



The Gradual Countdown: Quit Smoking the Easy Way!

by Dr. Eric C. Sayre, PhD

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About the author

Dr. Eric C. Sayre, PhD is a statistician, researcher and author currently living in Vancouver, BC. He is a well-published scientist, with well over 200 publications between 1997 and 2017, including a mixture of first-authorships and coauthorships on articles published in peer-reviewed medical journals, abstracts presented at scientific meetings, research reports and invited talks. For more information and links to other free books and software, please visit www.ericstayre.com.

Eric loves to write, and wants to help people with his books. [The Gradual Countdown: Quit Smoking the Easy Way!](#) is a roadmap to quitting smoking that Eric used himself to successfully (and *easily*) quit smoking, after 13 years as a smoker. He had previously tried many other popular methods, but always lacked the willpower to succeed. Fortunately, The Gradual Countdown does not require willpower—yes, you read that right! The day Eric quit, he did not struggle with that huge decision, “Should today be the day?” On the contrary, Eric literally *forgot* to have a cigarette! You too can get to that lowest of levels in your addiction, with just a few very simple principles outlined in these pages.

So read this short book, my friends, and change your life.

Introduction

“Quitting smoking is easy: I’ve done it hundreds of times.”

Cue laugh track. Have you quit smoking hundreds of times? I know I did. During my 13 years as a smoker, between the ages of 18 and 31, I tried many approaches, each many times: cold turkey, cutting down gradually without an organized plan, nicotine gum, regular gum, toothpicks, sunflower seeds, bags of chips. Still other methods I did not try myself but knew people who did (and failed), such as hypnosis. I don’t have a lot of willpower, as may be evidenced by one of my other books, [The Real Junk Food Diet Book](#). I love to eat, and believe me when I say I really loved to smoke too.

For me, quitting smoking was not about money, or how I smelled, or social stigma, but about health. Few things are so important as health, so I was highly motivated, and yet it turned out to be a monumentally difficult task—that is, until I found a secret formula. The method I literally stumbled on by accident turned out to be the easiest way to quit smoking you can imagine. Picture this friends: my first day as a non-smoker was an *accident*; I literally *forgot* to have a cigarette.

How did I get to such a low level in my mental and physical addiction levels that this could possibly happen? The approach I used to get there can best be termed a “Gradual Countdown”, and an easier way I cannot imagine. This method is so simple and easy, that this book will also be simple and easy—I’m not going to fill it with more words just to make it seem more valuable. Less is more: us statisticians call it “parsimony”. In this book, I’ll give you the easiest recipe for quitting smoking possible, in just a few thousand priceless words.

So turn the page, my dear friends, and change your life.

Chapter 1. Your motivation

Before you can quit smoking, or lose weight, or enjoy any number of other accomplishments, you have to *want* it. Few good things in life will just fall into your lap without you even asking for them. Let's talk about what is so good about smoking, then the bad, and therein we will find our motivation.

First the good. Now, you love to smoke, as did I love to smoke. Morning coffee and a smoke, beer and a smoke, smoke after food, smoke breaks at work or school. It is a crutch that smokers come to depend on; I used cigarettes to help me through some hard years in my early 20's when working a construction job, then to help me study as an undergrad when I returned to university. I took a trip to Poland to meet family there at a time when I was thinking of quitting (again), but decided to keep smoking because everyone over there smoked and it was a big social aspect of life there. Smoking (temporarily) improves mental clarity, soothes nerves, decreases appetite. Well, smoking sounds really great! Why on Earth would we ever want to quit?

Because the bad. First, that temporary improvement in mental clarity I mentioned is followed by an ever deepening *decrease* in mental abilities, until you are a bumbling, angry idiot who just must have another smoke even to function. In fact, as a non-smoker of many years now, I assure you that the sustained mental clarity of a non-smoker is far higher than the brief, elusive peaks of clarity that a smoker attains immediately after a cigarette—I should know, I did an undergraduate degree as a smoker, followed by two graduate degrees as a non-smoker, and did far better in grad school in vastly more difficult courses, not to mention theses and comprehensive exams. What else is so bad? Smoking stinks, not just the smoke in the air, but your clothes smell, your hands smell, your hair smells, your car smells, your apartment smells. Even if you only smoke outside, I guarantee that *you and your clothes and many of your possessions stink*. You might not notice it being a smoker, but ask any non-smoker for an honest answer, and you'll find out. Smoking is expensive, and getting more so. Countries around the world are jacking their tobacco taxes to help offset the added burden on their health care systems. A pack-a-day smoker can spend several hundred dollars a month on cigarettes. Smoking ruins physical performance. If you like to run, or hike, or even just go for a walk or try to walk up a flight of stairs, as a smoker you'll find yourself quickly out of breath, as your lungs try to cope with the poisonous tar coating them. Smoking ages you. Your face will become wrinkled far before your time, your voice will become rough and you will develop that prototypical (and unattractive) wheezing, smokers' cough. Is that all? Well, not quite. Smoking can of course kill you. Besides the obvious risks to lungs (e.g.,

emphysema or lung cancer), it is linked to elevated risks of pretty much every other form of cancer known.

