

# Why Do We Smoke Cigarettes?

By Ernest Dichter (1947)

None of the much flaunted appeals of cigarette advertisers, such as superior taste and mildness, induces us to become smokers or to choose one brand in preference to another. Despite the emphasis put on such qualities by advertisers, they are minor considerations. This is one of the first facts we discovered when we asked several hundred people, from all walks of life, why they liked to smoke cigarettes. Smoking is as much a psychological pleasure as it is a physiological satisfaction. As one of our respondents explained: "It is not the taste that counts. It's that sense of satisfaction you get from a cigarette that you can't get from anything else."

## Smoking is Fun

What is the nature of this psychological pleasure? It can be traced to the universal desire for self-expression. None of us ever completely outgrows his childhood. We are constantly hunting for the carefree enjoyment we knew as children. As we grew older, we had to subordinate our pleasures to work and to the necessity for unceasing effort. Smoking, for many of us, then, became a substitute for our early habit of following the whims of the moment; it becomes a legitimate excuse for interrupting work and snatching a moment of pleasure. "You sometimes get tired of working intensely," said an accountant whom we interviewed, "and if you sit back for the length of a cigarette, you feel much fresher afterwards. It's a peculiar thing, but I wouldn't think of just sitting back without a cigarette. I guess a cigarette somehow gives me a good excuse."

## Smoking is a Reward

Most of us are hungry for rewards. We want to be patted on the back. A cigarette is a reward that we can give ourselves as often as we wish. When we have done anything well, for instance, we can congratulate ourselves with a cigarette, which certifies, in effect, that we have been "good boys." We can promise ourselves: "When I have finished this piece of work, when I have written the last page of my report, I'll deserve a little fun. I'll have a cigarette."

The first and last cigarette in the day are especially significant rewards. The first one, smoked right after breakfast, is a sort of anticipated recompense. The smoker has work to do, and he eases himself into the day's activities as pleasantly as possible. He gives himself a little consolation prize in advance, and at the same time manages to postpone the evil hour when he must begin his hard day's work. The last cigarette of the day is like "closing a door." It is something quite definite.

One smoker explained: "I nearly always smoke a cigarette before going to bed. That finishes the day. I usually turn the light out after I have smoked the last cigarette, and then turn over to sleep."

Smoking is often merely a conditioned reflex. Certain situations, such as coming out of the subway, beginning and ending work, voluntary and involuntary interruptions of work, feelings of hunger, and many others regulate the timetable of smoking. Often a smoker may not even want a cigarette particularly, but he will see someone else take one and then he feels that he must have one, too. While to many people smoking is fun, and a reward in itself, it more often accompanies other pleasures. At meals, a cigarette is somewhat like another course. In general, smoking introduces a holiday spirit into everyday living. It rounds out other forms of enjoyment and makes them one hundred per cent satisfactory.

## Smoking is Oral Pleasure

As we have said, to explain the pleasure derived from smoking as taste experience alone, is not sufficient. For one thing, such an explanation leaves out the powerful erotic sensitivity of the oral zone. Oral pleasure is just as fundamental as sexuality and hunger. It functions with full strength from earliest childhood. There is a direct connection between thumbsucking and smoking.

"In school I always used to chew a pencil or a pen," said a journalist, in reply to our questions. "You should have seen the collection I had. They used to be chewed to bits. Whenever I try to stop smoking for a while, I get something to chew on, either a pipe or a menthol cigarette. You just stick it in your mouth and keep on sucking. And I also chew a lot of gum when I want to cut down on smoking."

The satisfied expression on a smoker's face when he inhales the smoke is ample proof of his sensuous thrill. The immense power of the yearning for a cigarette, especially after an enforced abstinence, is acknowledged by habitual smokers. One of our respondents said: "When you don't get a cigarette for a long time and you are kind of on pins, the first drag goes right down to your heels."

### **The Cigarette -- A Modern Hourglass**

Frequently the burning down of a cigarette functions psychologically as a time indicator. A smoker waiting for someone who is late says to himself, "Now I'll smoke one more cigarette, and then I am off."

One person explained, "It is much easier to watch a cigarette get smaller and smaller than to keep watching a clock and look at the hands dragging along." In some countries, the farmers report distances in terms of the number of pipes, as, for example, "It's about three pipes from here to Smithtown."

A cigarette not only measures time, but also seems to make time pass more rapidly. That is why waiting periods almost automatically stimulate the desire to smoke. But a deeper explanation of this function of smoking is based on the fact that smoking is *ersatz activity*.

