

Smoking Cessation Workshop

Losing my best friend

I wanted to say a few words about the title of this presentation. I have often said that quitting smoking was like losing my best friend to try to describe how hard it was for me to stop. Cigarettes were like a best friend in many ways. They were always there when you needed them. I smoked when I was happy. I smoked when I was sad. They really didn't ask for anything in return and I didn't have to hide my real feelings when I smoked. There was no judgment from them in terms of my decisions or my actions or behavior. The only real giving required was to spend the money to get them, which was one of the reasons why I wanted to give them up.

I started smoking when I got sent away to a boarding school for high school. It just fit in with all the things I did to rebel against all the rules and being away from my family and home.

My history with struggling with mental health started soon after I graduated from high school with the suicide of my best friend. That was a long time ago when smoking was still cool and a huge part of mental health treatment. It was also a part of the social scene with alcohol. I spent the majority of the next 22 years cycling in and out of psych hospitals, therapy and treatment. Smoking became something I could always rely on and use to stop and think about something; take a break; reward myself; or use to calm anxiety and depression. It never asked anything of me in return either, except to spend money and light up. It was part of being able to get outdoors when I was locked up and a system of value and worth in the state hospital, where coffee and cigarettes were commodities and whoever had the most of them, had status and some sort of power. Those that were lucky had people on the outside sending them their supplies. Cigarettes were used as a way to control people in inpatient units by staff.

My first quit attempt was when I first started in recovery at Alcoholics Anonymous in 1990. I decided that I wanted to quit smoking as well as get sober. I quit for about 6 months. Everyone kept telling it was better to smoke than drink so I started smoking again. I ended up quitting several more times until the last time which was in 1993. One time, I quit for 2 years and then came to the thought that I really wasn't missing it so it would be okay to take a hit off 1 cigarette. That was it – back to where I left off.

When I stopped smoking, I needed cigarettes and couldn't get through the night without waking up to have one in the middle of the night. Each time I quit, I did it cold turkey without nicotine replacement therapy or medication. I still remember the cravings and the obsession with thinking about smoking a cigarette. One attempt I tried Nicotine Anonymous, a 12 step program of support for people who are trying to quit. I learned one good thing in that group. It was that the urge for a cigarette ALWAYS goes away. It goes away within 5-7 minutes but those minutes seem like hours and were filled with tremendous anxiety and uncomfortable, intense thoughts and feelings.

The conclusion I came to the last time was that I really was the one who had the choice to smoke or not to smoke. I had quit because I was tired of spending so much of my disability check on cigarettes and that didn't stick. I had quit because my brother lent me money to go to California to live and that was part of the deal. I had quit because I was sick of it and wanted better health. But the real reason I think it stuck the last time was because I gave myself the power of choice. I didn't throw away my cigarettes or invest in gum or candy, I carried a cigarette with me everywhere I went – in my car, in the ashtray; by my bed at night; in my purse, and next to my chair in the living room when I watched tv. When I had an urge to smoke, I picked up a cigarette and went through all the motions of smoking. I puffed, dragged and exhaled – everything except light it. Each time I picked it up, I consciously made that choice to either light it or not.

I've been told that this would never work for most people – that if it was in their hands, and they went through the motions, that they would just light it. For me, it felt like empowerment. Every time I put it down without smoking it, I felt successful.

For each of my quit attempts, the last time stuck because I had to ask myself if I really wanted to light it. It wasn't that someone was taking something away from me or forcing me to quit for some reason. I had the choice and the power in the decision. It just made sense to me.