

HOW TO BREAK A HABIT

by Regina Victoria Cates



After a 22-year, almost two-pack-a-day cigarette smoking habit, I quit.

So I am frequently asked how I managed to stop. My initial answer is, "I just did."

That may seem too simple a response for smokers or those addicted to substances or undesirable patterns of behavior to believe. But yes, one part of the truth is that at 9 p.m. on a Sunday evening, I smoked my last cigarette. And my over-two-decade history with cigarettes holds another truth. Quitting happened only after I spent time on the front end, preparing myself physically, psychologically, and emotionally to end the harmful habit for good.

Transforming my decades-long dependency on nicotine took concentration, self-support, self-control, emotional responsibility, and a deep desire for my freedom. It took accepting the truth that while nicotine does, over time, change the body and brain chemistry into a physical addiction, smoking initially is a learned behavior. The fact is, I chose to become a smoker; I developed the detrimental practice of smoking. To break the negative habit, I had to make the choice to create a new pattern: that of being a non-smoker. And I had to do so in spite of the mildly unpleasant and temporary withdrawal symptoms.

My journey of healing began in earnest when I looked at the reasons why I thought it was okay to abuse myself with cigarettes. I came to understand that my growing up with mistreatment and confusion about what love and acceptance really meant caused me to not know how to love and respect myself. Over time, the frustration of not being accepted for who I was grew to the point that I turned the anger, pain, and disappointment inward. The result was that I developed self-abusive behaviors, including smoking.

One day, I connected the dots and understood that hurting myself would never be a way to get back at those who hurt me. I realized I could continue to harm myself out of a lack of self-worth, but any self-abuse was not contributing positively to my life. The “aha” I had, that harmful behavior only brought undesirable results, allowed me to begin caring for myself enough to permanently remove self-destructive behavior from my life.

It was hard to admit that I was intentionally treating myself badly. Being honest about the self-abuse allowed the blinders I’d been wearing to fall away. Admitting that I was hurting myself woke me up to the fact that I could also stop hurting myself.

The first action I took to quit smoking was to become mindful of the habit by identifying the psychological and emotional associations I developed with cigarettes. I’d have a meal and finish with a cigarette. I’d have a glass of wine and a cigarette. I’d be bored and have a smoke. Since smoking was banned in my office building, I was forced to take a break from the daily routine to go outside. I started relating a smoke break with providing temporary reprieve from the stress and tension of the job. When I encountered worry or boredom, I used cigarettes as a relief. Over time, I associated smoking with eating, drinking, having a good time, peacefulness, and self-support.

It was by realizing how smoking made my body feel that I grasped the harsh truth that smoking was not peaceful, self-supportive, or a good time. Regardless of what temporary relief from stress, worry, or boredom I thought I got from cigarettes, the fact remained that for way too long I ignored the obvious physical dangers.

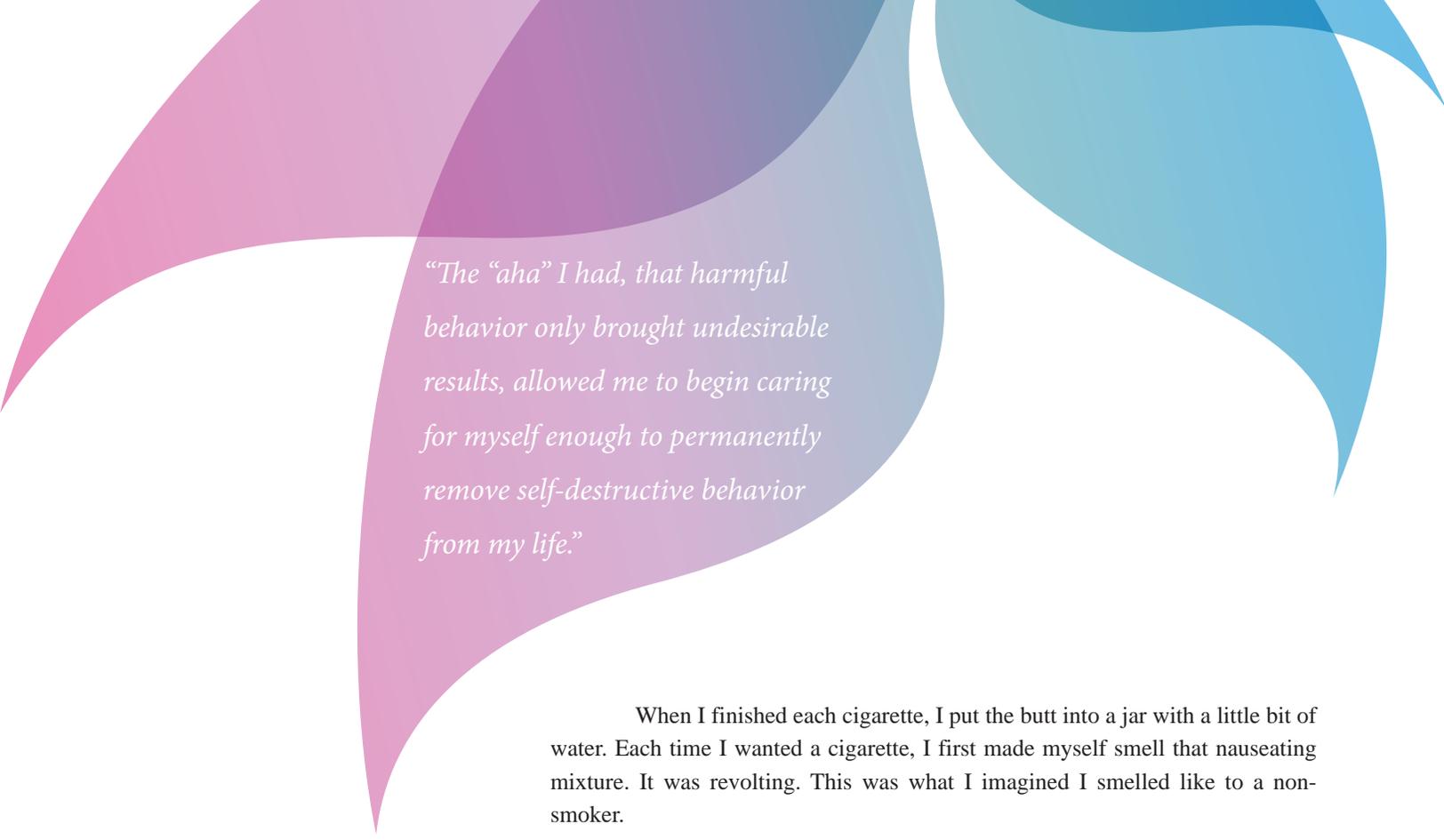
Smoking did not calm my nerves. It actually made me more nervous than not smoking, because I worried about getting sick, to the point I lived in constant terror of it. The fact is I got sick all the time, smelled bad, had a constant cough, lost my sense of taste, and could not walk up one flight of stairs without becoming badly winded. It was eye-opening.

