



PENNSYLVANIA

Statewide Tobacco-Free
Recovery Initiative



Stress and Tobacco Use: The Problem, Not the Solution

Does tobacco use relieve stress? It's a common belief shared by many people in recovery. Why is that, and where exactly did this thinking come from? More importantly, is it true? The answers are a bit complicated, but when we examine them through our understanding of substance use disorder, they're not surprising.

Smoking cigarettes or vaping nicotine stimulates production of the "feel good" chemical in the brain called dopamine which creates feelings of pleasure. When we combine lighting up with social contact, such as having a heart-to-heart with a peer when having a rough day, we distract from the source of our stress and that makes us feel better. Dopamine contributes to the pleasure of the experience, in part from using nicotine and in part due to personal interaction.

The problem is that dopamine production within this scenario reinforces smoking behavior, and the feel-good part doesn't last. As the effect of the nicotine wears off, tobacco withdrawal kicks in. We need to smoke another cigarette to manage the discomfort of craving. This traps the tobacco user into a constant reoccurring cycle to smoke more to avoid withdrawal. Temporarily removing the symptoms of withdrawal is confused with a false impression of stress relief. Nicotine is a stimulant that increases blood pressure and heart rate, constricts blood vessels, and decreases oxygen to our brain and body. A chronic state of elevated stress and anxiety happens when we develop a tobacco use disorder.

The tobacco industry has a long history of creating and reinforcing the myth that tobacco abstinence would be too stressful for individuals in recovery from other substances. They do this to keep us smoking. It's a lie that perpetuates a sense of hopelessness, fuels stigma, and maintains cigarette sales. Nonetheless, the myth has been passed down over the years. It still influences our thinking and keeps many of us hooked on tobacco products.

Learning how to manage our day without using tobacco often results in decreased depression, anxiety, and stress, and increased positive mood. Many who have stopped smoking report a boost to self-confidence and improved self-image. Better physical health and wellness is common, and you may have heard that letting go of tobacco enhances our probability for long-term recovery.

So please know that when it comes to managing stress, tobacco use is the problem, not the solution.

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