELF** - Turn your slip into a positive learning experience and remind yourself that you are still a NON-smoker!