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Joel's Reinforcement Library

NEVER TAKE ANOTHER PUFF!

Can people quit smoking and still drink alcohol?

There are different groups of people that must be taken into consideration when addressing alcohol and quitting: people who have never taken a drink in their lives, people who are truly social drinkers, drinkers who consider themselves to be social drinkers but who may in fact have a drinking problem, people who know that they are alcoholics and who have quit drinking, and people who are actively drinking alcoholics. There are different considerations involving quitting for each of these groups.

Never Drinkers

The easiest group of course is people who have never been drinkers and don't plan on ever drinking. There is nothing they need to worry about regarding alcohol consumption when quitting smoking.

Social Drinkers

Truly social drinkers can still drink alcohol without risk of smoking relapse--but being mentally prepared can be crucially important for them. They must go into ALL drinking situations reminding themselves that they are recovering nicotine addicts and that they are going to be recovering nicotine addicts for the rest of their lives.

While that may not sound great in concept--being a recovering nicotine addict--it sure beats being an actively using nicotine addict, hands down. For over time, being a recovering nicotine addict has no real signs or symptoms and no real adverse health or even social effects associated with it. Being an active user would actively be destroying tissue with every puff, depositing cancer-producing chemicals with every puff, assaulting your heart and circulatory system with every puff, costing you money with every puff, and making you reek

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with every puff.

It is important for these people to know that everything that they could do as smokers, they can also do as ex-smokers. They just have to teach themselves how. There are some things that new quitters are forced to learn early on like how to eat, sleep, use the washroom, breathe, etc. These are things that are required from day one for survival. So even though they may resist doing one of them, they can't resist for long and will thereby be forced to start to break the association to smoking early on.

Other things are sometimes put off and seen as unimportant to face early on. Tasks like doing housework, laundry, cleaning, brushing teeth, combing hair, or maybe even going to work and doing their jobs. While it is true that people won't die if they stop doing one or more of these activities for a day or two, putting off doing them too long will create a set of problems that can be quite annoying to those around them.

Besides threatening their livelihood and making them look like slobs in general, if carried on too long, it can really start to make them feel intimidated that they may never again be able to do these activities. Again, it must be repeated, everything a person did as a smoker they can also do as an ex-smoker--but they have to teach themselves how.

Now when it comes to areas of less importance like watching television, sports, playing cards, being a couch potato, and yes, even drinking with friends--things that are not necessary for survival and in fact, things that may not even be good for a person--well, the truth is people can do these things too as ex-smokers.

The same process is necessary though. They have to teach themselves how. Holding off too long can create a sense of intimidation, the feeling that they can never do the specific activity again. This simply is not the case. They will be able to get themselves back to their pre-quitting existence if they choose to.

Drinking is a special case because the association is so strong and by its very nature lowers their inhibitions. It can cause people to do some very irrational behaviors. Smoking can be one of them. Because of the drug's influence, it is best that people take it on gradually, in the beginning in a safe environment.

These people should probably limit themselves to one drink the first time out just to show themselves that they can have a drink without smoking. Also, they should do it with people who are non-smokers and who really are supportive of their quitting. This is a much safer situation in the beginning than going out with drinking buddies who smoke cigarettes and who may be a tad envious of their quitting, and who, while drinking themselves also have their inhibitions lowered. It may manifest in behaviors of encouragement of smoking at a

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time when the person is more vulnerable.

Soon ex-smokers will be able to face these environments too. Again it is best that they do it gradually, breaking some of the association and intimidation factors in the safer controlled environments. The fact is, though, for the rest of their lives they will need to keep their guard up, in a sense reminding themselves of their reasons for having quit and the importance to stay off smoking, every time before they go drinking. It prepares them to face the situation in a much safer state of readiness.

These people need to use timetables that they are comfortable with, but the sooner they take on activities like drinking the sooner that they will prove to themselves that life goes on without smoking.

Problem Drinkers

The next group is people who define themselves as social drinkers but who do in fact have a drinking problem. These are people who cannot drink in a controlled manner, or people whose drinking at one time has adversely affected their health or caused them any economic, professional, legal, or personal problems.

These people need to think long and hard about whether they are in fact problem drinkers or possibly dealing with alcoholism issues. If a person says that they know that their drinking will cause them to take a cigarette and relapse back to smoking, and then they take a drink and relapse, they are in effect problem drinkers for they have now put their health on the line in order to drink.

