

# C O N T E N T S

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## INTRODUCTION

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In survey after survey, the vast majority of smokers say they would like to stop – the most recent national survey<sup>1</sup> found that 72% of smokers said this. The reasons given traditionally relate to health impacts, rising costs and the growing inconvenience of smoking. Many smokers expressing these views also report having tried to stop in the past, but many others persist for several years as unhappy smokers before being able to stop. A new survey for No Smoking Day<sup>2</sup> has examined this phenomenon in more depth, measuring the extent of smokers' regrets about starting smoking and probing the underlying reasons. The results portray a group of deeply unhappy consumers, many of whom transfer their feelings of disgust about their smoking onto themselves. The research suggests that, far from helping smokers feel confident, cool and composed, as cigarette manufacturers aspire, smoking makes people feel down, dowdy and distressed.

## SUMMARY

- 83% of smokers say they would not smoke if they had their time again.
- Women were significantly more likely than men to regret ever smoking (87% vs. 79%).
- The reasons why smokers regret starting fall mainly into 5 categories: Health, Expense, Addiction, Disgust and Stigma.
- Younger smokers are significantly more likely than older smokers to cite Addiction as their main regret.
- The poorest smokers are least likely to cite Expense as a reason for regret.
- Women tend to give more reasons than men, and are more likely than men to express concern about Addiction and Disgust.
- Despite the frequency with Health and Expense concerns are mentioned, the mild manner in which they are usually expressed suggest that smokers may be downplaying those issues while feeling the more emotional effects more deeply.
- The extent, range and depth of smokers' regrets about starting could, with sensitivity, be explored as powerful motivators in cessation interventions.

## THE STUDY METHOD

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**“IF YOU HAD  
YOUR TIME  
AGAIN, WOULD  
YOU START  
SMOKING?”**

Data were gathered from 2 waves of the ONS Omnibus Survey in Great Britain during October and November 2001, yielding responses from 846 smokers<sup>3</sup>. All of those smokers were asked: “If you had your time again, would you start smoking?” All who answered “no” were asked: “Why is that?” and responses were recorded verbatim.

Responses were analysed for their general content and 5 clear themes emerged. Responses were then individually classified into these themes by three judges, among whom agreement was very good. Variations in responses were examined by age, sex and socio-economic status – the indicator variable for socio-economic status was created by combining information on housing tenure, access to a car and educational qualifications.

# RESULTS

## THE EXTENT OF REGRETS

It is clear that starting smoking is something that is widely regretted. To gauge smokers' overall feelings in this respect, respondents were first asked whether, if they had their time again, they would start smoking.

TABLE 1: *The response pattern is shown in Table 1.*

**If you had your time over again, would you start smoking?**

	SEX				AGE RANGE					SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP			
	TOTAL %	M %	F %		16-29 %	30-39 %	40-49 %	50-59 %	60+ %	0 %	1 %	2 %	3 %
Yes	10	12	8		11	10	9	4	11	10	8	9	12
No	83	79	87		82	81	86	91	79	82	86	85	77
Don't know	7	9	5		7	8	4	5	10	7	6	5	11

The response pattern was remarkably similar across age and socio-economic groups but the main significant difference was across the sexes: women were significantly more likely than men to regret ever smoking (87% vs. 79%).

It is interesting to note that younger smokers, who might be expected to be more contented smokers as a result of discounting future health impacts, were just as likely to express regret as older smokers.

It appears then that smoking-related discontent sets in early in the smoking years. As few smokers quit before middle age, it appears that smoking is causing millions of smokers to spend many years enduring lowered self-esteem ~ a neglected side-effect of smoking.

TABLE 2:

### Response Categories

REGRET CATEGORY	% OF SMOKERS CITING THIS REGRET
Health	61%
Expense	43%
Addiction	20%
Disgust	17%
Social stigma	5%

## THE ROOTS OF REGRET

The 83% of smokers who said they would not start smoking again were asked to give reasons for that view. Over half (58%) offered just one reason – 32% cited 2 reasons and 11% cited 3 or more reasons.

The great majority of the reasons given (93%) fell into five main categories: Health, Expense, Addiction, Disgust and Social Stigma.