With proof of how my body felt on the “truth” table, I finally woke up, got fed up, and started accepting the reality about my unpleasant obsession. I candidly admitted that from almost the first cigarette I smoked, I had wanted to stop. In fact, for 22 years, I’d harped on myself to quit smoking. I would try and fail. Then try again and succeed for a week or two. Each time, my intentions to quit were good. After trying again and passing up a cigarette or two, soon I made an excuse to have just one. Then I beat myself up for once again not being strong enough to not smoke. Excusing my lack of commitment, I told myself I was not perfect, I was only human, with faults, and I was allowed to make mistakes. I convinced myself the addiction was too strong, and that I just could not deal with the uncomfortable withdrawal symptoms.

I tried to change the negative habit for a long time. Until I understood I could continue “trying” for the rest of my life. That is when it dawned on me that quitting smoking—or any other destructive pattern of behavior—is accomplished not by trying harder, but by “doing.”

To successfully “do” what was necessary to finally quit, I needed a plan. I sat down and outlined, step by step, how I would become a non-smoker in one month.

During the first two weeks, I remained focused on being emotionally accountable for each cigarette. That is, I forced myself to remain present with, connected to, and responsible for each puff. I stopped doing anything else while I smoked. No eating, watching TV, talking on the phone, or any other distractions.



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When I finished each cigarette, I put the butt into a jar with a little bit of water. Each time I wanted a cigarette, I first made myself smell that nauseating mixture. It was revolting. This was what I imagined I smelled like to a non-smoker.

Staying present with each cigarette allowed me to see the habit for what it was—learned. I smoked without thought, often unconsciously lighting one while another still burned in the ashtray. To stop smoking required me to remain mindful of each of my actions. When I picked up a cigarette, I stayed aware of what I was doing. That presence gave me the self-control necessary to stop trying and begin establishing a new habit of doing, by consciously passing up cigarettes.

For the last 10 days leading up to the target date of my final cigarette, I dramatically cut the number I smoked each day. Weaning myself off cigarettes this way was not about reducing the nicotine in my system so that the withdrawal symptoms would be milder, since any nicotine in my system would create a desire for more nicotine. The purpose for the gradual decrease was to get a clear psychological and emotional handle on the habit I had created.

On day one, I started with 20, a full pack. The next day I went to 18, the next to 16, then 14, then 12. Over the final five days, I limited myself to only five cigarettes per day. By the time Sunday evening rolled around, I was truly anxious to quit. I lit the last cigarette and smoked it down to the filter, then put the butt into the jar. From that moment on, I claimed my new habit: “I am a non-smoker.”

The next thirty days were spent retraining myself and my mind. I stayed present, and when I habitually reached for a cigarette, I replaced that action with a new, positive behavior, like drinking a glass of water or going on a short walk or eating a carrot stick or smelling the vile mixture of waterlogged cigarette butts. By staying emotionally present with and responsible for my non-smoking actions, I managed not only to quit my dependency on cigarettes but I also lost a few pounds in the process.