Recovering Alcoholics

A person who has acknowledged that he or she is an alcoholic and has successfully quit drinking probably has a rather thorough understanding of addiction. If he or she didn't, he or she would not be successfully off drinking but more likely rather still is an active drinker. People who are successfully recovering from alcoholism probably understand the relapse implications of just one drink, or just one sip.

All a person who has quit drinking needs to do to quit smoking is to just transfer his or her experience and knowledge with alcohol, while aiming it straight at nicotine. The same problem -- drug addiction. The same solution -- stop delivering nicotine into his or her system.

The recovering alcoholic will probably be scared about quitting, feeling that life will never be the same without smoking. ” The odds are pretty good that he or she probably had those exact same fears when quitting drinking. The recovering alcoholic was right when he or she

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thought his or her life would be different. It in all likelihood became immeasurably better. The same will hold true with quitting smoking.

I always state it this way. Treat an addiction as an addiction and a person will learn to control it. Treat an addiction like a bad habit and the person won't have a prayer. Nicotine use is an addiction. If a recovering alcoholic takes his or her understanding of addiction and aims it at nicotine he or she will do fine.

I should point out that whenever I have a person who quits smoking after quitting another substance, he or she often has a harder time quitting than the average smoker. Smoking may have been a crutch used to help them get off of the other substance. Now, when quitting cigarettes, not only is the person trying to break free from a primary addiction, but he or she is also trying to remove the crutch that he or she feels supported recovery from the other addiction.

While it may be harder up front, people recovering from alcoholism or any other addiction can be more prepped for success than the average quitter, for once again, they understand addiction. If the quitter aims their alcohol recovery program at treating this addiction, they will do fine with nicotine dependency recovery, too.

Drinking Alcoholics

The last group is people who are actively drinking alcoholics who want to quit smoking. When it comes to nicotine addiction, the only thing these people need to do to successfully quit smoking is to stop delivering nicotine. Are there other things that some people may also have to get rid of after they quit smoking? Sure there are.

If a person were a diabetic while smoking and not watching his or her diet, he or she would likely have to get his or her sugar intake under control when quitting smoking. The fact is, though, he or she probably needed to get his or her sugar under control when he or she was still smoking. Quitting didn't change that variable. Alcohol is no different. If a person has a drinking problem before quitting, he or she will still have a drinking problem after quitting. Still, all the problem-drinker needs to do to get off nicotine is just to get off nicotine. The drinking problem still exists and still needs to be dealt with.

A person first realizing he or she has an alcoholism problem and who also wants to quit smoking either has to quit both substances at the same time or get drinking under control first. The only reason I say that some people probably need to quit drinking first is because of the limitation of how the person's alcohol treatment program will advise him or her when they find out that he or she is a recent quitter of cigarettes.

Many if not most alcohol recovery programs will inadvertently or very purposely push a new

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ex-smoker entering the program to smoke. Over the years I have in fact had actively drinking alcoholics in smoking clinics--people who made it abundantly clear that they knew they had drinking problems and smoking problems but wanted to treat the smoking first.

I really do try to get them into alcohol treatment concurrently but cannot force them to do it. On more than one occasion I have seen the person successfully quit smoking, stay off for months and sometimes longer, and finally get into AA, only to be assigned a smoking sponsor who tells the person that he or she can't "get off smoking and drinking at once," and who actually encourages the person to smoke again.

Note the sequence here--the ex-smoker has been off of nicotine for an extended time period but the smoking sponsor says that the person can't quit both at once. It is unfortunate that most alcohol and drug treatment programs just don't recognize smoking as another drug addiction.

You will not often see an AA sponsor say that you can't give up drinking and heroin at once, so if you have been off heroin for six months and now want to quit drinking, you should probably take heroin for a while until you get alcohol out of your system.

The bottom line is that there are other things that ex-smokers may need to address but not in order to sustain their quits, but to sustain their health or control other problems. To successfully overcome smoking and arrest a dependency upon nicotine requires only that a smoker make and stick to a personal commitment to Never Take Another Puff.

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Page created October 29, 2005 and last updated by [Joel Spitzer](#) on October 29, 2005

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