*The overall distribution of responses is shown in Table 2.*

## RESULTS

TABLE 3:  
**Age distribution of response categories**

	AGE RANGE					
	TOTAL %	16-29 %	30-39 %	40-49 %	50-59 %	60+ %
Health	61	57	59	64	69	59
Expense	43	45	45	44	39	40
Addiction	20	26	22	21	14	15
Disgust	17	18	23	15	11	16
Social stigma	5	3	6	10	6	2

### WHO REGRETS WHAT?

There were no age-related differences in expressions of health, disgust and expense concerns. Age related differences were seen in concern about addiction, which was significantly more likely in younger smokers than older ones, and in concerns about social stigma which were more common in middle-aged smokers.

TABLE 4:  
**Sex variation in response categories**

	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE
	%	%	%
Health	61	65	59
Expense	43	42	44
Addiction	20	16	24
Disgust	17	12	21
Social stigma	5	5	6

The sexes showed some differences in their sources of regret about smoking: women mentioned addiction significantly more frequently than men (24% vs. 16%), and they were also more likely to express feelings of disgust (21% vs. 12%). Overall, women tended to give more reasons than men. This may reflect women's greater emotional dependence on their cigarettes as found in an earlier No Smoking Day study *Sex and Smoking*<sup>4</sup>, which also highlighted the greater difficulty women experience in stopping smoking.

TABLE 5:  
**Socio-economic group variation in response categories**

	SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP				
	TOTAL %	0 %	1 %	2 %	3 %
Health	61	64	58	59	67
Expense	43	45	48	44	30
Addiction	20	22	23	16	18
Disgust	17	14	19	18	18
Social stigma	5	9	3	5	1

There were also some differences in the range of reasons expressed across socio-economic groups (Table 5). Paradoxically, the poorest smokers were least likely to cite regrets about the expense of smoking. They were least likely to mention stigma, which was most frequently mentioned by the most affluent groups (10%). This may of course reflect the wide differences in smoking prevalence across socio-economic groups – where smoking is highly prevalent, it will attract little stigma. Health, disgust and addiction concerns were felt equally across the socio-economic groups.

## THE THEMES IN DEPTH

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### HEALTH

*“It will kill me in the end if I don’t stop”*

Health worries, the number one concern, were expressed in a variety of terms. Most respondents expressed general health concerns, but many identified specific reasons. These ranged from noticeably decreased physical fitness to accounts of smoking-related illness they were currently suffering, and even the impact of smoking-related deaths among close family and friends.

*“it has caused me arterial sclerosis in my left leg”*

*“I probably would not have had angina . . . I can’t go upstairs to the hairdressers any more so probably would have been able to if angina hadn’t affected my breathing”*

*“I’ve seen my mum suffering”*

*“Being a nurse I have watched so many people die from lung cancer – why did I start? I would not do it again”*

Many seemed to be doubly concerned that that they were already noticing health damage at a young age.

*“I’m 45 and I have a bad chest and the rest ”*

*“I’m only 40 and I do get breathless quite quickly”*

*“I’m only 32 and cannot run very far without getting out of breath”*

However, although health effects were widely mentioned by smokers, the relatively mild and general language used in the majority of the comments and the apparent surprise at early onset of health effects might suggest that smokers are in fact downplaying this aspect of smoking.

Compared with the stronger and more detailed language used to express feelings of disgust, addiction and stigma, the health-related comments are much softer.

This may be related to smokers’ tendency to discount future health damage and mistakenly perceive the main diseases to be inevitable or normal diseases of old age. A further possible explanation may of course be the considerable efforts of the tobacco industry to distract attention from the health impact of smoking. Health warnings have until recently been phrased in rather general terms, and have been relatively insignificant on packaging and advertising.

The introduction of stronger, more prominent warnings in September 2002 may well affect smokers’ willingness to confront the extent and detail of the health impact.

## THE THEMES IN DEPTH

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### EXPENSE

*"It's financial – think of the thousands I've spent"*

*"It's money up in smoke"*

With cigarettes now costing an average of £4.30 for 20, the expense of smoking is considerable in absolute terms, but the impact of that expense clearly varies from one smoker to another. Some regret that smoking is expensive now compared to when they started; others simply mention the cost in absolute terms. A frequently expressed theme however was a sense of waste and poor value for money. As with comments about health, it was interesting to note that the most frequent comments were relatively mild general comments, with fewer couched in stronger language. It may well be that smokers will generally acknowledge expense issues but not allow themselves to think too deeply about it or quantify their personal expenditure, as feelings of guilt and waste can be uncomfortable.

