

**Thousands of people** stubbed out their 'last' cigarette on New Year's Eve. But by now, most of them will be back smoking and will have given up giving up once more.

Two years ago I tried yet again to give up smoking. I am a war-weary veteran of this vice, having assiduously attacked the addiction from all fronts, including acupuncture, hypnosis, relaxation therapy and behaviour modification courses. Nothing had ever worked, however, to wean me off the weed. On this attempt it was cold turkey time again but the difference was that I had an incentive: I wanted to try to get pregnant.

On day one, I stayed in bed until 1 p.m. to put off facing the future without a fag and, being self-employed, I decided to carry on this economically ill-advised ploy all week. But even when I did get up I couldn't work. I paced the floor fighting a fearful longing, ate a bag of sweets and thought seriously that life no longer seemed worth living.

I expected it would get better after day three. Instead it just got worse, as if I were on a rack and being stretched further each day. Catching a whiff of cigarette smoke from a passing smoker in the street was exquisite torture. Increasing irritation led, on day four, to a major row with my nearest and dearest. On day five, in a dreamy sort of fashion, I scraped my car along a brick wall and drove home with the fog lights on at three o'clock on a bright afternoon. On the sixth day I cracked. On the seventh I was a 40-a-day smoker once more.

On 25th February I stopped again and I haven't smoked since. This time I wasn't irritable at all. Nor did it bother me if people smoked around me. I didn't fear that I would accept a cigarette the first time someone offered me one. I put on no weight and didn't change my habits, except for not smoking. I now understand why I had such a bad time before and although it wasn't easy, it was still a lot better than it had ever been.

What was different was that I had attended a stop smoking course called Full Stop, which teaches you, not tricks and gimmicks, but such effective common sense and home truths that I was able to bring an entirely new attitude to my efforts to give up. What's more, the common sense I learned could be applied to giving

up all sorts of undesired behaviour, be it overeating, drinking, nail-biting or whatever.

I now accept that smoking and other addictions are irresponsible behaviours in more than merely the sense of being damaging to health. The would-be ex-smoker (or drinker or eater) will do anything to avoid taking responsibility for their habit, reeling off such excuses as: "I smoke because of my nerves" or "I'm only a smoker because I have such a stressful job" or "It's no wonder I smoke when my partner's so mean to me, my parents drive me mad *and* I have a stressful job." For me it was "I smoke because I'm physically addicted." (Although, in fact, nicotine disappears from the system after three smoke-free days and any remaining addiction is in the mind.)

We also convince ourselves that we are victims of circumstance. What we rarely admit is that we've chosen our addiction, and chosen to perpetuate it. After all, there are plenty of people in circumstances similar to or more

are saying (in effect) is, 'I don't care about my health but I'll stop because *you* want me to,' you are not taking control of your life in an adult way. You are acting like a child and making the other person your parent whom you then resent because you feel they are depriving you of what you want. This just provokes temper tantrums and rebellion."

The same point, I learned, can also apply to stopping smoking only for a forthcoming baby (the baby gets resented), giving up smoking with a friend (i.e. sharing the responsibility and expecting the friend to keep you on the straight and narrow) or enlisting the support of non-smoking partners or friends to keep you immune to temptation.

Another way of avoiding taking responsibility is to trivialise your smoking, drinking or eating as 'just a habit' that you could give up at any time you wanted to. Addiction, particularly to a drug, is powerful. It can cause us to dream up ingenious ways to deny our addiction or rationalise

## **you** It could be easier than you think. **By Denise Winn.** **can stop** **smoking**

stressful than ours who don't choose smoking, drinking or overeating to deal with them. When we try to stop smoking without having taken full responsibility for being a smoker, we are usually doomed to failure.

"Stopping smoking for the benefit of others, e.g. your partner or the people you work with, is also a form of irresponsibility," says ex-smoker Gillian Riley, who teaches the Full Stop course. "I know many books and courses recommend it but what I see is that the people who come to my course with only that sort of motivation don't stop smoking. If what you

it, saying things like: "I'm happy to be a smoker" or "Of course I plan to stop one day but not just yet" or "I'll know the time is right when one day I wake up and find I just don't want to smoke any more."

Giving up anything successfully, says Gillian, entails seeing that we *are* responsible for it and we have the choice to do it or not. The less successful among us at giving things up tend to be final and dramatic about our decisions to stop. We get into the trap of thinking, "I can never have another cigarette." And then we become victims again. It's as if there



weren't a single cigarette left in the world and so we experience deprivation (along with resentment, rebellion, irritability and despair) instead of seeing that we still have the choice to smoke if we really want to.

I no longer smoke because, at last, I choose not to: for myself. It sounds so simple but addiction can do the damndest things to your motivation and many people need assistance to untangle their negative thinking.

We may try to avoid making a choice, for instance, by trying to deny desire. Isn't it amazing when someone who smoked 60 cigarettes a day

for 15 years suddenly declares they have no desire to smoke again? What they are doing is repressing their desire in an unconscious effort to avoid feeling craving and discomfort. Sometimes that works, because anything works for some people. But for those of us who are repeated failures, at some point the desire comes roaring back—maybe weeks or months afterwards—and then we have no power to resist it.

If we can't repress we may try to avoid the places or events that trigger off the desire—going to the pub, talking on the phone or having a cup of

coffee. Not only does life become even more insufferable with these additional deprivations but, again, we are quite unprepared to handle the unexpectedly, overwhelmingly wonderful smell from the cigarette of the man who has come to fix the plumbing, or the seductive sight of the woman in the bus queue peeling off the cellophane from our favourite brand. The other common ploy, of course, is to try to suppress the desire to smoke by eating, drinking, pacing the floor or any other substitute behaviour.

"Stopping the habit correctly is about looking at what it is that goes on in your mind that makes you smoke, that blocks you stopping and that can lead you back to smoking," says Gillian. "It is not just about getting the nicotine out of the body but about taking care of the long term, e.g. the time of crisis even a year after stopping when the old kneejerk reaction of wanting to smoke comes back again. Staying off smoking is a skill that has to be learned just like swimming or driving. It is not a single event, it is a process."

Choice, I have learned, is empowering. It is the starting point, from where it is possible to learn workable ways to achieve a goal. I found, as a result, that my worst stop-smoking experiences—the tetchiness, the tearfulness, the constant teetering on the brink of failure and the absurd wish to die—didn't happen at all this time.

But many people who do the Full Stop course say that they get a lot more from it than just how to handle giving up smoking. For Caroline, who stopped smoking eight months ago, "It has meant realising that I always have a choice—about anything, from smoking to taking on responsibilities. And that realisation has been very liberating." ☑