

# Tobacco: Twelve Years with the Golden Leaf

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## Introduction

Tobacco, whose smoke and juices and powders were once limited to small-scale ceremonial use on special occasions, is now available in any convenience store on the planet in cigarettes, a pre-measured, carefully engineered, metered delivery technology. What follows below is an account of my experiences with tobacco addiction and withdrawal. I cannot say that my experience has been typical. Nor can I recommend my path out of dependence. This is just the story of my relationship with tobacco, of my love for and bondage to the golden leaf.

## Years One to Two -- The Beginning (March 1988 - Summer 1990)

I decided I wanted to become a smoker. I was 17 years old. I looked at my options and figured that if I started out smoking two or three ultralight cigarettes a day, I could prepare my lungs for regular-strength cigarette smoke after a week. The plan worked. For the next couple of years, I smoked two or three cigarettes a day, except when I went to parties and consumed alcohol. Under "party" circumstances, I could easily smoke a pack (20 cigarettes) an evening. During these early years, I still consumed tobacco for pleasure, for the nicotine rush. I was still able to stop smoking if I did not feel like smoking. At some point in the middle of this period, I was able to go a couple of months without smoking without experiencing withdrawal.

## Year Three -- Addiction (Summer 1990)

The hammer fell. I woke up one day and something was different. Something felt different in my mind. I did not want to smoke a cigarette that morning; I needed to smoke a cigarette. It was a frightening revelation: I am addicted. I was still only smoking up to four cigarettes a day, except at parties.

## Years Three to Seven -- Ramping Up and Steady Rate (Summer 1990 - March 1995)

During this period, my daily cigarette consumption slowly ramped up. By 1993, I was smoking a full pack a day. The ritual of the smoking process (packing, lighting, holding, flicking ashes, gesturing, extinguishing) had become a source of reassuring pleasure. Physically, smoking met my needs, maintained my new neurochemistry; smoking was no longer about any nicotine rush or buzz. Many people did not know I smoked because I never smoked in my house, or at least never in my room. Consequently, my clothing never smelled of smoke. I could not stand the smoke reek that clung to peoples' clothing; I loved the flavor though. I knew which shops had the best prices, the freshest cigarettes.

I did most of my smoking in my car as I drove around from work site to work site, or while I ran errands. In addition, I had broken up my two 15 minute work breaks (one in morning, one in afternoon) into six hourly five-minute breaks. I was never longer than an hour away from a cigarette while I was working. This proved to be great for on-the-job networking: one learns a great deal when one meets and chats with the same people, from all different departments and levels in an organization, four or five times a day.

Visiting relatives who disapproved of smoking became difficult. A weekend visit would leave me anxious from the craving. I would sometimes make excuses to get out of the house and drive to the mall where I could smoke a cigarette in the parking lot. I would look forward to Sunday when I knew I could chain-smoke the whole four-hour drive back home.

## Years Seven to Eight -- Withdrawal and a New Steady Rate (March 1995 - May 1996)

A series of personal crises prompted me to look at my smoking patterns. I decided to cut back from a full pack a day to a half-pack a day (10 cigarettes). There I was, still smoking AND experiencing withdrawal at the same time. Addiction. It seemed like every cell in my body was screaming for nicotine (and whatever other addictive substances there are in tobacco smoke). I knew that smokers' neurochemistry changed, that, among other effects, nicotine partially replaced the production of a neurotransmitter (acetylcholine, I believe). I was starving every cell in my body of something it needed, every neuron was gasping, and my body was making sure I knew it. Somehow, I managed to make it. I cut down to 10 cigarettes a day. I still wanted to smoke more, but I was able to hold out. I would smoke five cigarettes during the workday (including one on the drive home), then smoke five each evening. It was not a very balanced intake schedule, but it worked for me. Early during this period, I switched from smoking heavily processed cigarettes produced under a major national brand to smoking a relatively new and hard to find "natural" brand of cigarettes. "Whole Leaf, Natural Tobacco... 100% Additive-free." Those cigarettes cost more, but they tasted better, and I reckoned that if I was hurting myself by maintaining my addiction, I should at least enjoy it more.

#### **Year Eight -- Full Withdrawal and Real Failure (May 1996 - Late Summer 1996)**

I experienced some more personal crises. One of my responses was to quit smoking altogether. I think I was unconsciously using the pain of quitting to punish myself for personal failings. Pain. My cells were screaming again, but this time it was unbearable. I woke up at dawn one day and walked to a pharmacy to get some transdermal nicotine patches. They helped a little, but they were inadequate. The dosage was all wrong. Too little nicotine dribbling in at the wrong times. Moreover, the patch delivered none of the other possibly addictive but less known compounds in cigarette smoke. With a cigarette there was close to total control of dosage. I lost my appetite and forced myself to eat lots of ice cream to keep my calorie intake up. I lasted about three months, and cheated often. Thankfully, I have a high metabolism; the "addiction" to ice cream lasted for a couple of years after I had taken up smoking again. One valuable lesson I learned was that I could use nicotine patches when I traveled and visited nonsmokers and would be unable to smoke for a few days. Not an ideal solution, but helpful.

