

Addiction goes up in smoke

Published: Mar 02, 2009

A clinic successfully helps people to quit by focusing on the psychological aspects of the habit, writes Aspasia Karras

DANIELLA Nichols*, a mother of two, a professional, and a smoker, had what she considered a moderate habit, anything between five and 15 cigarettes a day.

Like most smokers, she had a smoking pattern: no smoking at work, but definitely at the kitchen table, and she would get to her kid's hockey practice half an hour early to have a fag and a gab with her friends.

This year's New Year's resolution was to quit, so she enlisted a buddy and together, they took the leap of faith that is attendant on Allen Carr's Easyway to Stop Smoking Clinic. She now claims to have something of the religious convert about her. Ever since they attended the five-and-a-half-hour workshop, she says: "We joke about how they messed with our heads."

Admittedly, the idea that people with a lifetime of cadging a drag behind their name can give it up after just a brief debriefing seems a little far fetched, more in the realm of the fantastic mind-altering experiments in sci-fi movies.

Charles Nell, the chief executive of the Allen Carr clinic, says there is no mystery about it.

Carr was an accountant who had spent 30 years trying to quit before he finally understood the root of the problem. Sadly, he died of lung cancer in 2006, but not before he established his clinics in 38 countries and wrote a book that sold 10 million copies.

What the one-day programme does, says Nell, is remove the fear of stopping. "Most people want to stop, but are scared of the withdrawal symptoms or of gaining weight." The clinic's statistics are impressive. Seventy percent of smokers stop after the first session, the remaining 30 percent come back for two back-up sessions. It has an overall 90 percent success rate, and if it cannot effect a cure after three sessions, you get a full refund.

Nell says it is the only programme that effectively deals with the fact that quitting smoking is a psychological problem. The programme removes the desire to smoke by touching on three issues: smokers believe it is enjoyable, relieves stress and relaxes you. It proves none of it is true.

Nichols elaborates: "The way they sell the whole thing is that they are not getting people to stop, rather making sure they never start again. I feel a little indoctrinated, but what they are saying is that while other programmes talk about using your willpower to stop, creating a sense of deprivation, this one makes you realise that you actually aren't missing anything.

"You think smoking relieves stress but it doesn't — they repeat the same thing over and over. It is a physical addiction — as addictive as tik — but that is only 5 percent of the problem, 95 percent is the nicotine monster in your head."

I ask her about her moment of epiphany: "I suppose, realisation came during the smoke break on the course at the Bryanston Country Club. They purposefully leave an overflowing ashtray with the detritus of 18 smokers lying around — you can imagine what it looks like — and they make you



GOING UP IN SMOKE: Quitting the nicotine habit is not easy, but is not impossible. It requires commitment and determination
Picture: GALLO IMAGES

“Forget willpower, it makes you realise you aren't missing anything”

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think about each drag you take. Think of it as you draw it into your lungs and blow it out. The realisation is that, physically, there is nothing nice about it.”

How is she doing a week later? “It’s pathetic that I needed that crutch. After a week, the addiction is starting to wane. In the beginning, it felt as if there was something missing, like a friend at the kitchen table, but there is no physical need whatsoever. It’s not a habit, it’s a mental thing — that’s the problem with patches . I feel a bit like a reborn Christian — I want to go out and spread the good news.”

Top Tips

- Make a list of reasons you want to quit. A strong commitment and desire to stop are vital for success.
- Document which days (over a two-week period) you smoke, how many you smoke and what the circumstances are.
- Schedule an absolute quit date two to four weeks in the future.
- Enlist the support of family, friends and colleagues, especially those who are present when you smoke.
- Seek information and support from quit lines, websites and cessation programmes.
- Talk to your physician or pharmacist about using a medication to help you quit. Many people use nicotine gum to allay withdrawal symptoms when they most want a cigarette.
- Avoid situations (for at least two months) where you are most likely to smoke to break the habits associated with your occasional smoking.
- Stop on the day you planned to.
- If you slip and have a cigarette — and most will — don’t consider it a failure. Analyse the circumstances and begin again to stop. — Tom Glynn, American Cancer Society

* Names have been changed to protect identity. — Additional reporting by Keitumetsi Segoi

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