When such feelings were expressed in the survey, they were often associated with reflecting on a lifetime's smoking or with family financial responsibilities.

Cigarette manufacturers are acutely aware of the impact of this issue on their most important customer base – less affluent smokers.

With little opportunity to affect the official retail price of a pack, they employ a variety of marketing strategies to address the value issue. These include providing voucher schemes, large pack sizes (25 vs. the normal 20) and, more pervasively, creating brand identities that imply luxury and quality.

*"It's a waste of money. Look what I have spent over the years on cigarettes. I'm not working at the moment so no money - even less because I'm smoking. It's a waste of money."*

*"It costs a fortune and it's not good for me"*

*"it's so pointless as it's so expensive to smoke"*

*"it's so expensive for something that does you harm"*

## THE THEMES IN DEPTH

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### ADDICTION

*“It’s a drug and once you’ve started it’s very difficult to stop”*

*“It’s easy to get into but difficult to get out of”*

*“It just makes you gasp for cigarettes, so I’d rather not be that way”*

One of the most interesting aspects of many smokers’ comments on addiction is the sense of shock and surprise that underpins them. It is striking that so many describe having found themselves unexpectedly addicted very quickly after starting.

*“I thought that one would be enough and that would be it  
but then I had another one and then one again”*

*“I was 7 years old and no-one told me  
it would get to be a habit I’d not be able to break”*

It is also striking that the state of being addicted is so frequently perceived as unattractive, weak - almost shameful in some smokers’ eyes. Some see themselves in similar terms as alcohol and hard drug abusers.

*“It comes to control your life –  
I have a physical craving which stops me doing other things.”*

*“I don’t like the feeling that I’m hooked on it  
and I’m very much against the idea of addiction”*

*“It’s the same as if you are an alcoholic”*

The addictive nature of smoking is of course an aspect the cigarette manufacturers strive hard to downplay or even deny. As a Tobacco Manufacturers’ Association spokesman put it . . .

*“The definition of addiction is wide and varied.  
People are addicted to the Internet. Others are addicted to shopping, sex, tea, and  
coffee. The line I would take is that tobacco isn’t addictive but habit forming”.<sup>5</sup>*

## THE THEMES IN DEPTH

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### DISGUST

*“It’s an expensive, filthy habit – antisocial”*

*“I hate it. Everything about it is disgusting. It is killing me. When you start when you’re a kid you think you can stop. I have tried so many times to stop I have seen myself crying.”*

*“I can’t stand it, I keep trying to give up”*

*“It’s a horrible habit, bad for health, stinky, and passive smoking is bad for others”*

*“It’s disgusting, smelly and horrible”*

The strength of the language used to express these regrets about smoking was one of the survey’s main surprises. While it might be expected that non-smokers and ex-smokers would feel revulsion towards cigarette smoke, it was surprising that so many current smokers shared those feelings. Smoking is not something that smokers feel comfortable about, but even beyond the external unpleasantness, very few even claim to enjoy the activity itself.

### SOCIAL STIGMA

*“You’re a social outcast if you smoke today”*

*“Less and less people find it acceptable – it’s a more difficult thing to do these days”*

With smoking prevalence now reduced to only 27%<sup>6</sup> of adults, and smoke-free environments increasingly widespread, it is not surprising that smokers can feel stigmatised. It is interesting however that the effect does not seem to provoke resentment or defensiveness in smokers, but rather reinforces their negative feelings about smoking in general.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The physical health effects of smoking are well known and well documented. The impact of smoking on mental health is less frequently discussed, but may well be an aspect deserving of greater attention when assisting smokers who want to stop. It has been documented that smokers display higher levels of anxiety symptoms than non-smokers, which reduce when they stop smoking.<sup>7</sup>

This study provides pointers to at least some of the issues that trouble smokers, and that will diminish when they stop.

It is not uncommon for smokers to describe feelings of elation, self-confidence and pride when they stop, lending greater weight to the theory that smoking itself affects self-esteem and anxiety.

A stress-reduction effect has been found to be a powerful motivator in encouraging people to increase their physical activity levels<sup>8</sup>. It may also be a helpful motivator when helping people stop smoking.

