

Ex-smokers crave lost identity, study shows

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/public domain

Ex-smokers may not be able to resist lighting up again in order to recover a sense of 'who they are'— according to new research from the University of East Anglia.

New findings published today in the Journal of Substance Use suggest that [smokers](#) who have quit often [relapse](#) because they want to recapture a sense of lost social [identity](#). And that many ex-smokers experience quitting as a 'loss.'

As well as being physically addictive, [smoking](#) has a range of emotional, behavioural and social triggers.

Lead researcher Dr. Caitlin Notley said: "Although many people do manage to quit, relapse is very common.

"Of course we know that smoking is physically addictive, and there has been research about the psychological side of it – but this assumes that people are unable to resist physical urges, or are vulnerable to social cues.

"We wanted to understand other social factors that might also be important."

The research team studied in-depth interviews with people who had quit and relapsed. 43 participants described their history of smoking and previous quit attempts, their current quit attempt, and discussed any smoking relapses. The researchers then drilled down to study a sample of 23 participants who provided the most detailed information about relapsing to smoking.

Dr. Notley said: "What we have found is that relapse is associated with a whole range of emotional triggers. It is often tied up with people wanting to recapture a lost social identity – their smoker identity.

"People want to feel part of a social group, and recover a sense of who they are – with smoking having been part of their identity, for most, since their teenage years.

"The social environment and close personal relationships are major influences on people, usually teens, when they start smoking in the first place. People learn, socially, to become a 'smoker' – it's part of a group membership and it becomes an important part of people's identity.

"When people attempt to quit smoking, what they are really doing is attempting to bury part of their old identity and reconfigure a new one. That can be hard. Particularly when it's something that has been 'part of them' for most of their adult life.

"A loss of smoker identity may mean giving up previous social groups, and finding a new identity as a non-smoker.

"People often go back to smoking because they feel it helps them cope with stressful events. Many saw slipping back into smoking as inevitable.

"They also talked about a [sense](#) of relief at regaining their identity as a smoker – so there are a lot of emotional reactions related to relapse such as pleasure, but also guilt and shame."

"Redefining smoking relapse as recovered [social identity](#) – secondary qualitative analysis of relapse narratives" is published in the *Journal of Substance Use*.

More information: Caitlin Notley et al. Redefining smoking relapse as recovered social identity – secondary qualitative analysis of relapse narratives, *Journal of Substance Use* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/14659891.2018.1489009](#)

Provided by University of East Anglia

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