

A SMOKE-FREE ZONE with NLP

One year on since the smoking ban, people are still desperate to quit. If what you're doing isn't working... do something different!
by Caitlin Collins



The ban on smoking in public places in the UK came into effect on July 1st 2007 with, according to opinion polls, 'three quarters of adults expressing their support'. Hefty legislation targets the 'managers of premises' rather than smokers themselves; 'managers' are threatened with a fine of £2500 for failing to prevent puffers from lighting up – rather like bullying the prefects to make the naughty kids behave. The result of this is that we're seeing more smoking than ever because now it's going on outside in the street!

As well as harassing business proprietors, the Government is promoting NHS stop-smoking programmes primarily

focused on drugs; the pharmaceutical companies have managed to brand their nicotine-replacement products, plus Zyban and Champix (whose list of side effects includes 'suicide ideation'), as 'medicines'. So complete is the seduction of the NHS by the drug companies that other more wholesome methods of helping people to stop smoking, such as NLP or hypnotherapy, barely get a look in.

PEOPLE ARE STILL SMOKING...
Given the evidence that smoking ruins

your health, plus public opinion granting it honorary pariah status, combined with the current legislation making it so darned inconvenient (hands up who enjoys popping outside in the cold and rain for a ciggy), what interests me is that so many people continue to do it. I suspect they haven't cottoned on to NLP as the best way to stop!

Most people seem to favour one of two approaches to quitting: either the NHS route, or, for those understandably wary of that 'suicide ideation' enticingly proffered by the NHS, the gritted-teeth application of willpower. I'm convinced that neither of those two methods is the way to go: physical addiction is not the major issue the nicotine-replacement promoters would have us believe it to be, and unsupported willpower rarely lasts.

Over the past 20 years, first as an acupuncturist and later as an NLP Trainer and personal development coach, I've had the privilege of helping many people to stop smoking. I've become fascinated by the way the impulse to smoke bobs up repeatedly despite all attempts to squash it – and despite its apparently insane self-destructiveness (hospital entrances are full of coughing patients trailing drip stands, shivering in their pyjamas and fluffy bunny slippers, puffing grimly towards their demise...).

Many smokers have mixed feelings about quitting: they want to lose the disadvantages of smoking but don't want to lose the benefits. And they are absolutely right to be concerned about this, because there are indeed benefits to smoking; no one would do it if there weren't. There are coercive self-help methods that insult smokers and deny the benefits of smoking, but as well as being unkind and discourteous they are also dishonest.

So, accepting for the moment the hypothesis that there are benefits to smoking, how can we lose the smoking, but keep the benefits it was providing?

We can start by being attentive to what's going on in the mind when the desire to smoke arises.

A little introspection shows the mind to be a complicated process, changing all the time and made up of many parts; it's not a single stable entity. Sometimes there's a conflict between two or more parts of it, as reflected in everyday speech when somebody says: 'Part of me wants to do this, but another part wants to do that, so I don't know what to do!' It's reasonable to think that different parts of oneself would have one's well-being at heart; however it's only too obvious that they can have different ideas of how to go about achieving it.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

One of the classical presuppositions of NLP suggests: 'A positive intention underlies any behaviour.' If we're open to the interesting idea that there may be positive intentions underlying

even destructive habits such as smoking, we can explore some kind of constructive conflict resolution. This can avoid the disappointment experienced by people who heroically battle the desire to smoke and succeed in suppressing it, only to succumb to temptation months or years later. The fact that this happens so often indicates that physical addiction to nicotine is not the problem; anyone who has stopped smoking for a year is beyond the nicotine dependency – and yet the desire to smoke is still lurking. As ironic graffiti artists have pointed out: ‘Stopping smoking is easy – I’ve done it hundreds of times!’ It’s staying stopped that’s tricky.

Let’s look at the idea that the impulse to smoke is prompted by a positive intention. If that were so, then if people could find better ways to fulfil the intention they wouldn’t need to smoke.

Smokers need to reflect on the underlying purpose of the part of them that is prompting them to smoke. Is it trying to offer them a way to feel better, maybe to relax, or think more clearly, or to reduce tension or alleviate some kind of unease? If so, how could they find other, better ways to do that?

The various NLP techniques that work with the model of parts of the psyche are particularly good for resolving the inner conflicts associated with unwanted behaviours. Instead of lurching from the extreme of indulgence to the extreme of repression or denial, often accompanied by guilt and recriminations as the ‘goodie’ part punishes the ‘baddie’ part and the ‘baddie’ part feels resentful and rebellious, we can work with self-awareness and an attitude of kindness and enquiry to find alternatives that avoid these extremes.

THE NAKED DANCING GODDESS

Let’s look at an example based on a real-life case history: a client of mine from several years ago.

‘Chloe’ wanted to stop smoking; or rather a part of her did – another part was very resistant to the idea. In her mid-thirties, with three young children, Chloe knew she shouldn’t be smoking. It was inconvenient, going outside in order to escape the family

every time she wanted to smoke; her husband hated the smell of it on her skin, hair, clothes and breath, and had been nagging at her for ages to stop; and of course she couldn’t smoke around the children. To make matters worse her eldest daughter was receiving anti-smoking propaganda at school and coming home and laying on the guilt along the lines of, ‘Please, Mummy, I don’t want you to die.’ This emotional blackmail had actually backfired, as it raised Chloe’s stress levels so she needed to smoke even more to calm herself down; and she’d resorted to lying to her daughter, pretending that she had stopped smoking – so now she was hating herself for her dishonesty.

With all this incentive, why couldn’t she stop? More accurately, why couldn’t she stay stopped? She had been able to manage without cigarettes for periods as long as three months; but then had experienced an increasingly uncomfortable feeling that she identified as a craving for a cigarette, and had eventually yielded to it, usually after a few glasses of wine. The fact that she could go for such long periods without cigarettes indicated that physical addiction to nicotine was not the major issue; there was something else going on. She needed to get in touch with the part of her that was driving the smoking.

I asked Chloe to imagine that she could bring out the two parts of her mind that were in conflict over the smoking, and imagine them actually sitting in front of her, one on each of her palms. What would they look like, if she could see them? It seemed that the stop-smoking one looked like a rather glum little goody-two-shoes, standing demurely with its hands clasped; while the smoking one looked like a sparky little goddess, stark naked and dancing wildly. It was easy to see that the sparky goddess was unlikely to take kindly to being told what to do by the goody-two-shoes, and that while it might be possible to shut it in a box temporarily, it wouldn’t stay there for long!

When we asked the goddess part to talk about its positive intention for Chloe, it transpired that it was battling to save Chloe’s youth, creativity, and ultimately her freedom for self-expression – all of which she felt were

