Dear Alice,

I smoke. I don't like it at all but it's the only way I know to relieve stress. It makes me dizzy and nauseous. I tried quitting but I have reached a point in my life where I am overwhelmed by stress and cannot take out the time to exercise or sleep my stress away. I can feel the cigarettes altering my health. Please, aside from telling me to quit, can't you offer some kind of advice?

?Nico

Answer

Dear Nico,

Everyone gets stressed at some point or another, and people have different ways of coping with stress. It sounds like you know that smoking isn't the best way to deal with stress because of the negative health effects. Quitting is your best bet for reducing stress and improving health, but if you aren't ready, there are some healthier ways to deal with the stress and the effects of smoking.

The symptoms of dizziness and nausea can make anyone feel terrible. What you describe is most likely being caused by the nicotine in your cigarette. When you smoke, nicotine in cigarettes stimulates the cerebral cortex in your brain, and the adrenal glands which then discharge adrenaline. Other effects of nicotine include inhibition of the formation of urine, constriction of the blood vessels, increased heart rate, and elevation of your blood sugar level and blood pressure. So, even as you feel less stressed after smoking, your body is actually being stimulated, which can, in turn, make you feel more stressed.

Whether you reduce your smoking or not, it's a good idea to get checked out by a health care provider to make sure that your symptoms aren't something else, and to get help dealing with them when they occur.

Aside from quitting [2], you can try to reduce the number of times you smoke, which will reduce the amount of nicotine you ingest and may decrease the stimulation contributing to your stress. Try becoming conscious of each time you reach for a cigarette and deciding whether or not you really want it. You may find that at times you don't want a cigarette but are actually hungry, tired, bored, or in need of some air. Instead of smoking, try eating something, or chewing gum, taking a nap, switching your activity, taking a quick walk, or substituting deep

[1] Smoking for stress relief

[2] Quitting
breathing. When you really need a break from what you're doing, you can still act like you're going out for a butt, but then go sit still for the three to five minutes it would take to smoke a cigarette and just breathe. Make sure you take time out of your busy schedule to relax; for right now it seems like that's what smoking allows you to do?take time out.

Although you feel that you are too busy to exercise or relax, if you think about the amount of time that you spend smoking each day, it may add up. Let's say you smoke 3 to 5 cigarettes per day- that takes approximately 15 minutes. If you smoke more than that, it's even more time. If you cut back on smoking even a little bit, you could add a few minutes of a stress relieving exercise, or a quick catnap. You can also try to add a few minutes of activity here and there to get you moving, which may help decrease stress. Get off of the subway one stop early, or take the stairs instead of the elevator. Check out No time for exercise [3] for some tips. Once you begin to get your body moving, you may naturally reduce your smoking, probably without even thinking about it.

It's true that with a busy lifestyle there can be little time left over for exercise or extra sleep. Have you considered why your life is so busy and why you have so much stress? Perhaps there are changes you can make to relieve some of the stress. Some schools and employers have initiatives to keep students and employees from feeling overwhelmed.

If you do decide that you want to quit, there are several resources available to help you along the way. Check out smokefree.gov [4] for more info and support for quitting.

In order to reduce stress and feel better in the long term, it's important to find what works for you and your busy lifestyle.

Good Luck!

Alice!

Category: Alcohol & Other Drugs [6]
Cigarettes, Chewing Tobacco, & Other Nicotine [6]

Related questions

Quitting smoking = depression? [7]
My boyfriend?s smoking habits [8]
Cigar and pipe smoking: Safer than cigarettes? [9]
Non-tobacco versus tobacco hookah smoking [10]
How to reduce stress at work [11]
Cold won't go away [12]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [13]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [14]
Stressbusters (Morningside) [15]
Tobacco Cessation (Morningside) [16]
Medical Services (CUMC) [17]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [18]