

Peer Perspective May 2022

My Quit Story – Living with a Mental Health Disorder and Smoking

Nicotine addiction in folks living with a mental health disorder is extremely high- 2 to 4 times the rate of the general population. I know all about it.

I was 14 years old when I started smoking and quit at age 61. I was an on-and-off smoker for years (more on than off). My focus was on relapses, never giving myself credit for the times I was nicotine free.

Something has changed along the way since the last time I relapsed. I looked back to understand what caused me to relapse. In my case there was a correlation between depression and my relapsing and/or increase in smoking. When my mood was “up” I didn’t need the cigarettes and when “down” I panicked even thinking about quitting.

I “beat” the physical nicotine addiction many times (more than 7 times over the last 20 years) but I had not addressed my mental/emotional addiction to cigarettes. Cigarettes had become my go-to when I was depressed, lonely, bored, or stressed out. Cigarettes became my companion when I was isolating myself from people.

My parents both passed due to lung disease, and I was spending an average of \$4000 per year on cigarettes. None of the above stopped me from smoking. What finally made me quit was the toll that it was taking on me. It was affecting my self-esteem, job, health, my bank account, and I was tired of going through the physical withdrawals along with the emotional ones each time I quit.

To those folks who don’t smoke, just be there for those you care for when they are ready or trying to quit. To those folks who want to quit: only a very small percentage of smokers successfully quit cold turkey (this is not a weakness in character) – so look at a relapse as a “practice run” then try again, and keep on trying. It is never too late to quit. There are supports in place to help you like the MN Quitline and smoking cessation programs. Talk to your physician, or your mental health providers. Reach out – there is help and understanding and don’t give up looking for help if you need it.

I am taking the money I save over the next year and flying somewhere warm during the cold winter months. Think about it – set a quit date – one step at a time adds up and keep trying – you can do it.

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