Impatience is a common feature of our times, but there are many situations which *compel* us to be patient. When we are in a hurry, and yet have to wait, a cigarette gives us something to do during that trying interval. The experience of wanting to act, but being unable to do so, is very unpleasant and may even, in extreme cases, cause attacks of nervous anxiety. Cigarettes may then have a psychotherapeutic effect. This helps to explain why soldiers, waiting for the signal to attack, sometimes value a cigarette more than food.

### **"With a Cigarette I Am Not Alone"**

Frequently, our respondents remarked that smoking cigarettes is like being with a friend. Said one, "When I lean back and light my cigarette and see the glow in the dark, I am not alone any more . . . ."

"In one sense, a cigarette seems to be something alive. When it is lighted it appears to be awakened, brought to life. In a French moving picture (*Daybreak*) the hunted criminal, played by Jean Gabin, holds out as long as he has his cigarettes. He barricades himself against the police and stands siege courageously for some time -- until his last cigarette is gone. Then he gives up.

The companionable character of cigarettes is also reflected in the fact that they help us make friends. In many ways, smoking has the same effect drinking has. It helps to break down social barriers. Two smokers out on a date light up a cigarette as soon as they get into their car.

"It's just the right start for an evening," they say. Immediately they feel at ease, for they have found an interest they both share.

We could report many true anecdotes to illustrate how cigarettes bring people together. One such story was related by a middle-aged lady:

"A long time ago, on a steamer, there was a boy I was quite eager to meet . . . but there was no one to introduce us . . . . The second day out, he was sitting at a table right next to me, and I was puffing away at my cigarette. The ashes on my cigarette were getting longer and longer, and I had no ash tray. Suddenly he jumped up and brought me one. That's how the whole thing started. We are still happily married."

## **"I Like to Watch the Smoke"**

In mythology and religion, smoke is full of meaning. Its floating intangibility and unreal character have made it possible for imaginative man to see therein mystery and magic. Even for us moderns, smoke has a strong fascination. To the cigarette smoker, the clouds he puffs out seem to represent a part of himself.

Just as most people like to watch their own breath on cold winter days, so they like to watch cigarette smoke, which similarly makes one's breath visible. This explains the emotional attitudes of many toward smoke.

"Smoke is fascinating," said one of the people we interviewed. "I like to watch the smoke. On a rainy day, I sort of lie in a haze in the middle of the room and let my thoughts wander while I smoke and wonder where the smoke goes."

The desire to make things is deep-rooted -- and smoke is manufactured by the smoker himself. Smoking provides satisfaction because it is a playful, creative activity. This fact was well stated by one cigarette devotee as follows: "It's a fascinating thing to watch the smoke take shape. The smoke, like clouds, can form different shapes . . . You like to sit back and blow rings and then blow another rings through the first ones. You are perfectly relaxed."

## **"Got a Match?"**

Some of the appeals of a lighted cigarette derive from the appeals of fire in general. Fire is the symbol of life, and the idea of fire is surrounded by much superstition. In this connection, it is interesting to note that traces of superstition can be seen in the smoking habits of modern man. For instance some people never will light three cigarettes on one match. It is said that this superstition is based on experiences during World War I. As three soldiers were lighting up the third man was hit when the light of a match flared up for the last time. Our custom of lighting another smoker's cigarette for him may sometimes have an erotic significance, or it may serve as a friendly gesture. Match and cigarette are contact points.

## **Smoking Memories**

Certain moments in our lives are closely linked with cigarettes. These situations often leave on people's memories an important imprint never to be forgotten. Here is such an occasion, described by an office clerk of twenty-one.

". . . I can remember the moments when I returned home -- no matter how late -- after having been out with a girl on a Saturday night. Before going to bed, I'd sit on the fire escape for a while and enjoy a smoke. I'd turn around so that I could see all the smoke going up. At the same time, the windows would be bright with lights on the other side of the courtyard. I would watch what the people were doing. I would sit, and watch, and think about what my girl and I had talked about and what a nice time we had had together. Then I'd throw the cigarette away and go to bed. I feel these were really the most contented moments in my life. . . ."

"I remember one time we were in North Africa on a trip and it was evening," said one of our respondents, a nurse about twenty-seven years of age. "During the day, I had noticed there was a lovely spot to sit, across the way from the hotel where we were staying. I went there at night, and sat looking at the stars and the tall cypresses illuminated against the night sky. I was far away in my thoughts. I was thinking of God and the beautiful world he had made. The smoke from my cigarette rose slowly into the sky. I was alone, and at the time I was a part of all the world around me . . ."

