



Key Facts about Smoking and Stress

People who smoke often say having a cigarette reduces their stress. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often experience many stressors, including the impact of intergenerational trauma and racism, financial strain and family conflicts. A person might feel powerless about the problems making them feel stressed and some say smoking helps them manage these feelings.

However, smoking can also cause worry for people. Many people who smoke are concerned cigarette smoking might make them ill. Tobacco is also expensive, which can add to financial stress, especially if there is not enough money left for food and other necessities. The good news is that many people who smoke are successful at quitting, even when they are experiencing stressful life events.

What does the Evidence say about Smoking and Stress?

- Whilst some people say smoking helps them feel better, evidence shows that the chemicals in cigarettes produce a physical stress-response, which can make people feel more anxious.
- When nicotine enters the body, it binds to specific receptors in the brain. These receptors then send signals which activate the body's major stress-response system and stress hormones like cortisol are produced. Smoking has been shown to increase levels of cortisol in the body, even after just two cigarettes.
- Activation of the body's stress response system also leads to an increase in heart rate and blood pressure.
- These bodily changes are commonly known as the 'fight, flight or freeze' response and are usually a sign we don't feel safe. When someone has a fight, flight or freeze response they might feel tense, angry or like they have a knot in their stomach. These are all typical anxiety symptoms. Studies have shown a link between smoking, nicotine addiction and an increased likelihood of developing anxiety disorders.
- So why do people say smoking helps them to relax? As the effects of the nicotine from that last cigarette wear off, a person who smokes starts to experience withdrawal. Nicotine withdrawal can be uncomfortable and cause cravings. When people give in to those cravings and have a smoke, they will experience an improvement in their mood and anxiety. What they perceive as stress relief is simply a decrease in those cravings, which were caused by nicotine withdrawal in the first place.

Benefits of Quitting for Stress and Wellbeing

Quitting can be challenging, but studies have found that once withdrawal symptoms have passed, people feel calmer and, in some cases, even less stressed than before they started smoking. Many people also say they find life more enjoyable after quitting.

Supporting People who are Quitting to Manage Stress

Because smoking is often perceived as a coping mechanism, supporting people who are trying to quit to manage stress through other strategies is important. Some examples include:

- **Physical activity/exercise** – exercise helps manage withdrawal symptoms. Exercise stimulates reward pathways in the brain, increasing self-esteem and making us feel happier. For example, emerging evidence shows promising results for the effectiveness of yoga in reducing cravings.
- **Mindfulness meditation** – evidence is emerging to support the idea that being mindful can make quitting easier, and therefore more successful. Mindfulness meditation teaches people to pay attention to negative feelings, cravings and other symptoms of nicotine withdrawal and respond to these unpleasant feeling more mindfully (for example, using breathing exercises), so as to break the habit of reacting to cravings or feeling of stress by smoking.
- **Diet/nutrition** – a highly nutritious diet is important for good mental health. Vitamins and minerals are essential for the brain to perform at its best and protect us against stress. Fear of gaining weight is also common for people who smoke thinking about quitting, so developing a healthy diet plan may help lessen this worry.
- **Professional support** – a GP can talk to people who are quitting about options like Nicotine Replacement Therapy (e.g. patches, gum) to reduce cravings. Referrals can also be made to Quitline. Research shows professional support increases the chance of successfully quitting.

Further Reading

- Badrack, E, Kirschbaum, C, & Kumari, M (2007). The relationship between smoking status and cortisol secretion. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 92(3), 819-824.
- Kurti, Allison N, & Dallery, J (2013). Effects of exercise on craving and smoking in the human laboratory. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 140, e113–e113.
- Moylan, Steven, et al (2012). Cigarette smoking, nicotine dependence and anxiety disorders: a systematic review of population-based, epidemiological studies. *BMC medicine* 10.1: 1-14.
- Shahab, Lion, & West, Robert (2011). Differences in happiness between people who smoke, ex-smokers and never smokers: cross-sectional findings from a national household survey. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 121(1), 38–44.
- Thomas, David P, Davey, Maureen, Sterren, Anke E, Panaretto, Kathryn S, & Lyons, L (2020). Do stress, life satisfaction, depression and alcohol use predict quitting among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander smokers? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 44(3), 186–192.