As smokers, we may try to quit several times. To make certain this time is our last, we must become emotionally responsible for the habit. We must courageously face the fact that we live with the constant dread of dying. We must acknowledge that we are continuously sick, smell bad, and have a deep, nasty cough. We must accept the truth that we are intentionally abusing ourselves, exposing others to the harmful effects of secondhand smoke, and wasting money. And, we



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must become responsible for the fact that we are allowing ourselves to be controlled, rather than being in control of ourselves.

The bottom line is that to better our life, we have to better ourselves—first, by defining the acceptable behavior we want from ourselves: to be a non-smoker. Second, by setting a boundary with ourselves: to not smoke, period. And third, to remain focused on keeping the “I refuse to smoke even one” boundary in place.

The last one is huge because, yes, there were times I was not popular with myself for striving to change for the better. During the first week, when I was getting over the physical withdrawals of smoking, there were countless times I wanted just one more cigarette. But the boundary I had set was not to pick up even one cigarette, ever again.

To be stronger than the psychological habit, temptation, and my countless rationalizations, I had to focus with tunnel vision on keeping the boundary firmly in place, out of self-love and respect. Concentrating on the boundary gave me the willpower to stop smoking, cold turkey. It has been many years since I put cigarettes down, and the “I am a non-smoker” boundary remains firmly in place.

Our success in breaking any negative habit that we have allowed to become an addiction depends on preparing ourselves. Whether it is overeating, using shopping as therapy, drinking, or even exercising too much, we must honestly look at the psychological and emotional wounds behind our patterns of self-destructive behavior.

We stand in front of the mirror of honesty and stop running from whatever pain causes us to medicate ourselves in the first place. We accept that self-love is the way to heal past pain and present suffering. We become determined to care for ourselves, rather than continuing to thoughtlessly harm ourselves. Then we develop a self-supportive plan outlining the actions that will allow us to achieve success.

We can accomplish anything we want when we respect ourselves enough to take the actions necessary to remain in control of our behavior. We do not listen to the rationalizations of our mind when it says we can have just one cigarette, one drink, one pill, one last pair of new jeans. No, we listen to the higher wisdom of our heart, that says I CAN do this! I am worth it. Yes, I do love myself enough to control myself.

Taking control of our behavior this way is the key to winning over any undesirable habit. We replace a negative habit with a new, self-loving and self-respectful habit.

What negative habit(s) do you want to change? Make a list. Take one at a time and make a plan.

First, go inward and honestly look at the motivations behind the behavior you are allowing to hurt yourself. Accept that you will not change the past or get back at anyone who hurt you by continuing to hurt yourself. Pain does not heal pain. In fact, healing whatever happened to you that caused you to develop the negative behavior requires loving yourself more than

you were hurt. Do not be afraid or embarrassed to seek professional assistance for support and guidance to help you identify and heal old wounds. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Working with someone who has overcome the same challenge you face will give you tools and support to ensure success.

Second, outline a plan of action that will allow you to reach your goal within a reasonable time period. Once you set a target date to stop the behavior, then stick to it. Keep a healthy boundary in place by remaining dedicated to doing whatever it takes to achieve your goal. And although you must make yourself take the actions necessary, do so by being gentle and self-supportive. If you slip up, calmly start again, with a stronger determination to love yourself more than you do the negative habit. Stay self-supportive. Regardless of what you have told yourself in the past, you do have the power within to take the steps necessary to be successful this time. You are worth the effort. You can get past the temporary pain when changing yourself for the better.

Third, remember at all times that you are making the positive change for you and you only. While other people may benefit from the changes you make, any permanent shift in behavior is motivated by the desire to better yourself for you.

Fourth, instead of concentrating on “having” to stop smoking, buying, eating without awareness, drinking, drugging, sleeping around, etc., focus on choosing to be the opposite of the negative behavior. That is, see yourself as a non-smoker, responsible with money, or food, or your sexual behavior. When you envision yourself in control of yourself and your actions, rather than being controlled by a negative pattern of learned behavior, you will be empowered to move from I am trying to I AM DOING.

Fifth, think of something as a reward when you reach the successful attainment of your goal. When I quit smoking, I began saving the money I would have spent on cigarettes. After I'd been cigarette free for six months, I took part of that money and purchased a new stereo system. Each time I listen to music, I am reminded that yes, I can do anything I really want to.

Overcoming any negative pattern of behavior leads to your having a greater level of self-respect, self-love, and personal empowerment. By developing the positive behaviors necessary to stop a negative habit, you become self-aware. With awareness over your actions, your heart opens and you move forward, with a new sense of empowerment and responsibility, avoiding behaviors that hurt yourself and others.

Break any negative habit and you will learn through experience that whatever you want to achieve in life it is absolutely possible, when you believe in yourself and take the necessary actions to reach your goal. Once you realize how strong you really are to change a negative habit into a positive one, you will be able to successfully face and overcome other challenges life brings.

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