During Pandemic, No Better Time to Quit Smoking By Jackson Gutierrez

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect us, I think about the importance of lung health. Especially for people trying to quit smoking. When it comes to the quit struggle, I know all about it.

I remember when I was a young boy I played with the ashtray my father kept next to my parents' bed and admired the beautiful ornament on the coffee table in the living room that I later learned was a cigarette lighter. All around me were signs of my father's habit, and it was no surprise that I occasionally mimicked him by bringing a white, plastic straw to my lips and taking a drag.

During my teenage years, I attended a high school for the arts and saw so many classmates smoking. That's when I had my first cigarette. Little did I know it would be the start of my seven-year fight against nicotine.

Social smoking soon turned into an addiction and changed my sense of who I was. From a co-worker calling me a "smoker," to a friend commenting how I reeked of tobacco, these are things I never thought applied to me. These comments forced me to examine who I had become and accept that smoking played a big part in my life.

Over the following years, it felt like I tried to stop smoking almost every week. I would mentally prepare to quit, but as I neared the end of a pack, I'd delay the decision to another day. Sometimes I was more successful, with a handful of my attempts to stop stretching nearly three months. I only recently learned that I wasn't alone. One study found the average smoker tries almost 30 times to stop before quitting for good.

But then I'd feel a trigger. I recall sitting in the movie theater one day and being focused on a character smoking a cigarette in a scene. I became so distracted at the thought of lighting up that I hurried outside the building for a quick puff. And so it went, another attempt to quit ended in defeat.

The pandemic has put the spotlight on how dangerous smoking is and how important quitting can be for continued good health. Studies show people who smoke and vape are at increased risk of developing chronic lung conditions which puts them at a high risk for severe illness from COVID-19.[1]

Experts say we shouldn't be so hard on ourselves as long as we keep trying.

"Over the years, we've seen so many people who think they will never be able to quit but we remind them that with determination and help, they can succeed," said Sharon Cummins, Director of the California Smokers' Helpline, a free service that has helped nearly 1 million Californians quit smoking over the past 30 years. "People move at their own pace and no matter how many tries it takes, the desire for a healthier life can prevail."

The best thing I've done for myself is quit smoking. Not only do I feel better, and smell great, but my career as a voice actor hasn't suffered. Had I continued to smoke, I would have damaged my lungs and throat, possibly destroying my career.

Now that lung health is more important than ever, I hope other smokers see the truth about tobacco: it is harmful and addictive, and yet they have the strength to quit, too. It may take more than one time or 20 times, but with support and confidence, they can quit and stay quit.

Gutierrez is a voice actor and lives in Long Beach. Need help to quit smoking? Visit quit.nobutts.org or call 1-800-NO-BUTTS, for free quit support from the California Smokers' Helpline.

1. California Smokers Helpline. Coronavirus (COVID-19). NoButts.org. https://www.nobutts.org/covid. Accessed February 26, 2021.