My boyfriend’s smoking habits

Dear Alice,

My boyfriend smokes a lot and I really don't like it. I'm afraid if I ask him to stop he will break up with me or get stressed and smoke more. What shall I do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Smoking can be a real drag, especially when someone you care about isn’t ready to quit. However, because you haven’t brought the subject up to your boyfriend yet, you should have an optimistic attitude - your concerns may be the final push your boyfriend needs to help him quit! In addition to simply encouraging your boyfriend to give up smoking, you can offer him lots of resources and support to help him through this difficult process.

It’s important to address both the physical and psychological aspects of quitting. Nicotine withdrawal can be very challenging - fortunately, nicotine gums and patches help to relieve symptoms of withdrawal, and slowly reducing the number of cigarettes smoked per day may be more effective in ridding your boyfriend’s system of nicotine than quitting cold turkey. In terms of the mental aspects of quitting, stress and other psychological concerns are often reasons people start smoking in the first place. Your boyfriend may find it helpful to meet with a counselor to discuss healthy alternatives and stress relieving techniques to replace this unhealthy habit.

Try the following tips and tricks to support your boyfriend:

- Have an open conversation with your boyfriend, and be well prepared. Consider bringing materials with you, such as pamphlets, printouts, and website recommendations. The American Cancer Society’s Guide to Quitting Smoking and smokefree.gov are helpful resources with comprehensive step-by-step instructions on how to quit.
- Ease into the conversation gently and keep your tone neutral. Make sure to have a clear message and maintain sight of your goal, but be mindful that you don’t come off as combative or aggressive.
- Respect that this is your boyfriend’s decision to make. Quitting is a lifestyle change that requires dedication - he has to want this for himself. If he decides he’s not ready to quit, you’ll have to evaluate whether this relationship is worth working for and if this is a compromise you’re willing to make.
- Should he decide to quit, help your boyfriend commit to a quit date. The quit date should
be far enough in advance to make appropriate preparations, but soon enough that he doesn’t talk himself out of it.

- On or before his quit date, help your boyfriend make his living space smoke-free. Toss ashtrays and lighters and prohibit smoking in any part of the house.
- Check in frequently. Ask your boyfriend how he’s doing, and if he’s experiencing a craving, help distract him with smoke-free relaxing activities, such as going on a nice bike ride or sipping a cup of tea.
- Surprise your sweetie with a supportive care package. Fill a box up with nicotine gum, stress balls, hard candies, toothpicks, motivational stickers or greeting cards, and any other goodies that may benefit your boyfriend in his efforts to quit.
- Help your boyfriend avoid situations that may trigger his urge to smoke. By staying away from places and people that tempt him to smoke, your boyfriend will have fewer opportunities to relapse.
- Don’t give advice. Regardless of your good intentions, your boyfriend may feel like he’s being nagged, scolded, or patronized. Instead, ask him what he thinks you can do to help, and listen with an open mind.
- If your boyfriend experiences mood swings throughout the process of quitting, try your best to be compassionate — nicotine withdrawal can be incredibly difficult to cope with, and it’s not personal.
- Offer your lover rewards as he achieves incremental successes. For example, after a full 24 hours of not smoking, honor his achievement by taking him out to a movie or giving him a neck massage. After a whole smoke-free week, treat him to his favorite meal or arrange a celebration with his friends and family.
- If your boyfriend slips up, help lift his spirits and get back on the bandwagon by reminding him of previous achievements — for example, “You were able to go a whole week without tobacco before, and I know you can do it again.” Show him that you have faith in him, and remind him that it usually takes smokers a few tries before they’re able to quit for good.

Quitting cigarettes is similar to losing weight in that it requires long-term commitment and perseverance. Unfortunately, there’s no magic pill to rid your boyfriend of his addiction, but quitting is absolutely possible and well worth the effort. If you’re a Columbia student, check out the on-campus Tobacco Cessation program for more information and clinical support as well as the Stressbusters program for healthy stress-reducing techniques. Good luck!

Alice!

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