Now I knew all of this for quite awhile before I quit, but it was not quite enough to empower me. What eventually pushed me over the edge from trying the usual methods to quit (and failing), to taking the new, measured actions that really led to quitting, was one added realization/visualization. One day I asked myself, how does the nicotine actually make it from the tobacco in the cigarette into your brain, to give you that rush you feel with each drag? The answer was quite obvious, there is really only one way this can happen: sticky, poisonous tar (which happens to contain nicotine) within the tobacco smoke coats itself onto your lungs, and as your blood passes through your lungs to become re-oxygenated, it picks up the nicotine along the way. This realization suddenly and permanently made me acutely aware, and every time I took a drag and felt that rush, I could not help but picture the sticky tar coating my lungs in ever thickening, deadly, black layers. Needless to say, this visualization dramatically reduced how much pleasure I was able to glean from the *momentary* nicotine rush resultant from that one drag, knowing that the cost was another deposit of deadly tar that would take *years* to expunge from my lungs if ever I even quit smoking. The pleasure/pain balance had been permanently shifted in my mind, and I was motivated to really take action.

But I lacked the willpower to just up and quit; I could not stand the idea of quitting and had failed so many times before! So what could I do? The solution was clear: I would have to take baby steps, a whole lot of them, and climb a mountain, one very tiny step at a time.

Chapter 2. The Gradual Countdown

The Gradual Countdown uses baby steps to climb Mount Everest. Mount Everest might be big and daunting, but baby steps are small and easy. Take enough baby steps, and you can climb any mountain. Let's start with the easiest first baby step we can think of: we will just count our daily cigarettes.

For the first week on this program, I want you to smoke as you normally would, and just count your cigarettes. Every morning, note how many are in your pack, and keep track of exactly how many you smoke up until you go to bed. Over the week, this number is likely to vary a bit. Maybe you smoke more during the week because you work outdoors, or maybe you smoke more on the weekend when you're out having some fun. Take the maximum number that you smoked that entire week, and add two extra (to make it really easy on yourself). This number is your first allowable daily maximum.

For the next month, you will start every day pre-loading a pack with your allowable daily maximum number of cigarettes. If your pack has more cigarettes in it at the beginning of the day, take out the extras and leave them at home in a drawer. If the pack does not have enough cigarettes at the start of the day, add some from another pack, then leave the rest at home in a drawer. Always start every single day with *exactly* your allowable daily maximum in a pack. If your allowable daily maximum exceeds one pack, carry two packs but follow the same principle, only bring with you in your pack(s) the exact allowable daily maximum. For example, suppose your allowable daily maximum is 15, then *every single morning* for that first month your pack will look like this.



You must never smoke more than the amount in your pack at the start of each day. Try to plan out the timing of your smokes so that you will not find yourself running out too early in the day. If later in the day you do notice you are running low the odd time, you will have to ration the remaining cigarettes. An easy way to do this is to divide up the time until you are going to bed. If you plan to go to bed in 6 hours, and there are 4 cigarettes left, then you can have one every

90 minutes until bedtime. Now, this should not be excessively difficult, because we made sure to build extra cigarettes into our allowable daily maximum. If you do simply run out a bit early and find yourself craving, just go to bed early! Get yourself to the next day without breaking above your allowable daily maximum. More optimistically, what if you have extra cigarettes left over in your pack when you go to bed? That's great! It means your addiction is waning ever so slightly. And no, you are not allowed to add them onto the next day's allowable daily maximum—but nice try. You will do this for one month.

Only after the first month, when you feel ready you can reduce your allowable daily maximum by one cigarette. Why so slow? Because we want to succeed this time; we are tired of failing, and people like us who lack willpower cannot make things too hard on ourselves or we *will* fail. In fact, we need things to be as easy as possible. Have patience, better to take this slow and have it work, than rush it and fail—yet again. So, supposing our first month had an allowable daily maximum of 15, then our second month will have an allowable daily maximum of 14, and *every single morning* your pack will look like this.



