



See ya, cigarettes: Snuffing out a 10-year habit

Fred Evans, a high school teacher from Montgomery County, MD, had just picked up his daughter from kindergarten. She got in the car and they chatted about her day. Then, seemingly out of the blue, she said, “Dad, why do you smoke?” Caught completely off guard, Fred danced around the subject, mumbled some sort of excuse and quickly redirected the conversation. He was curious why she asked — she’d seen him smoke before but never asked questions about it. Her reply was simple: “I learned in school today that it’s not good for you.”

About a month later — Dec. 1, 1975, to be exact — Fred came down with a terrible cold and fever. He ran out of cigarettes and was too sick to leave the house to buy more. Despite Fred’s pleadings, his roommate Bob refused to buy any for him. Although they had never argued about Fred’s smoking, Bob clearly was bothered by the smoke in the house — he didn’t want to enable Fred’s habit. So, without any cigarettes on hand, Fred had to go smokeless for two days.

This was when his daughter’s comment “hit me between the eyes,” he says. He decided this would be the beginning of the end of his smoking addiction. In addition to his roommate disliking his smoking, his doctor had been encouraging him to quit. The doctor talked about just a few of the health benefits of quitting smoking, including:

- Lower heart rate and blood pressure
- Improved circulation and increased lung function
- Lower risk of heart disease and stroke
- Decrease in the risk of several types of cancer, including lung, mouth, throat, esophagus, bladder and pancreas*

Breaking the habit

"I had one of those 'a-ha' moments," Fred says of the day he realized he could use his decision to quit as a teachable moment for his students. He let them in on it, not only to use himself as an example, but also because, as he puts it, "Mr. Evans may get a little cranky or wound up these next few days because I'm trying to stop smoking."

One student, in particular, was ready to keep Fred honest. Each day he wrote on the chalkboard how many days Fred had been smoke-free. When Fred hit the 30-day mark, his cravings had subsided and he felt fully confident that he was done for good. He assured his student that he no longer needed to keep track.

After Fred stopped smoking, he wondered why he'd even started in the first place. Looking back, when he started smoking in college, he recalls often feeling nauseated. But, everybody he knew smoked, so he went along with the crowd.

Fred shakes his head, recalling that the school in which he taught even had designated smoking areas — outside for students and inside for staff. "It was a smoking culture," he says. "It was accepted that people were going to smoke." In those days, people weren't as aware of the health threats of smoking as they are today.

Fred says he noticed a big difference in his health, for the better, once he stopped smoking. He'd always been active, but could feel a change in his stamina. Quitting smoking also was something Fred could focus on mentally, as well. He was going through a divorce at the time, and being strong enough to quit smoking gave him some additional self-esteem during a difficult time in his personal life. "It was amazing how much better I started to feel about myself — aside from the physical, just being able to conquer something like that [was incredible]," he says.

A temptation gone

Fred is proud to report that he hasn't had a single puff since he ran out of cigarettes on that fateful day in December of 1975. "I haven't thought about cigarettes in years. I wouldn't even give [taking up smoking again] a single thought," he says. Fred often shares the tale of his daughter's question with others, hoping it may make a difference in their lives. "I've told this story to [students] at opportune times, especially to kids who I knew were smokers," he says.

He describes his former habit as both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, he was addicted to cigarettes, which he knows was terrible for his health. But, on the other hand, he can relate to smokers — he's been in their shoes, so he can provide encouragement: If he can quit, so can they.

For others trying to quit, Fred suggests a tactic he uses whenever trying to solve a personal problem: tell others. He says letting others know your challenge helps you feel accountable for following through on your plans — and you'll also have an automatic support system of cheerleaders. When he told his students of his plan to quit, he says they encouraged him, and he didn't want to disappoint them by not finishing what he started.

Fred was able to inspire his wife, too. Like Fred, she also quit on Dec. 1 — about four years ago. This simple story that started with an innocent question made a lasting impression on Fred, and he'll never puff again.

*Source: American Cancer Society

Get the facts

You'll find more information at smokefree.gov — this site provides free, accurate, evidence-based information and professional assistance to help support the immediate and long-term needs of people trying to quit smoking.

You also can visit myuhc.com[®], where you can find information about smoking, including a cost of smoking calculator, the risks of secondhand smoke and more. Once you log on, click “Look up health topics” and type “smoking” into the search bar.



Insurance coverage provided by or through UnitedHealthcare Insurance Company or its affiliates. Administrative services provided by UnitedHealthcare Insurance Company, United HealthCare Services, Inc. or their affiliates.