

Smoking Cigarettes: The Unfiltered Truth

Janet Benner

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Smokers who have managed to wean themselves from cigarettes tend to behave a little like born-again Christians, eagerly proselytizing to help others get back on the path to salvation. Some of the self-help books written by these ex-smokers have been quite good; however, readers would do well to look for credentials. This author's are impressive: not only a Ph.D. but extensive experience in substance-abuse work, including California's excellent state-wide tobacco education program, of which she was a regional director. For the past twenty years she has trained cessation-group facilitators and counseled many hundreds of smokers as they struggled to quit.

Benner's own experience as a smoker helps to convince her of the almost unimaginable tenacity of nicotine's addictiveness. Her chapter titled "Why Can't We Just Quit?" provides crucial information for the huge majority of smokers for whom the cold-turkey method is simply not an option. Withdrawal is the penalty paid by addicts for failing to maintain their addiction, states Benner: "When the nicotine isn't present for a few hours, its absence, along with the absence of the natural chemical function, causes the feeling of uneasiness or even panic we know as an urge to smoke. We then take the cigarette to make our bodies feel right, that is, to rebalance our physiological systems. We take a cigarette to fix what it, in fact, has caused."

Having explained that the quitting process may give rise to a variety of difficulties, Benner offers various strategies for coping. She believes that the process of becoming a nonsmoker is "largely a mind game," a matter of "keeping your attitude in the right place."

If there is a single panacea, she says, it is a combination of good nutrition and exercise. For many smokers (especially women) blood-sugar levels complicate their efforts to quit. Because smoking regulates blood sugar, quitting may lead a person to rely on an alternative method-such as dosing oneself with chocolates.

Benner's book is probably the best of the quitting books. One wishes that it could be translated and airdropped throughout Africa and Asia, where the tobacco industry has recently shifted its attention. In China alone, tobacco use is expected to kill 100 million people in the next fifty years.

HAROLD CORDRY (March / April 2003)

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