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How I beat smoking

Admitting that there's nothing pleasant about smoking is the key to quitting, writes Ontario Finance Minister

GREG SORBARA

One of the things about being a public figure is that one's various vices and foibles become the world's to observe, and often to judge. So it was with my smoking.

My first reaction upon reading a Toronto newspaper — not this one — describe me as a chain smoker was one of indignation. I was not a chain smoker; never had been. Smoking a pack a day does not make a person a chain smoker, and I tracked down the reporter to tell him so. The fact is, though, that his story ended up being the straw that broke the camel's back. In my case, if I might permit myself a bit of easy smoker's humour, it was the Player's back.

And certainly, if I was not a chain smoker, there is no denying that for 40 years, I was a committed one. There were times when a cigarette simply became an imperative. I

Fitness profile

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Currently: Ontario Minister of Finance
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Health issue: Quitting smoking after 40 years.

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doubt there is a smoker reading this who doesn't understand what I mean. My political staff had to accept that second-hand smoke was a fact of life, as was dealing with me rushing back into the Ontario Legislature, papers flying, after an over-long smoke break that threatened to derail the province's business.

I am given to understand, in fact, that certain members of my staff are still waiting for me to explode in the middle of some particularly long and stressful pre-budget meeting, and go charging out in search of a

cigarette. It won't happen. I am a non-smoker, and I am going to remain one.

My children had been at me for ages to quit. Like so many smokers, I had tried to stop, and failed, many times. You never lack for opportunities, as a smoker, to decide to stop. Whether it's a new year, feeling particularly lousy one morning, or the pleading of a loved one, there is always a good reason. But having a good reason to quit smoking is not the same as being completely committed to quitting, and eventually some part of me always wanted a cigarette more than the other part of me wanted to resist.

Last year, my daughter gave me a book, *The Easy Way To Quit Smoking*, by Allen Carr. I didn't read it right away, but I didn't get rid of it either. Shortly after reading the "chain smoker" article, I picked up the book. By the time I had finished it, I was an ex-smoker.

It really has been that simple. What Mr. Carr does in the book is force you to confront the real reason you smoke: It isn't that you like it. You can tell yourself that it is, but you're making excuses. You smoke because you're addicted, and for no other reason. And you're addicted to something pretty disgusting. There's a reason most people get sick the first time they smoke a cigarette. Therein lies the key to quitting. Everybody knows by now that cigarettes are addictive, but smokers talk themselves into believing that they are also somehow enjoya-

ble. They're not.

I became a non-smoker the moment I understood, deep down where you understand the things that are really important, that there is absolutely nothing even remotely pleasant about smoking.

I do, on occasion, feel a need to smoke. I must confess that there has been the odd single-smoke lapse. But I will never be a smoker again. There is simply no upside to going back, and so very much upside to going forward as a non-smoker.

Let me count the ways. The long-forgotten pleasure of clothes that don't stink. The extraordinary pleasure of running down a tennis ball without feeling as if my lungs are going to burst. Quitting hasn't improved my backhand, but it has let me get into position to miss more of them. And finally, speaking as a Finance Minister, there's a lot to be said for finding a way to save \$10 a day.

Of course, the best way to quit smoking is never to start, and I have to say I am haunted by the idea that young people are still picking up the habit. In the late 1950s, when I was a teenager, smoking really was fashionable and cool. Everywhere you went, indoors and out, people smoked. That is no longer the case.

I would implore young people who are starting to smoke to reconsider. Let me be blunt: You are picking up a vile, dirty habit that will make you a virtual outcast in our society until the day you either stop, or it kills you.