The same rules apply as in the first month: You must not ever smoke more than the amount you start the day with. Use the same strategies: timing, rationing, and as a last resort going to bed early as needed. You will do this for at least one week, but probably much longer, until it becomes easy to obey the new limit.

Only when your new allowable daily maximum is easy to obey, are you allowed to further reduce it by one cigarette. This is a critical point: we must make this process easy on ourselves, so that we do not fail. You might find yourself stuck at a given allowable daily maximum for more than a month, maybe even longer, or maybe you'll be there for just one week. The important thing to remember is that going backwards compromises the process; we should strive to never increase our allowable daily maximum (except in the rarest of circumstances where we overstepped and are in imminent danger of the whole thing collapsing). Therefore we must be absolutely certain that the previous allowable daily maximum is as easy as it will ever get, before we drop another cigarette. You will remain at each new level for at least one week, but probably much longer, until it becomes easy to obey the new limit.

This process may be slow, but rest assured, you will eventually claw your way down to single digits. Your morning cigarette pack will begin to look like this, for example, at eight per day, then five, then three.



Once you reach single digits, it is time to introduce a complementary strategy: a stepwise reduction in the amount of each cigarette that you smoke. While you used to smoke every cigarette nearly to the filter (left cigarette butt in the image below), it is now time to put out a cigarette when it's just half done. Once again, this will pose a minor challenge at first, but eventually you will feel satisfied with this amount, and it will no longer be hard to stop at half a cigarette. Only when your half cigarette limit is completely easy should you even consider further reductions, for example to 1/3 of a cigarette. The image below illustrates the progression from smoking a full cigarette (far left), to 1/2, then 1/3, and finally to just a few puffs (far right). You might alternate between reducing your allowable daily maximum number, and the amount of each cigarette that you smoke. You will remain at each new level for at least one week, but probably much longer, until it becomes easy to obey the new limit.



Generally, as you reduce your allowable daily maximum, it will become easier and even natural to make a corresponding reduction in the amount of each cigarette that you smoke. As your allowable daily maximum *slowly* drops towards 3, then 2, then eventually 1, the amount you smoke of each cigarette will also come down. This actually makes it easier to obey the allowable daily maximum, because it enacts further reductions in your addiction level and further habituates you away from your smoking dependence.

Even when you are down to smoking just a few puffs of a cigarette at a time, it is important to never save a partially smoked cigarette—throw it out! This is important for two reasons: first, you will not confuse or cheat your allowable daily maximum by making multiple smoking sessions out of one cigarette, and secondly, it is probably healthier to smoke a fresh cigarette with a new filter than to pick up an old extinguished one and try to continue where you left off.

When you are down to a single cigarette per day, and are dropping the amount you smoke of that cigarette towards just the few puffs illustrated in the above image, it is time to enact yet another strategy: stop direct inhalation of the smoke. The trick to doing this while still delivering the smoking experience as well as small amounts of nicotine to your bloodstream is as follows. Inhale into your mouth only (closing off your throat), then push the smoke out of your open mouth while gently inhaling through your nose. This surrounds your head with cigarette smoke, and allows small amounts to be delivered through your nose from the diffuse cloud being expelled from your mouth. It also maximizes the flavor experience since you will directly smell the smoke as it enters your body through

your nose. You will therefore become satisfied with this experience, yet at an extremely low level of nicotine consumption.

Eventually, you will arrive at the penultimate level: one cigarette per day, just a few puffs, without direct inhalation. Stay at this level for several weeks to several months. Why do I say that? Because we want to succeed! Too many times we rushed the quitting process, and lacking willpower, we just failed and went back to a pack a day or wherever we started. Make it easy on yourself: do not rush the final step. At this exceedingly low level of smoking, the damage you are doing to yourself is vastly lower than when you started. Yes you want to get to zero, but let it happen naturally, *it will happen*. For me, it took a few months at one cigarette a day before that day arrived when I literally forgot to have my cigarette. We'll talk about that next.

Chapter 3. Your first day(s) as a non-smoker

At the end of the last chapter, I asked you to take your time moving from the penultimate level of one cigarette per day and just a few puffs mouth smoked, to 0 cigarettes per day. If you followed the process covered in the previous chapter, then you should be quite comfortable at this level. The longer you remain here, the easier it will be to finally move to 0. This is because your daily nicotine consumption is now so low, that your addiction is waning even while you remain a “smoker”. Eventually, after a few weeks or months, you will feel it is the natural time to move to 0. For me, it was too easy: it was literally an accident. Let me share my story with you now.

