

# Young people took up smoking during the pandemic—how tobacco has been used for stress relief for more than a century

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In the UK and much of the west, smoking rates have consistently declined since [the turn of the millennium](#). But during some of the most anxiety-ridden months of the COVID pandemic in early 2020, that rate of decline slowed almost to a stop.

What's more, despite a rise in the rate of people trying to quit, there was a curious increase in the number of [young people](#) (aged 18 to 24) [smoking for the first time](#).

A recent study [suggests](#) that the social disruption, boredom, and stress brought about by the pandemic may have contributed to a rise in young people taking up smoking.

As a historian of wartime endurance and resilience in modern Britain, I've been studying tobacco use from the 1850s to the 1950s. I try to understand why smoking was so central to [everyday life](#) during particularly stressful times, like the armed conflicts of the period. Indeed, there has long been a link between smoking and stress relief.

## Smoking as stress relief

Many Victorian and Edwardian writers, including notable doctors and surgeons, showed a keen interest in tobacco. For some, it was the drug of modernity, as its soothing effects (caused by nicotine) were the ideal antidote to the [stress and tension](#) that came with the machine age.

The invention of new technology, such as the telegraph and railways, made life more fast-paced and stressful. As early as the late 1850s, some [doctors claimed](#) that people could fall prey to overexcited "nerves" (a common shorthand for the effects of stress that we still use today) if they did not find a calming intoxicant.

From the 1880s, cigarettes were mass-produced, reaching more

consumers than ever before. Many working-class men switched from the pipe to the cigarette, which was seen as a more practical accompaniment to modern life. It was also cheap: a pack could be picked up and smoked without any prior preparation for no more than a few pence.

At the turn of the 20th century, even the [medical journal](#) *The Lancet* [suggested](#) that smoking could ease the "restlessness and irritability" that accompanied urban life. Such an endorsement helped tobacco manufacturers and retailers sell their wares.

But crisis and war have always provided the biggest boost to tobacco use. The onset of the First World War in 1914 ensured the supremacy of the cigarette in Britain. By Christmas 1914, [more than 96% of British soldiers were smokers](#), and both the government and civilians at home sent, literally, tons of tobacco to the front.

Cigarettes didn't just ease the boredom of life in the trenches; they were seen to improve the mental and physical well-being of servicemen. As *The Lancet* put it in October 1914:

"To the soldier and the sailor in the present war, with his nervous system in a ceaseless state of tension from the dangers and excitement, tobacco must be a real solace and joy when he can find time for this well-earned indulgence."

Nurses even [administered cigarettes](#) to injured men in hospitals. In earlier conflicts, including the Boer war (1899-1902) and the Crimean war (1853-56), many military and medical writers had said much the same thing. But the machine-made cigarette made smoking more accessible.

## **Concerns about young smokers**

For the late Victorians and Edwardians, the ease with which the cigarette habit could be acquired was a source of worry, as more and more young people seemed to be falling under tobacco's spell.

As I've found when reading journals from the early 1900s at the British Library, smoking was seen by some doctors and anti-tobacco activists to cause bad manners and antisocial behavior in idle young boys. It was also purported to stunt their growth.

This was a period where fears of national decline and "degeneration" abounded, especially after the [poor physical condition](#) of working-class army recruits was discovered during the Boer war. Such views are, therefore, understandable. Smoking was endangering the health of the next generation and, by extension, the health and longevity of the British Empire.

In many ways, these fears never really went away, particularly about the effects of smoking on [future generations](#). However, anti-tobacco public health messages and smoking cessation programs would not become common until after the link between smoking and lung cancer was proved in the 1950s.

We can now add recent crises, such as the COVID pandemic, to the timeline of historical [smoking](#) boosters. Even if wars and pandemics are clearly different kinds of crises, they both lead to widespread anxiety and stress, providing a perceived need for soothing, often psychoactive, remedies.

Much like the young soldiers who had to endure a mix of intense stress and numbing boredom in the major wars of the modern era, the new, youthful smokers of the pandemic perhaps lit their first-ever cigarette to deal with life in lockdown.

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