

'Why is it so hard to quit smoking?'

Psychotherapist Anna Yates talks about the journey back to being a non-smoker

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Aquarius



"It is important not to avoid smokers completely, otherwise you aren't actually learning a new behaviour, just depriving yourself of the old one."

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"The main reason some people find it difficult to quit smoking is because they expect it to be so. It's the opposite of the placebo effect, whereby people benefit from something because they believe it to be beneficial – it's the nocebo effect, whereby people receive a harmful effect from something simply because they believe it will happen. Simply put, if people tell you it is hard to quit smoking, it will be. My job, as a therapist, is to turn this thought around in people's minds to make it easy rather than difficult.

"Another factor is that as soon as you try to cut down on something, it becomes more desirable. When you go on a diet, consciously you'll be telling yourself that unhealthy foods are off limits. Unfortunately, because your subconscious thinks in pictures, when you are telling yourself not to have crisps and chocolates, all it sees is images of these foods so you crave them more. It's the same with smoking.

"Also, the part of the brain that triggers nicotine craving is next to the part that registers hunger, dehydration and fear, which is why scare tactics don't work on smokers. The more you scare them, the more they want to smoke. It also means you can confuse thirst and hunger for a craving for nicotine.

"I always say to my clients that quitting smoking is like asking a child to give up Christmas because, for both experiences, the anticipation is almost better than the real thing. It's a learnt pattern of behaviour to want a cigarette when you wake up, or in the car, or on the phone – you expect you will want that cigarette before you have even wanted it. You cannot delete learned behaviour patterns, only replace them with new ones. If this is difficult to get your head around, think of it like a footpath across a grassy field. Over time, the path has been trodden into the grass so you can see it clearly. If, one day, you take a different route across the field, you'll be