

## **Quitting the smoking habitual behavior**

**Student: Jordi Valls**

I am forty-nine years old. Thirty-six years ago I lit my first cigarette and packed daily from the hours. I have been doing sports and physical activity at a competitive level for forty years. I have been teaching professionally in physical activity and sport for twenty-nine years. For ten years I have had an increasingly intense ethical-moral conflict to teach about healthy habits and after the speech, go out to smoke. I have been trying to quit for ten years.

I have used ALL the treatments that currently exist: patches, chewing gum, Champix, behavioral therapy, hypnosis, willpower, often in an interrelated way. They have all failed miserably, at most I have been able to maintain abstinence for a month or two.

Last year I managed to transfer the file from Inefc Lleida to Inefc Barcelona after many years of trying. Twelve years ago I moved to Barcelona for work reasons and that's why I was forced to postpone my studies. In this new stage, this is the second year I am enrolled, I have studied Exercise Physiology. In this subject I have had the opportunity to enjoy a model of learning, exposure, and assessment completely different from those experienced previously, and to become familiar with a new perspective for me to understand the changes: that of complex systems. One of the practical proposals presented the approach of an individual challenge based on suppressing habits and the subsequent presentation of experiences, personal feelings, daily strategies explained based on the concepts learned about the properties of complex adaptive systems. I set out to be a non-smoking one day. Given my competitive nature, I decided to quit smoking again, it was a motivation and an opportunity to learn and reap the added benefits.

During the first weeks of abstinence, the somatic experience was very unpleasant. The stability of my psychobiological system was completely altered and the state of attraction demanded that I smoke again. The desire appeared suddenly, uncontrollably and with total crudeness.

I thought about the parameters of control and / or constraints that could keep me away from the attractive state but the desire manifested itself again with intensity and capriciousness, which caused me frustration and despair. Maintaining the state of abstinence, sustained by the personal constraint of my willpower, competed with an attractive state with a deep and wide basin. The weakness of the intentional attractor, with respect to the attractor of the addiction, jeopardized my purpose.

The negative feelings were so intense that I had two options, go back to smoking as usual or look for answers and solutions.

My discomfort and the subject were advancing in parallel, and I began to explore new synergies for double benefits: a better understanding of the content of the subject and an understanding of my addictive behavior.

The attractor stabilized for 36 years was so deep that to get out of it he had to create a new one capable of competing with him (Figure 1 panel A). New synergies had to integrate physical, psychobiological and emotional components and processes. Cognitively I had to contrast previous experiences (treatments and *relapses*, see Figure 1), trying to take advantage of failures and reflect on the positive experiences lived throughout my life that could "replace" tobacco to set up solid synergies, able to compete against any kind of provocative constraint.

While these constraints remained present, having a **personal plan**, reinforced by a better understanding of **what was happening** and **why it was happening**, gave me some **security, willpower, and motivation**. I noticed that something inside me was different from other times.

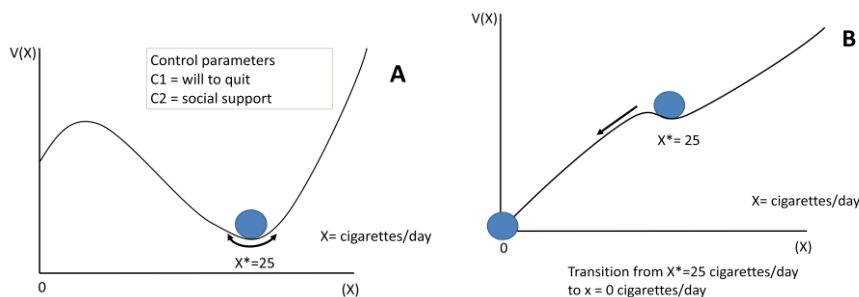


Figure 1. Destabilization of an unhealthy habitual behavior by changes of personal and social constraints. Panel A. Control parameters:  $C_1$  - the **strength of the volition to quit** smoking, and  $C_2$  - the **social support** of close ones are low. As a consequence the smoking behavior ( $x^* = 25$  cigarettes/day) is very stable (deep) attractive state. The arrows pointing in both directions from  $x^*$  show the fluctuations of the number of cigarettes/day around the average value  $x^*$ . The state  $x = 0$  cigarettes/day is less stable (i.e. shallow) state because even if for some time the smoking is quitted ( $x = 0$ ), a small perturbation (e.g. a company of friends smokers or a new problem) of the  $x = 0$  state would push the behavior over the barrier to the old smoking habit ( $x^* = 25$  cigarettes/day). As the strength of the volition to quit increases, the support of the close ones increases as well and brings to: Panel B – the smoking habit ( $x^* = 25$  cigarettes/day) is destabilized by a very small perturbation and spontaneously decays (see the arrow) to the more stable (deep) attractive non-smoking behavior ( $x = 0$  cigarettes/day). However, the smoking behavior ( $x^* = 25$ ) although is currently less stable, it still exerts some attraction (it still contains a minimum). For details about the contributing factors which constituted the control parameters  $C_1$  and  $C_2$ , see the text.

I put the whole plan into practice. I gave my name, surname and order to all the measures that needed to be taken: to stay away from disorders associated with addiction (friends, social events, etc.).

On a psychophysical level I was looking for **physical activities** that I enjoyed (yoga, running, cycling), with a **playful and pleasant orientation**, to replace the immediate sensation provided by smoking.

At the psychological level I resorted to the stabilization of **my state of will** and to thoughts related to **success, victory, with the visualization of a future** with health and without ethical-moral conflicts, of greater freedom at all levels.

On an **emotional level** I sought to **lower anxiety** and **strong moments** of desire with **breathing and meditation**. A technique that I had tried in previous treatments and that worked pretty well for me but had not given it the due continuity.

I also decided not to take any medication. Using chemistry made me feel fragile.

Another differentiating factor was the exposure of my challenge to the rest of my classmates and teachers. I think I managed to connect with them and their feedback gave me **extra motivation** to move on without tobacco.

After sixteen weeks of abstinence, I can now say that I feel more stable in a state of abstinence and that the desire to smoke again is more spaced and less intense. Everything has a meaning and a why.

I don't feel like I'm "cured" I used to suffer from abstinence, now I'm enjoying it and I think that's a key aspect to stabilizing this state over time.