## **Smoking Mannerisms**

Usually the way we smoke is characteristic of our whole personality. The mannerisms of smokers are innumerable. Some people always have cigarettes drooping from their mouths. Others let the cigarette jump up and down in their mouths while they are talking. Men sometimes complain about the way women smoke:

"A lot of women blow out the smoke with a gust of wind, right into your face. They just puff it at you."

Some men, when they want to appear to be aggressive, hold their cigarettes with thumb and forefinger so that the glowing end shows toward the palm of the hand. Often smokers will assume a pose, because they have found that it fits their personality best, or at least they think so. A not too modest glamour girl revealed to us some of her "smoking secrets":

"I think it looks so much better to smoke with a holder. I studied that very carefully. Don't you think I'm somewhat of a Latin type? It all really depends on what type you are . . . I always have holders that are long and dark. I think a long holder is somewhat like a big hat: it's alluring and 'don't dare come close' at the same time."

While every smoker has to go through the motions of lighting and inhaling the smoke, the way in which these acts are carried out varies according to his mood. The nervous smoker has a faster smoking tempo than the relaxed one. The angry smoker blows the smoke in an aggressive way, almost as if he were trying to blow somebody down. A smoker who is about to ask for a raise in salary will press his lips tightly around the cigarette as if to gain courage by holding it that way.

### **"Smoking Helps Me Think"**

The mind can concentrate best when all outside stimuli have been excluded. Smoking literally provides a sort of "smoke screen" that helps to shut out distractions. This explains why many people who were interviewed reported that they cannot think or write without a cigarette. They argued that moderate smoking may even stimulate mental alertness. It gives us a focal point for our attention.

It also gives our hands something to do; otherwise they might make us self-conscious and interfere with mental activity. On the other hand, our respondents admit that smoking too much may reduce their efficiency.

### **Cigarettes Help Us to Relax**

One shortcoming of our modern culture is the universal lack of adequate relaxation. Many of us not only do not know how to relax, but do not take time to learn. Smoking helps us to relax because, like music, it is rhythmic. Smoking gives us a legitimate excuse to linger a little longer after meals, to stop work for a few minutes, to sit at home without doing anything that requires effort.

Here is a nostalgic comment contributed by a strong defender of smoking: "After a long day's work, to get home and sit in a chair and stretch my legs 'way out, and then to sit back and just smoke a cigarette and think of nothing, just blow the smoke in the air – that's what I like to do when I've had a pretty tough day." The restful effect of moderate smoking explains why people working under great stress use more tobacco.

### **"I Blow My Troubles Away"**

In times of high tension, cigarettes provide relief, as indicated by the following typical comments of one of our respondents:

"When I have a problem, and it comes back and back, warningly saying, 'Well, what are you going to do about this?' a cigarette almost acts like a consolation. Somehow it relieves the pressure on my chest. The feeling of relief is almost like what you feel in your chest after you have cried because something has hurt you very much. Relaxing is not the right kind of word for that feeling. It is like having been in a stuffy room for a long time and at last getting out for a deep breath of air." That man's explanation comes very close to stating the scientific reason why smoking brings relief.

Worry and anxiety depress us not only psychologically but also physiologically. When a person feels depressed, the rhythm of his breathing becomes upset. A short and shallow breath creates a heavy feeling in the chest.

Smoking may relieve mental depression by forcing a rhythmic expansion of the breast and thus restoring the normal pace of breathing. The "weight on the chest" is removed. This connection between smoking and respiration accounts for the common expression, "Smoking helps us to let off steam." When we are enraged, we breathe heavily. Smoking makes us breathe more steadily, and thus calms us down.

### **Cigarette Taste Has to Be Acquired**

Most people like the smell of tobacco but dislike the taste of a cigarette. Frequently we were reminded that "a cigarette never tastes as good as it smells. One usually very much dislikes his first cigarette. Taste for cigarettes must be acquired slowly. And whenever a smoker tries out a new brand, with a lightly different taste, he finds that he has to repeat this process of becoming accustomed to the taste. Often smokers who say they do not like the taste of certain brands really mean that they are not accustomed to it. Few advertisers of cigarettes realize that it takes time for a smoker to change his taste habits.