#### **Years Eight to Ten -- Steady Rate of Consumption Reset (Late Summer 1996 - Late 1998)**

I smoked again. This time I quickly ramped up to a pack a day, twenty cigarettes a day. Years of smoking; I knew that I was hurting myself. I smoked whenever I was outside. I often chain-smoked. I always knew exactly how many cigarettes I had; I knew how long I had before I would have to seek out a fresh pack of cigarettes. I was always aware of whether I had enough matches, or a lighter, and how much fluid the lighter held. Cigarette prices were rising; still I smoked. I took some pleasure when I had to rush into a building and extinguish a half-smoked cigarette. These were rare indirect victories against an addiction I knew I had to fight, but could not attack directly.

#### **Years Ten to Eleven -- Realizing that the End is Near (Late 1998 - October 1999)**

Sometime in late 1998 or early 1999, I began noticing that I was getting chest pains. It took me months to realize that the pains were localized over my heart, and a few more months to note that they were worse immediately after I had smoked a cigarette. I would lightly thump at my chest, but the transient dull pain would not change. Then I began the several months of preparing, of readying myself to quit. I had no choice; I could not ignore this sign. I went on a weeklong camping trip in September of 1999 during which I allowed myself to smoke as much as I wanted, as much as I could. I went through a carton and a half, about 300 cigarettes, after which I would quit.

#### **Year Eleven -- Quitting (October 1999)**

I had done my research. I knew there was a prescribed drug on the market, an antidepressant that had been shown to reduce the craving for smoking cigarette tobacco. Considering my earlier failure with transdermal nicotine patches, I went to my personal physician and asked for a prescription for Bupropion HCL in a sustained-release pill form. I took this medication.

"Clang!" It felt like there was a part of my mind that had been moving and fluid that was suddenly and violently stopped. It was an extremely unpleasant event. That first evening after my first ingestion, at half doses, I woke up and my vision had degraded. Soon other, increasingly unpleasant side effects began appearing: lost libido, tremors, headaches, etc. This was not like my earlier withdrawal episodes, but, at the very least, my urge to smoke was gone.

I sought advice from regular consumers of Bupropion HCL. They were confused by my descriptions of my side effects and suggested that I keep taking the medicine. My side effects got worse and worse until, a week or so later, I felt I had to stop taking the medication. I realized that I had been getting advice on my reactions from individuals who were taking the medication for depression, not for smoking cessation. The differences in neurochemistry must have been significant. It took months for some of the side effects to go away. I sought out friends and acquaintances that had tried this medication. Those who were on the medication for depression seemed to have had mostly positive experiences; those that had gone on the medication to cease smoking had had mostly negative experiences. Some of the negative experiences related to me included suicidal ideation and schizophrenia-like states. Given my experience, and those of others, I can not recommend this path to smoking cessation. I decided that after my rather traumatic experience, I would not smoke and I would force myself to go "cold turkey" and just not smoke at all. I had been "scared straight."

#### **Years Eleven to Twelve -- Withdrawal Continues** (November 1999 - May 2000)

The following two months were difficult. I had to deal with the lingering and diminishing Bupropion HCL side effects and the rapidly growing nicotine withdrawal symptoms. In weakness, I "cheated" twice. The pain, the constant craving, the insomnia, these symptoms only kept getting stronger. I tried smoking non-tobacco herbal cigarettes (containing horehound and coltsfoot) for a month to help put off the psychological withdrawal symptoms. This torturous state peaked after about 3 months then slowly started diminishing.

#### **Year Twelve -- Withdrawal and Recovery** (May 2000)

It has gotten much easier to resist the craving. I still crave tobacco. I still love tobacco. Several times a day I feel a pull deep in my self, a deep body-wide longing to smoke, to feel the smoke sliding into my lungs, to taste the sweetness of the golden leaf's smoke rolling in my mouth. On occasion, I love spending hours in cafes watching other people smoke, breathing in the second hand smoke that fills such places. I am not torturing myself by placing myself in such situations. I approach such situations as challenges, as tests of my ability to resist while surrounded by a thing that would make me feel good but would ultimately kill me in some incredibly unpleasant manner. I am told it will take many years for my lung tissue to completely replace itself, and that bits of my brain altered by my addiction will take years to (incompletely) "rewire" themselves. In addition, I will continue to have a higher risk (although greatly reduced from when I was a smoker) for cancer compared to a typical non-smoker. My chest no longer hurts; I think whatever harm I might have been doing to my heart has lessened, and it may be healing.

#### **Conclusion**

Smoking has been a part of my life for all of my adulthood. I am now learning what it is like to live a life without the comfort or indignities associated with smoking. The tobacco golden leaf is still with me; it will be with me for many years to come, perhaps until I die. The addiction will linger; I understand that the draw will be in me for decades to come. However, through resistance, my death will likely be less horrific than it could have been. There is some real comfort in that knowledge.