

# A psychological technique to help smokers quite tobacco

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An international research project led by scientists from the U. of Granada has demonstrated that motivational interviewing can make smokers see tobacco as something disagreeable, thus helping them to quit the habit. Motivational interviewing is a psychological technique of direct intervention that seeks to produce changes in patient behavior. Credit: UGR Divulga

An international research project led by scientists from the University of Granada has demonstrated that motivational interviewing can make smokers see tobacco as something disagreeable, thus helping them to quit the habit. Motivational interviewing is a psychological technique of direct intervention that seeks to produce changes in patient behaviour.

53 smokers participated in this research, published in the journal *Behaviour Research and Therapy*. These patients had been smoking over 10 cigarettes a day for over a year, and expressed no intention of abandoning the habit.

The researchers, from the universities of Granada in Spain and San Buenaventura in Bogotá, Colombia, evaluated the effects of a 20-minute motivational interview. This intervention expresses empathy and generates discrepancies between current behaviour and future goals. It also increases self-efficiency and avoids confrontation and resistance.

They compared the results of this test with another type of standard intervention, also using a control group. The researchers then explored whether willingness to change increased in smokers. To determine this, they measured the amplitude of the shock reflex experienced by subjects when presented with a series of disagreeable images associated with [tobacco](#).

## **An efficient intervention**

Jaime Vila Castellar and Pedro Guerra are the authors of this article. They point out that their results prove that [motivational interviewing](#) "was the most effective sort of intervention."

Before this treatment, smokers responded to tobacco imagery similarly

to how they responded to pleasant images (for instance, erotic photographs), but after the [intervention](#), their response to the same tobacco images was analogous to their response to disagreeable images, such as corpses or images of violence.

"Motivational interviewing," the researchers concluded, "manages to change, at least temporarily, the emotional response that smokers present before stimuli associated with tobacco, from pleasant to unpleasant, which helps them overcome one of the main obstacles to quitting [tobacco consumption](#), i.e. motivation for change."

According to data provided by the World Health Organization, there are over 1000 million smokers worldwide, and tobacco consumption is associated with the three main causes of premature death.

There are several obstacles for health professionals when it comes to treating [smokers](#). For instance, their low motivation to change, the scarcity of time and resources that health systems worldwide provide to attend patients, and the scarcity of evidence for the efficiency of psychological therapies when it comes to change in this sort of behaviour.

**More information:** From appetitive to aversive: Motivational interviewing reverses the modulation of the startle reflex by tobacco cues in smokers not ready to quit, Carlos Gantiva, Pedro Guerra, Jaime Vila, *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 66 (2015), 43-48, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2015.01.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2015.01.006)

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