Blowing Smokes

Ten tips to help positive smokers quit

April 1, 2006 By Christopher Murray

HIV and cigarettes are a toxic mix, yet up to 70% of positive people smoke. I puffed a pack of Marlboros a day for 20 years before realizing that smoking cigarettes increased my risk for HIV-related complications, including oral lesions, pneumonia and dementia. Here's how I kicked my nicotine fits:

1. I gave tobacco its props for having helped me deal with the stress and tension—and plain boredom—of life with HIV. Then I crumpled my last three cigs and flushed them.
2. For my quitting date, I chose a day with meaning—my niece's birthday. I want to make sure I am around for her college graduation.
3. I enlisted some nicotine-replacement therapies like the patch and the gum—New York Medicaid pays for them!
4. I asked friends and family to support me despite my (numerous) previous failures at quitting. One friend played drill sergeant, keeping me in line; another was Big Momma Love, giving me lots of hugs.
5. I asked other positive ex-smokers for help. One POZ staffer offered, "Join an aerobics class. You won't be able to breathe, so you won't pick up another pack. I replaced a toxic obsession with a healthy one—working out."
6. I ate lots and lots of oranges. Their antioxidants and vitamins helped me detoxify; they smelled good—and peeling them kept my hands busy.
7. I rewarded myself: little things like a ginger candy each night and big things like a snazzy new outfit when I reached a month.
8. I didn't sweat the few extra pounds I gained. I knew I was a lot healthier, and eventually I hit the gym.
9. I chanted: "I no longer want to smoke; I know if I do I'll choke. The craving no longer is there; I really would rather breathe air!"
10. I was gentle with myself when I slipped and just got back into the groove. Now, I've been smoke-free for more than three years. Celebrate!

Christopher Murray, MSW, recently organized the world's first conference on HIV and tobacco.

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