

My love affair with nicotine

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My relationship with cigarettes began long before I adopted the habit. I was born in the eighties, when the restrictions on tobacco that we see today were merely a gleam in the Surgeon General's eye, and all over town people were lighting up in eateries and indoor shopping centres.

My mother told me smoking was a "filthy habit" but I found it glamorous and grown-up. I used to mimic the adults I saw in restaurants. In between sips of imaginary wine, I'd bring a white Popeye cigarette candy to my lips and pretend to inhale, feeling like a very sophisticated six-year-old.

It was inevitable that I would try smoking – I just needed an opportunity. When I was in Grade 8, I got my chance. My best friend's mother was a heavy smoker and left cigarettes around her house in various drawers. Our curiosity got the better of us and we borrowed a few from a pack we found in the living room. Which led to borrowing more. Regularly.

When I was 14, most of my evenings were spent in my friend's smoke-filled bathroom. With an open window and a towel under the door, we'd watch ourselves in the mirror, perfecting our technique. We spoke with elaborate hand gestures, enjoying the added drama of holding a cigarette. We practised blowing Os. At 10 p.m., I would down myself in perfume and walk home with my secret safely masked under a barrier of coconut and floral aromas. The whole thing felt taboo.

Smoking was my first act of teenage rebellion. It brought excitement into my otherwise mundane, predrinking-age life. It was the nineties and the health implications of tobacco use had become apparent. But the well-meaning anti-smoking campaigns aimed at young people inadvertently sensualized the habit. Smoking was now legitimately "bad," and it had never been cooler. My friends and I would unapologetically light up in the bus station, in doorways and right outside the movie theatre.

Like a burning ember that retreats into the soggy end of a filter, the shock value eventually fizzled out. I was aware that my smoking habit had become more of a necessity than a novelty, but I truly believed I could stop any time I wanted. I based this on an inflated sense of self-control and the fact that I had never pictured myself as an adult smoker. The millennium celebration came and went and I resolved to work out more and eat less pizza. I puffed away in my party dress and sparkly gold New Year's tiara, unaware of the changes to come.

Smoking bans were introduced and even in bars and nightclubs, smokers were forced outdoors. There was nothing glamorous about sucking down a cigarette through chattering teeth on a below-freezing winter night. But still this did not dissuade me. I began chain-smoking at home, which turned my one-bedroom condo into an interior disaster.

My countertops were cluttered with overflowing ashtrays. Small round burns dotted the couch and carpet. The stench of hundreds of cigarettes stubbornly clung to the walls, despite my air purifier and ornamental potpourri. I was disgusted by these conditions and too ashamed of the mess to invite people over. My once social habit was ostracizing me, yet I lived like this for several years.

Over time I began to see smoking for what it really was: a pointless habit that was ruining my health and draining my finances. All the things that had initially drawn me to it were childish notions, adolescent fantasies. The honeymoon was over. I wanted out.

Unfortunately, my relationship with nicotine was more complex than temporary infatuation. It had a merciless hold on me.

It turns out I don't have the iron will I had envisioned as a teenager. In my early 20s, I was always trying to cut down with hopes of quitting. But every time I promised myself I'd had my last cigarette, I would come crawling back. I was defeated.

I internalized these failures and began second-guessing myself. This uncertainty wore on my self-esteem and led to more nicotine cravings. I was trapped in a cycle. It took me two long, dark years to finally break free from my smoke-filled restraints. But I write this today with confidence. I made it.

No longer relying on self-control, I made a plan to restrict myself from smoking by rearranging my finances so I could no longer sustain the cost of cigarettes. I made a detailed list of my monthly expenses and sought out a more constructive way to spend my money. I began taking a weekly aerobics class and joined a hot-yoga studio. I was agitated and panicky without my nicotine pacifier, but I forced myself to work through it. Exercise took the edge off.

As my physical health improved, the constant urges to smoke began to diminish and I started feeling good about myself again. I am now thankful for the smoking bans that used to be such an inconvenience because I know there won't be people smoking beside me when I'm out.

I've been smoke-free for a year now. My clothes and hair smell fresh and clean. I feel healthier at 28 than I did at 22. I would be lying if I said I don't want a cigarette from time to time, but I'm no longer tormented. I know that if I give in to the craving, it will lead to the demise of the other activities I enjoy. It will bring back the negativity and isolation I fought so hard to overcome. I had to consciously find a reason not to smoke, but now, I ask myself, why would I ever consider it again?

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