

After years of dedicated cigarette smoking, Sally Brampton believes she has found a way to shed the shackles of nicotine

# Breaking up with a very old friend

Picture: MARTIN POPE



**W**hen it comes to smoking, my willpower is formidable. I can smoke through hangovers, colds and flu. I've even been known to smoke through bronchitis, although I was briefly defeated by pleurisy.

Why, I wonder, can that determination not be put to better use, such as giving up? I have smoked for years. Far, far longer than I wish to put a figure to. I do it because I love it, but also because, in some deep, inarticulate way, it symbolises me. In my mind, I am smoking. I cannot separate it from my being, so giving up seems like an amputation of some part of my psyche.

Yet the rational part of me knows that the time has come. I know the facts. I know that lung cancer is now a greater killer of women than breast cancer, that women are more vulnerable than men to the most lethal form of lung cancer, that the incidence of heart attacks among women who smoke is higher than among those who don't, and that smoking ruins the texture of your skin and causes premature ageing.

I also know that more young women smoke than men. The percentage of young female smokers has risen from 30 to 37 per cent over the past 10 years. The highest proportion (40 per cent) of smokers is in the 20 to 24 age group.

I think they're nuts. I think I'm nuts. But the smoker in me is immune to reason. Even the heart-felt pleas of my eight-year-old daughter don't stop me. "Mum, did you know that cigarettes contain tar which goes into your lungs and kills you?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply. Her little face screws up. "So you want to die and leave me an orphan?" There's only one answer to that: give up.

My mother was a heavy smoker. She gave up 20 years ago, but all through my childhood, I associated the smell of cigarettes and Joy (the scent she used) with home, comfort and all things good. I love the smell of cigarette smoke. The one time I did manage to give up (when I was pregnant), I used to stand near perfect strangers who were smoking and breathe in deeply. And, oh, the relief when my daughter was born and I could be reunited with my old friend, nicotine.

Why start again? Well, why not? That's the irrational, emotional and addicted smoker in me talking. And I'm seriously addicted, not merely to the physical effects of nicotine but to the culture that surrounds it.

this!). I even smoke first thing in the morning. There is, in my mind, no better way to start a day than with a cigarette and a cup of tea.

And yet, I hate it. Sometimes I catch sight of myself in a mirror or a shop window, a cigarette in my mouth. I think how ridiculous I look, how ugly. I think of the 4,000 different chemicals I breathe into my body each day. I eat incredibly healthy food, take regular exercise, spend absurd amounts on the latest skin products. And for what? So I can ruin it all by smoking.

It's not that haven't tried to give up. I've tried everything from Allen Carr's book, *The Easy Way To Stop Smoking*, to hypnotherapy.

I've tried nicotine patches, gum and pills. I've even (oh, pure desperation) bought toothpaste "guaranteed to make you feel nauseous if you smoke after brushing."

The main issue that puts women off stopping smoking is weight gain. Tell me about it! I've watched friends balloon by seven pounds, one stone, even two stone. I've seen

**'I eat healthy food, invest in skin care and exercise. And for what? So I can ruin it by smoking'**

them go on low-fat diets to counteract the effects of giving up — and all to no effect. Every single one of them has gone back to smoking. Except that, now, they're fatter. The only friend who managed to give up and not gain weight was a recovered alcoholic and cocaine addict.

Then I heard about Valerie Austin, who claims to deliver a 95 per cent success rate without weight gain. Her prime tool is hypnosis, which she maintains can access the subconscious and persuade it to change patterns of behaviour that were set long, long ago.

Her theory is that it's not enough simply to appeal to the conscious mind, as it is the subconscious mind that sends the "Oh, go on, why not?" message to the smoker's brain every time he or she is confronted by a cigarette. Repro-

smoking (my mother, some childish notion of rebellion, a complex reward system) and the negative aspects (to which I freely admit). Then we watched a video in which hypnosis was used on patients undergoing surgery. They experienced no pain. Rather, they sang all the way through excruciatingly painful operations.

The purpose of this, Valerie explained, was to "instil a belief structure in my head that hypnosis works". And then we got down to business. The actual experience was delightful, a cross between meditation and hovering on the borders of sleep. Afterwards, I felt peaceful and infinitely relaxed.

Did it work? Yes, for two days. Which is, in its own way, a miracle. Ordinarily, two hours without a cigarette feels like an eternity. Not to want to smoke for two days was astonishing. So why did I start again? I honestly don't know, except that you have to really want to stop. And right then, I didn't. For reasons too dull to explain, I have had an *annus horribilis*.

**W**hen I said I was intending to stop smoking, all my friends told me I was mad. They were right. The timing was extraordinarily bad. But the whole act of stopping smoking, if only for so short a time, had set some trigger in my head. I was determined to find out more. For example, why do women appear to find it harder than men to give up?

It seems that there are inbuilt differences, although data is vague. According to Dr Edwin Fisher, professor of psychology and medicine and an expert on smoking at Washington University, St Louis, women are simply subject to greater stress. "The stress of running a household, the stress of bumping up against the glass ceiling at work, the stress of being a secretary with four bosses, the stress of worrying about gaining five pounds — all these things really hit on women more than men and make the mood-elevating effects of nicotine especially attractive."

Research also suggests that there are other factors besides nicotine dependence. According to Dr Kenneth A Perkins, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine: "Women may smoke for reasons other than nicotine." These might include non-drug-induced sensory effects, such as seeing and smelling tobacco smoke, conditioned responses to smoke stimuli and social pleasures involved in smoking rituals

that, I now realise, involved a good deal more behavioural than physical pleasure?

Still more studies have noted that the menstrual cycle directly influences women. The best time to stop, according to Dr Perkins, is in the first two weeks after your period has ended.

According to a group study, women who try in the latter part of their cycle experience significantly more anxiety, depression and irritability, and are more than twice as likely to fail. Again, this makes perfect sense. I went to see Valerie the day before my period began, which is, frankly, the act of a lunatic. I am always out of step with the universe on that day, and for three or four days before.

And the last piece of sound advice I discovered is that exercise helps. Most women gain, on average, 12 pounds when they give up. However, research at Brown University in the United States shows that would-be quitters who take up regular exercise not only reduce weight gain to an average of six pounds, but are also twice as successful at breaking the smoking habit. Exercise helps to manage stress, mood, anxiety, depression and blood lipids, and encourages the release of serotonin, which is nature's own feel-good therapy.

As for me, I'm going to see Valerie for a back-up treatment. If she can stop me for two days, I reckon she can stop me for good. But this time, I'm going to time my visit to coincide with the third day after my period ends (when I always feel at peace with the world). Second, I'm going to book a personal trainer for a minimum of three months. And this time, when I give up smoking, I'm going to do it. Really.

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