

Smoking Stress Away During Financial Strain

The stress of today's economic recession has taken a major toll on the public's spending, lifestyle, stress level, and our lungs. For smokers, stress is commonly countered by the small dose of nicotine provided by cigarettes, but this behavior is much more addictive than many realize. With increased stress, many long-term smokers are finding it harder to quit smoking. Increasing numbers of new smokers say they started this risky behavior as a result of the present economic crisis. A study at Columbia University showed that women are more likely than men to start smoking due to the economy (F=31 %, M=17%). Ironically, smoking creates even more of a budget crunch for people. Studies show that the average smoker will spend almost \$2,500 a year on cigarettes alone. Cigarette spending pulls from other funds, resulting in fewer necessities, less family recreation, and consequently more stress. Therefore, finding healthy stress management strategies aids in preventing health risk behaviors and leads to a more enjoyable life.

There are a variety of healthier, and ultimately less costly, methods which alleviate stress. Smoking is a behavior; therefore it can become a habit even without the addiction to nicotine. Many people who smoke have consistent times when they have a cigarette and it is at those times which the temptation to smoke can be the greatest. Replacing the time which is typically spent smoking with an alternative behavior can be more beneficial. For example, smoking during a lunch break is quite common. Replacing this behavior with activities such as a brief walk, exercise, or reading can result in equal or better stress relief and a healthier overall lifestyle.

Smoking can also be the result of stressful "triggers" which pressure the individual to have a cigarette. A trigger can be anything from a being in a car accident to a peer offering a smoke to someone who is trying to quit. Combating these triggers is another way to increase the likelihood of quitting. During the early stages of ending a smoking habit, it may be advantageous to start "psychologically smoking" during these times. Psychological smoking is the term used for physically going through the motions of lighting a cigarette and smoking it but without actually using a lighter or cigarette. The act of "pretending" to smoke has been shown to provide a small degree of stress relief for those trying to quit. Later, other behaviors can be used to relieve anxious energy such as organizing one's wallet, chewing gum, holding an object shaped like a cigarette, or writing down thoughts which are causing the stress.

Education relating to the negative impact smoking has on one's life can be a powerful tool to aid in recovery. It is important to gather resources which support your decision to quit such as information on lung damage, heart health, and mental health. Then, when the temptation to smoke arises, all of the necessary information is available to read and prevent the opportunity for relapse. This negative association can reduce the occurrence of smoking. When the urge to smoke returns, the negative emotional response evoked from the research will make sticking to your goal much easier.

Another reason many people smoke is for the social outlet it provides. It is common for a group of friends to join each other in a puff after work or after having a few drinks, but this can pose as a major threat to one's plan to quit. Peer pressure, combined with the odor of a cigarette, can tempt even the strongest willed people from the path to recovery. When trying to quit, it may be beneficial in the long run to surround yourself with friends who do not smoke or have managed to quit smoking. This reduces the chances of being pressured into "just one more."

Smoking cessation therapy enables someone to quit smoking as well as learn other strategies for dealing with stress. Several psychologists at Lepage Associates specialize in treating substance use, including smoking. Targeting the exact causes of stress which lead to smoking and learning to manage it can yield better results when trying to end this risky behavior. The resources section of the Lepage Associates website offers an extensive list of articles on various psychological disorders and how to get treatment, as well as tips for healthy lifestyles.

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