



PENNSYLVANIA

Statewide Tobacco-Free  
Recovery Initiative

## **Big Tobacco's Narrative is Cunning, Baffling and Powerful**

An influencer is a person or group that has the ability to impact the behavior or opinions of others, and while we live in a time when social media plays a huge role in how we communicate information, factual or false, there is nothing new to strategically placed, reinforced messaging to set trends and sell products. In the 1950's, when medical research first validated that smoking caused lung cancer, a priority of the cigarette companies was to counter that information through misleading ad campaigns to deny the findings, create doubt, and develop a deceptive narrative that not only glamorized smoking, but emphasized that it was beneficial to our emotional well-being.

We were bombarded with billboards, magazine ads, radio and television commercials with messages that tobacco use would help us to achieve happiness, find pleasure, and to cope with life's stressors. Nearly all of us are too young to remember the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century claims of "soothing nerves", "smoking your anxiety away", or "light up before your nerves get tired and tense", but those messages strongly influenced how we came to believe that smoking plays a beneficial role within our understanding of drug recovery. The messages were intentionally misleading, but it was an easy sell. Cigarette smoking is legal and doesn't get us high or drunk so it can't be a problem, right?

We were played. Big Tobacco accomplished their goal. Tobacco use became the social norm, a prime way to connect with peers. Meaningful conversations happened over a cup of coffee and a cigarette. "Having a rough day? Let's smoke a cigarette and talk about it." We failed to see nicotine as an addictive drug and the leading cause of death in the recovery community. Bill W. and Dr. Bob, the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous died from tobacco-related illness. As did Danny C. and Jimmy K., key figures in the founding of Narcotics Anonymous. Tobacco killed Marty Mann, founder of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, and Marie Nyswander, a physician that helped to develop methadone maintenance. The list goes on. Many of the pioneers of addiction treatment and recovery mutual aid societies died of tobacco-related disorders. Most of us have and continue to lose family members and other significant people in our lives to tobacco.

Social norms are the standards we live by. They guide our behavior and manage shared expectations. Sometimes we become so comfortable with our norms, we don't think about how they may be negatively impacting our lives. Without realizing it, our words and actions reinforce them. Many of us believe that we need to smoke cigarettes to manage craving for other substances and if we stop, we'll get high again; that tobacco use is an effective way to manage anger, depression, anxiety, and other uncomfortable feelings, or we must be in

recovery for at least 12-months before giving consideration to stopping our tobacco use. The tobacco industry narrative passed down over the years clearly continues to influence our views and decision-making.

So, what can do about this? Changing social norms is difficult and it will take a collective effort. We can challenge unhealthy beliefs by sharing truthful information, reframe the way we talk about tobacco, and express a sense of hope for positive behavior change. We may wish to stop using the term “smoking,” something the ad agencies taught us to associate to being cool, sexy, or rebellious, and recognize “tobacco use disorder” as a chronic, relapsing condition that warrants treatment consistent to how we promote recovery from other substances. “Tobacco recovery” implies a very different orientation to behavior change than “smoking cessation.” Developing tobacco free coping skills is achievable and a rewarding growth-promoting process. Let’s stop scaring one another by describing an anxiety-producing “quit” event. While the journey to recovery is an intensely personal one, the basis of all recovery is hope and a belief that our current circumstances can be improved, managed, and overcome. Together, we can expose the false narrative, support one another, and move into a better place.

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