It is well known that as your smoking decreases, food begins to taste better, because your taste buds are recovering from the damage caused by excessive cigarette smoke. However, this is actually a double edged sword. Cigarettes will also begin to taste much stronger, to the point where they can be overpowering, and leave an unpleasant after taste that may last a few hours. You will find yourself naturally positioning your single cigarette per day at least a few hours from your next meal, so as not to ruin your enjoyment of your food. Therein lies the story of how I went from 1 cigarette a day to 0. I was running late one morning, and did not have time to have my daily cigarette outside the office before work (as I was accustomed to doing). I thought, no problem, I’ll have it after work, and it wasn’t really a big deal to put it off, because my addiction level was so low at that point, I could pick any time I chose to have my cigarette. However, after work, I began to crave McDonalds, and knowing that my cigarette left such a long-lasting after taste that it would ruin my dinner, I decided I would have the cigarette later on that evening after I ate. This was completely opposite my normal routine (of smoking my cigarette in the morning), so after I got home and relaxed, I just literally *forgot* to have my cigarette. I did not actually realize this until the next morning. That was probably the easiest first day quitting in the history of quitting smoking! So I decided to keep going, and haven’t looked back since. That first day as a non-smoker was April 5, 2003, nearly 15 years ago as I write this.

Of course, it isn’t feasible to try to trick yourself into forgetting to have your daily cigarette, but remember, every day after the first, I was quite aware that I was quitting, yet it was still relatively easy to transition from 1 cigarette a day to 0 and stick to it. I credit a lot of that to just how long I had remained at 1 a day: several months. This had reduced my addiction so much that even with a lack of willpower, I found it quite easy to become a non-smoker and make it last.

I employed a few additional strategies during the first few days and weeks, to help keep me honest. I allowed myself to eat pizza (and other comfort food) every day, and did not mind gaining a little weight in the process, knowing it would come off after I became used to being a non-smoker. It did, and honestly becoming used to being a non-smoker was relatively quick, again owing to how low my addiction level was by the time I actually quit.

Chapter 4. Exercise

I would like to write a little about exercise before we wrap up. As a smoker, your physical abilities, especially cardiovascular ability, are dramatically inhibited. Regular smokers can hardly climb a few stairs, let alone run on a treadmill. Something you can do as a positive feedback loop while quitting smoking, and also after quitting, is to exercise at least once a week, and notice how your abilities improve as the cigarettes come down. This also counteracts any increases in your food consumption, and helps keep your weight stable while quitting smoking, even at that final move from 1 cigarette per day to 0.

But are you someone who hates to exercise? I was once there myself, but there are ways of making exercise easy with the right rewards, and even one day a week can have great benefits. There are a few things you can do to make it easier on yourself.

First, work out as close to your home as possible, preferably in your building if it has a gym. This is important. The farther you have to drive to get to the gym, the more likely you are to skip it in any given week. Make it easy on yourself. If you have a gym in your apartment, use that. Otherwise, find the closest three gyms to your home, and try those first. Gyms will usually hand out free passes to prospective clients (like you). Take advantage, and try out each of the gyms. Even if you have to pay a little, it's worth it to try *before* you sign any contracts. It's better if you can get at least two workouts in at each gym you're trying, since the first will be mostly getting to know where everything is. So buy two passes to each gym when you're about to try it.

Secondly, for at least the first few months, keep your workout short, and stick to one day a week. The reason for this is simple: I don't want you to quit! Too many times I've seen people (like myself in my early 20's, and various friends) start a workout regimen, get overzealous, work out 6 days a week and 3 hours per workout, then burn themselves out in a few weeks—and they never see it coming either, one day they just stop going altogether. Don't make that mistake. Only when you are really settled into a routine and it is no longer torture should you even contemplate adding either hours or additional days to your workouts.

Every workout should include stretching, weightlifting, pushups, abdominals and CARDIO.

Stretching your whole body is really important. I try to stretch my legs, arms, shoulders and back at a minimum. This will help you to avoid injury which would upset your whole routine.

Weightlifting helps to build lean muscle which burns calories all week long, not just during a workout. Because you're only working out one day a week, I suggest you exercise every major muscle group. This means at a minimum you should do leg extension (sitting down), leg curls (lying on your belly), tricep pull down (standing and holding a vertical cable), bicep curls, shoulder shrugs, pushups and sit-ups. If you're like me and you have a shoulder problem you might throw some physiotherapy in too.

As far as abdominals go, I do several sets of sit-ups with my feet under a padded support while holding dumbbells on my chest. Later on in the workout, I do a five-minute set of nonstop sit-ups and crunches with my feet unsupported, and no extra weight on my chest. However, you should start off much easier/shorter than that. Sit-ups are important for adding lean muscle mass to your midsection, and building core strength.

