

# Who are you without that cigarette?

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Cover of Eline Meijer's dissertation, 'This is (not) who I am: Understanding identity in continued smoking and smoking cessation.' Credit: Leiden University

Do you want to be successful at stopping smoking? If so, the main thing is that you should see yourself as a non-smoker. Psychologist Eline Meijer has discovered that smokers who are unable to do this are more likely to resume smoking. This is more common among smokers from a lower socio-economic background. PhD defence 14 November.

"People like to behave in a way that fits their identity," Meijer explains. "For some smokers, smoking is an important part of who they are - smoking fits with how they see themselves - while other people see themselves as non-smokers. It is the smokers who can see themselves as non-smokers who will be more likely to stop. The new identity as a non-

smoker is actually a "future self," and we know that a clear image of the "future self" can have a positive effect as a stimulus for changing behaviour."

We have known for decades that smoking damages the health. So, why do people continue to smoke, or why do their attempts at stopping smoking fail? Research has already been conducted on people's identity as a smoker, but research on the identity of a non-smoker is new. Why is it that you see yourself in a particular way? How does that influence your behaviour? How does your identity change when you change your behaviour? Meijer explains: "My research shows that a person's identity as a smoker or non-smoker can change over time. On average, smokers see themselves increasingly as smokers, while ex-smokers see themselves less and less as smokers."

But stopping smoking does not necessarily have to result in a change of identity, Meijer has found. Ex-smokers have a greater chance of reverting to smoking if they continue to regard themselves as smokers, while ex-smokers who see themselves increasingly as non-smokers are more successful at quitting. "It's particularly important that they have the feeling they are still the same person even when changing their [smoking behaviour](#) and their identity. Or maybe they become even more themselves."

Meijer combined several different research methods in her PhD. In a small-scale study, ten people who wanted to stop smoking were interviewed over a period of three months. The researchers extracted data from an existing large-scale, six-year study on the identity of smokers and stoppers. Meijer: "The big advantage of this large dataset was that we were able to monitor people over a long period of time. We were able to examine whether, and if so how, their identity changes, and whether there are differences in terms of socio-economic status." The researchers also used questionnaires, and checked a year later whether or

not the smokers had quit. The results all point in the same direction. People with a lower level of education have more difficulty adopting a non-smoker identity. They have a much stronger image of themselves as smokers.

According to Meijer, health psychology should pay more attention to [identity](#) because it can be an important predictor of behaviour. "I hope that this research will lead to more smokers being able to quit. We can use this research to develop treatments or interventions that will help smokers start to see themselves as non-smokers, and hopefully they will then be more successful at stopping smoking."

As an experiment within the PhD research, smokers imagined themselves as their 'future selves'—as somebody who has stopped smoking—in the form of a writing assignment. In follow-up research Meijer also wants to give participants tasks with visual images. She is looking for [smokers](#) who want to stop [smoking](#) and who are willing to take part in her research. If you want to take part, please mail Eline Meijer: [e.meijer@lumc.nl](mailto:e.meijer@lumc.nl)

Provided by Leiden University

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