Reflections on the Ex-Smoker: Some Findings on Successful Quitters

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Following the lead of Schachter [(1982). Am. Psychol. 37: 436-444] a questionnaire was developed to assess the process of self-cure among former cigarette smokers and then administered to 63 ex-smokers who had quit on their own. Separate samples of “helped” quitters and current smokers who had tried to quit but failed were also interviewed. Ex-smokers scored higher on Rosenbaum’s [(1980). Behav. Ther. 11: 109–121] Self-Control Schedule, which suggests that they may have succeeded because they had better self-control skills initially. Other results underscored the role of peer pressure and curiosity as major reasons for becoming a smoker, of withdrawal symptoms and loss of pleasure as major obstacles to quitting, and of self-confidence and perceived health benefits as factors that were most important in successful quitting. The difficulty associated with quitting was associated with cognitive factors such as beliefs about the addictive properties of nicotine and self-confidence ratings, as well as with a supportive social network and the amount smoked previously.

KEY WORDS: cognitions; curiosity; quitting; self-control; smoking; support.

INTRODUCTION

Cigarette smoking is the largest single preventable health problem in the developed world, and ironically it is one of the world's most serious self-
inflicted epidemics (Chandler, 1984). It is also one of those personal habits that is extremely difficult to break. Thus, most smokers would like to quit smoking if they could, but they are often discouraged by the difficulty of the task or the low likelihood of success (Leventhal and Cleary, 1980). What makes matters worse is that evidence from controlled outcome studies supports their view. Long-term success rates rarely exceed 30%, and many of those who begin treatment drop out prematurely (Brownell, 1982; Lichtenstein, 1982).

However a recent study by Schachter (1982) is more encouraging. Schachter suggests that the low success rates reported by many investigators may be an artifact of their sampling methods (i.e., a self-selected group of “difficult” cases) or the fact that conclusions are often based on a single-method or single-occasion approach. For these reasons, estimates of a successful outcome may be too low when generalizing to nonclinic populations. Schachter offers evidence in support of this view by showing that almost 64% of the nonclinic subjects he interviewed had managed to quit smoking on their own—many of them quite painlessly!

One of the important implications of this study is that there is much to learn about smoking control from ex-smokers who have quit smoking successfully (Miller, 1983). As Lichtenstein (1982) recently noted,

several of the key unresolved issues in smoking cessation can be summarized around the theme of possible differences between those who are and are not able to quit (with or without the aid of a program). Are successful quitters less dependent either in a pharmacological sense or (and) because of their learning history? Do they have more or different coping skills? Do successful quitters have less stressful and/or more supportive social environments? These are some of the issues that must be understood before we can achieve effective and efficient smoking interventions. (p. 815)

The hope expressed by Lichtenstein is that information from such research can suggest new ways of helping others quit smoking too. While preliminary work has been done in this area (e.g., Perri et al., 1977; Baer et al., 1977; Shiffman, 1982), in general we know little about how and why people quit smoking, not to mention related issues such as how they cope with urges to resume smoking, what they attribute their success to, and how they differ from smokers who have tried to quit but failed. This study attempted to clarify some of these issues by interviewing a large group of ex-smokers. Most of them were “self-cured” or “spontaneous quitters” who had managed to quit smoking on their own. Others were “helped quitters”—persons who had also managed to quit but with some type of professional help. Several unsuccessful quitters were also interviewed for comparison purposes.