Pushups are important for building shoulder and core strength, but be careful as done incorrectly, they can injure your shoulders. The important things to remember to reduce the strain on your shoulders are to only go down halfway (not touching your chest to the floor), and to keep your elbows tucked back against your body during the pushup. I do two sets of 50 pushups. However, you should start off with much fewer than that.

The last thing I do in my workout is cardio, because after cardio, I'm drained and ready to go home! You should do 10 or 15 minutes of cardio to begin with, and later on, 30 minutes. Take your time increasing, do not burn yourself out. I now do 45 minutes on the treadmill at a slight incline, running medium speed most of the time, and sprinting for 2 minutes 3 times in the middle, but it took me a long time to work up to that. I prefer the treadmill because stair climbers and elliptical machines hurt my knees, counter to popular wisdom. The slight incline on the treadmill means I can slow it down a bit and still get the same cardiovascular workout, which is easier on my knees. Good running shoes can also help protect your knees—buy a new pair every year and only wear them in the gym to preserve the cushion in the sole. I also recommend liquid glucosamine. Find one without aspartame. Cardio is really important for raising your metabolism and burning calories even for a few days after the exercise.

Drink only filtered water during your workout. Do not drink sugary "energy" drinks; filtered water is the best beverage to replenish lost fluids during your workout. I take filtered water to the gym from home.

Use mental tricks to make it easier. If you find it's hard to motivate yourself, try a couple mental tricks that work for me. Ask yourself, if you skip this workout, what will happen to your weight loss that has been going so well? How would you feel about that? On the other hand, if you go to the gym today and get it over with, it'll be a whole entire week before you have to go back, and that whole week you can feel good knowing that your diet is still on track, because one day a

week of exercise is all you need to do. The main trick here is to focus ahead on the point of time just *after* the workout, when, if you have done your exercise, you will feel really good about yourself both physically and mentally.

A critical tool I use to keep me faithful to the gym is music. I load my music player with a list of songs that instill emotion. Some are fast paced, prototypical “workout” tunes, but others are slow, yet powerful, that wrench at your heartstrings. Emotion stimulates an adrenal response, and gives you physical strength. You may get to the point where you hear one of your favorite gym songs and you *crave* the gym. Every once in a while, add new songs and remove old ones that have become stale. Use this tool and going to the gym is a lot more fun.

Have a protein shake after each workout. Your post-workout protein shake should consist of three scoops of protein powder mixed into plain skim milk. For added flavor, blend in a banana. Ensure you stick to protein powders sweetened with stevia, not aspartame or sugar!

Do your one day of exercise per week, and you'll be much more likely to succeed in that final move from 1 to 0 cigarettes per day.

The Ex-smoker Lifestyle

I would like to wrap up this book with a few words on the long term, what happens after many years as a non-smoker?

Eventually, after five or ten years or more, you may be having a few drinks somewhere, and be suddenly tempted by a cigarette. During the first five to ten years, do not take the risk—say no! However, after many years, when you are truly a non-smoker and rarely even think about smoking anymore, you might decide to allow yourself the exceedingly occasional smoke as a treat. If you do find yourself going outside with a friend to indulge (only after many years as an established non-smoker), you should follow a couple important rules.

First, never smoke alone. This ensures that it is only a rare opportunistic treat, and will never become an addiction that you seek out and depend on daily. Secondly, only mouth smoke, as you did during your last few months as a smoker. Third, only smoke a few puffs up to a maximum of half a cigarette, as you did during your last few months as a smoker. Honestly, the last two rules should be easy to follow, because after many years as a non-smoker, cigarettes will taste extremely strong and not very good, and the nicotine rush will be insane, so you will probably not want or even be able to smoke more than a small amount of one. Work out again as soon as possible after any day that you slip like this, to remind yourself how precious your cardio and overall physical health and performance are to you now, and that were you ever to slip back into the nightmare of being an addicted daily smoker, that this would all be derailed.

I am not advocating ever smoking again after quitting, but life can take unexpected turns, so do not be surprised if you encounter the odd opportunity. Have a plan in mind as discussed above.

This concludes my program on how to quit smoking the easiest way I can imagine. I truly hope that those of you reading this book will succeed in your endeavor to quit smoking, and change your lives for the better. I hope that following my simple system will give you the tools you need, even if, as I did before I quit, you have an addictive personality and are low on willpower.

I wish you all the very best of luck. I know you can do it.

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