When professionals attempt to help smokers stop, their main concerns are to ensure that smokers plan properly, use appropriate treatments and maintain their motivation in the early weeks when relapse is most likely. Smokers are often encouraged to use cognitive techniques, listing reasons for wanting to stop and contrasting them with feelings about smoking.

This survey suggests that smokers share many common concerns about their smoking, but that they express some in stronger terms than others. It may be useful in building motivation to help smokers explore and express their full range of regrets about starting smoking, particularly health and expense issues, in order to emphasise the corresponding benefits they will accrue very quickly after stopping.

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***“It was a big mistake.  
I think of all the money I’ve wasted and all the health problems I  
may have in store for me and the damage I’ve done to other people”***

## THE HYPE AND THE REALITY

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The tobacco industry's internal documents reveal how the manipulation of smokers' feelings is a fundamental tactic in promoting cigarettes. The industry quotes in the following table are drawn largely from **Keep smiling. No one's going to die**<sup>9</sup>, a publication that reveals tobacco industry marketing tactics in considerable detail.

WHAT THE TOBACCO COMPANIES WANT SMOKERS TO FEEL	WHAT SMOKERS ACTUALLY FEEL
<p><i>"Smoking is ... a sign of maturity, discernment and independence"</i><sup>10</sup></p> <p><i>"credible, urban, urbane cigarette brand"</i><sup>11</sup></p>	<p><i>"it's an idiotic thing to start to do"</i></p> <p><i>"it's a total waste of time – there's nothing good about it"</i></p> <p><i>"it's a filthy, ridiculous, dangerous habit"</i></p> <p><i>"it's the daftest thing I've ever done"</i></p> <p><i>"I just followed my friends – intimidated by them, would never have tried of my own accord"</i></p>
<p><i>"We want to engage their aspirations and fantasies"</i><sup>12</sup></p>	<p><i>"I have tried so many times to stop I have seen myself crying"</i></p> <p><i>"I am full of self-loathing"</i></p> <p><i>"it's like a vicious circle and you're just drawn into it"</i></p>
<p><i>"smart, modern, high tech and fun..."</i><sup>13</sup></p>	<p><i>"for the small amount of pleasure it gives me, it's not worth the hassle I get"</i></p>
<p><i>"The aspirational lifestyle brand - cool, everybody's smoking it in bars and clubs image"</i><sup>14</sup></p>	<p><i>"it's anti-social"</i></p> <p><i>"you feel that you are excluded, you feel an outcast"</i></p>
<p><i>"glossy, chic and glamorous"</i><sup>12</sup></p>	<p><i>"it's dirty, smelly"</i></p> <p><i>"everything about it is disgusting"</i></p> <p><i>"I hate the way I smell and having to lie"</i></p>
<p><i>"Salem people have a mind of their own. They are creative—individuals who are outgoing, but who never follow the crowd just for the sake of it."</i><sup>15</sup></p>	<p><i>"it was an ego thing – your mates did it and you go along with it"</i></p> <p><i>"I've probably got a bit more sense now I'm older"</i></p> <p><i>"I just copied the rest"</i></p> <p><i>"any fool can smoke"</i></p> <p><i>"you did it as a sheep"</i></p>
<p><i>"young, fast, racy, adult, exciting..."</i><sup>16</sup></p> <p><i>"a masculine, adventurous brand"</i><sup>17</sup></p>	<p><i>"it slows me down"</i></p> <p><i>"I was very fit before I started smoking and now I am not"</i></p> <p><i>"I would probably get that new motorbike if I didn't smoke"</i></p> <p><i>"I used to enjoy sport and smoking curtailed this"</i></p>
<p><i>"a sense of value"</i><sup>18</sup></p> <p><i>"Anything that implies quality is gratefully received"</i><sup>19</sup></p>	<p><i>"I realise that I am throwing away my money to kill myself"</i></p>
<p><i>"enduring core values of freedom, limitless opportunities, self-sufficiency, mastery of destiny and harmony with nature"</i><sup>20</sup></p>	<p><i>"it's an addiction and I would prefer not to fall into the trap again"</i></p>

## REFERENCES

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AGE GROUP								
TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	16-24	25-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
846	397	449	127	385	161	90	56	26

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