

# Stories of Life with Spinal Cord Injury

University of Michigan Model Spinal Cord Injury System

## Quitting Smoking — *a personal memoir*

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Are you a smoker? If so, I assume you already know you really should quit. Want to quit? Read on.

I assume you've probably tried to quit sometime; how long did you last? One day? One week? Until you were out with the crowd? Until the next stressful situation came along? Hard to do, isn't it? I know; I was a smoker, but it's 20 years since my last cigarette.

Smoking is one of the very hardest addictions (not habit; addiction) there is to quit. It's insidious, the way it sucks you in, becomes part of your "normal sense of being."

But think back, to *before* you started. You didn't "miss" cigarettes if you didn't have one. So what happened? Ah, yes; it was a "cool" thing to do.

For me it was in my teen years. I coughed like crazy with that first cigarette; felt kinda sick afterwards too. But I tried again when next hanging out with those "in" friends. And it went down a bit easier. *Hey*, there was a *warm rush* to it, too. A bit of a *high*! Wow! How *Cool!!* I had another.

Soon it was a regular thing; I developed "cool" ways as to how I opened and used my *Zippo* lighter, how I held a cigarette, how I inhaled, etc. I was more of a *dude* now.

And I got used to the tobacco being there, the *friend* that was with (in) me all the time. But I had to take care of my friend; anxious, empty feelings came when my level of nicotine dropped. I learned to be sure of my cigarette supply. (Sound familiar?) I was already addicted.

Most of the time there aren't sudden health problems from smoking for younger persons--you don't fall over dead--and back when I started it wasn't even a generally acknowledged problem. As I got into my health studies, though, it became clear, this was not good for me.

But, that didn't mean I was able to just quit. I tried many times, but never went longer than a day or two. Up late for a big exam? The knots in my stomach would win out and I'd get a pack. TGIF at the campus bar yakking with friends? "I think I'll do this quitting thing another time."

I didn't really understand what I was up against. The tobacco/cigarette addiction is *psychophysiologically* very strong. If the brain's usual level of nicotine starts to drop, withdrawal mechanisms send a message: *Hey, time for another hit*. If I just let the nicotine levels continue to drop, I could find myself getting quite desperate: "**I, to the very central core of my being, want, demand a cigarette!**" This of course wasn't really me; it's the

power the addiction had to twist my mind and body to the purpose of satisfying the addiction.

To jump ahead in this story, for a moment, let me assure you that the addiction's ability to control you declines as time goes by and you don't have any nicotine. But there is the problem of reducing the stress of withdrawal, especially initially. It can be substantial.

The answer for me was aerobic exercise. I took up "walking/jogging" [this was in my pre-SCI days], starting with just a short distance, mostly walking, and gradually over a year working up to a few miles, mostly running, and doing this 3-5 times a week.

This was great! First, it totally took away those knots of withdrawal stress in my stomach, and, as all the tobacco chemicals left my system and the crud in my lungs started cleaning out, I was able to go farther, faster and more easily! And this motivated me to not start smoking again--I didn't want to go back to "day one" in my training. Second, it got me into a routine of physical activity that I'd not had since I was a kid.

After totally quitting, it takes only about 7-10 days for the nicotine to leave your body, but much longer for your system to adjust to its absence. Gradually, urges do reduce--as long as you don't have a cigarette. When you quit, quit. Urges will pass; don't meanwhile light up.

One trick here was to mentally separate myself from the addiction; put the addiction in a box, so to speak. And if there was an urge for a cigarette, well, that wasn't really me, that was the addiction talking. **Remind yourself: you're in charge now, not the cigarettes.** Over time you "starve" the addiction by not "feeding it" cigarettes.

Unfortunately I didn't stay quit. Two years later, my wife and I were traveling and in Singapore one evening I came upon a street vendor where I could buy just *one* cigarette. And he had a *Zippo* lighter hanging on a string. It was an exotic night. On a lark, I bought one; it smoked down just fine. I bought another; I bought a pack. "I'll quit after vacation," I told myself. [Enter here: excuses.] Reality was, it was years before I totally quit again.

But I finally did, again using aerobic exercise as a *healthy* substitute activity, and I have been "clean" now, in spite of some tough life events, for over 20 years. Regular exercise is now just routine. I hardly ever even think of cigarettes. On those rare moments I might "miss" them, it just reminds me how "sneaky" they are and to **never, under any circumstance, have even one.**

Life will have stresses; for relief I recommend exercise as an effective and a very healthy alternative to smoking.