No matter how pleasant the taste qualities of a brand may seem to be, at first the unaccustomed taste will be disliked. One of our respondents made the following interesting comment on this point: "I went to Bulgaria once and was forced to smoke Bulgarian cigarettes. I tried one brand after another till I had gone through five brands. Finally, the sixth brand seemed to be perfect. I discovered much later that any of the other brands might have become my preferred brand if only I had tried it in the sixth place. It just took me that long to learn to appreciate Bulgarian tobacco."

### **How Many a Day?**

Despite all the millions spent on comparing the potentially harmful effects of different brands of cigarettes, our respondents seemed very little concerned about this matter. But all of them, even those who do not smoke excessively, worry about the quantities they smoke. Scientific and medical studies on the physiological effects of smoking provide a confused picture: Some conclude that smoking is harmful; others deny it. This same confusion prevails among smokers themselves. Nevertheless, all of them worry about smoking too many cigarettes, as shown by the fact that nearly everyone has tried, at one time or another, to "cut down on" smoking.

"I'll tell you something I do," one smoker confided. "I give up smoking cigarettes every year for one month, and I say to myself that I'll prove to myself I can still do without them." Periodic abstemiousness of this kind indicates an underlying feeling of guilt. Such individuals really think that constant smoking is not only harmful, but also a bit immoral. Efforts to reduce the amount of smoking signify a willingness to sacrifice pleasure in order to assuage their feeling of guilt.

The mind has a powerful influence on the body, and may produce symptoms of physical illness. Guilt feelings may cause harmful physical effects not at all caused by the cigarettes used, which may be extremely mild. Such guilt feelings alone may be the real cause of the injurious consequences.

## **The First Cigarette**

Much of this guilt feeling can be attributed directly to one's first cigarette, which the older generation remembers as a forbidden and sinful thing. Their fathers considered the habit an educational problem, whereas many parents nowadays have adopted a "modern" attitude toward smoking.

Here is what one such father said: "I told my son I thought he was a little young . . . He is seventeen. It might not do him any harm to wait another year or two. Then I remembered my own first cigarette and what awful stuff I had to smoke in secret. In a way, my son is lucky to be able to start with a good cigarette without running the danger of ruining his health. I gave him a pack of the brand I smoke."

Most of us remember vividly the first cigarette we smoked. "I certainly remember my first cigarette," said one of our respondents. "We were a bunch of boys on our way to a football game. I had trouble lighting my cigarette, and at that moment a man passed by and yelled at me: 'Throw that cigarette away, you rascal!' I was so shocked and frightened that I obeyed his command without hesitation. But only a few minutes later, I lighted another one just to demonstrate to myself that I was not afraid."

## **"No, Thanks, I'll Smoke My Own"**

This is the reply of most smokers when they are offered a brand different from their own. Brand loyalty among smokers is strong and persistent. Individuals smoke one brand consistently, so that they become identified with it. A guest who discovers that his host smokes the same brand considers this a personal flattery. If a young lady changes to the brand of an admirer, he understands that he has surely made an impression.

Here is the experience of one young man, and his interpretation of it: "I was very fond of a girl. She was giving a farewell party before leaving the country. I didn't have any idea how I stood in her affection. The only clue was that at her party she had my brand of cigarettes. I always felt that that was in deference to me." 'My brand' has a special significance, as if it were a part of the smoker's credo and personality.

## **A Package of Pleasure**

A new pack of cigarettes gives one a pleasant feeling. A full, firm pack in the hand signifies that one is provided for, and gives satisfaction, whereas an almost empty pack creates a feeling of want and gives a decidedly unpleasant impression. The empty pack gives us a feeling of real frustration and deprivation.

During the seventeenth century, religious leaders and statesmen in many countries condemned the use of tobacco. Smokers were excommunicated by the Church and some of them were actually condemned to death and executed. But the habit of smoking spread rapidly all over the world. The psychological pleasures derived proved much more powerful than religious, moral, and legal persuasions. As in the case of the prohibition experiment in the United States, repressive measures seem to have aroused a spirit of popular rebellion and helped to increase the use of tobacco.

If we consider all the pleasure and advantages provided, in a most democratic and international fashion, by this little white paper roll, we shall understand why it is difficult to destroy its power by means of warnings, threats, or preachings. This pleasure miracle has so much to offer that we can safely predict the cigarette is here to stay. Our psychological analysis is not intended as a eulogy of the habit of smoking, but rather as an objective report on why people smoke cigarettes.

Perhaps this will seem more convincing if we reveal a personal secret: We ourselves do not smoke at all. We may be missing a great deal.

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