



Mischa Barton ditched the cigarettes this year amid rumours that she did it for her health and to put on weight! That's gotta be a first.

puff 'n' stuff

Everyone knows that smoking is unhealthy, but do we think about why we smoke?

Georgia Kennedy signs up for a workshop and steps out of the haze.

At 38 I've been smoking for 20 years and am sick of smelling like an ashtray, of feeling disgusting and of spending a fortune on my habit. When my husband Richard, who's 51 and also a smoker, coughs, it sounds like he's only a heartbeat away from emphysema. I decide that enough is enough and this time I have to stub out for good, and Richard is going to have to chuck his 35-year-long, pack-a-day habit with me.

I'd recently read Allen Carr's *Easy Way To Stop Smoking* (Penguin). Carr had chain-smoked for 33 years but in 1983 he went from 100 cigarettes a day to none. How? Instead of concentrating on the reasons he shouldn't smoke – the money, his health, the stigma – he focused on “why” he kept smoking. Carr wrote a bestseller about his method, then went on to open clinics teaching his technique. Today Easyway clinics operate worldwide and famous ex-smokers such as Richard Branson and Ruby Wax have written glowing endorsements.

cynic clinic

I decide to enrol myself and my husband in the course, although I'm still cynical. I tell Richard about it and prepare for a battle (unlike me he's never attempted to quit) but his reaction surprises me. Instead of grabbing his cigarettes and running for the door, he's eager to try.

In preparation for the workshop we've been asked to think about what pleasure or benefit we get when we smoke. Then, we find ourselves in the meeting room of a local leagues club on a Saturday morning for our six-hour session. There are 12 of us in the group and in the middle of the room is a giant pile of discarded cigarette packs. Our facilitator Natalie Clays leads us through introductions.

One woman, who's in her 50s, smokes 60 cigarettes a day. She even smokes in the shower. Wrinkles run from the edges of her mouth and her skin looks brown and leathery. I think of the lines around my mouth and the fact that my skin is so dry.

clearing the air

Clays, a former smoker, has a soft, almost hypnotic voice. “Imagine the relief and pleasure you experience when you remove a pair of tight shoes,” she says. “But you wouldn't wear tight shoes on

purpose just to get the pleasure of removing them.”

It's like that with smoking, she explains. It creates an aggravation and then temporarily relieves it, allowing you to feel “normal” again. She asks us how often we've gone out for dinner with friends to find they've booked a table in the non-smoking section and then felt irritated when we realised we wouldn't be able to smoke. That's when it hits home.

Every half hour we're sent out for a cigarette break.

There's no single life-changing moment in the day, I simply mull over what I'm hearing and begin to realise that the reasons I think I need to smoke are false. Focusing on “why” I smoke makes me aware that I don't have a great reason to smoke.

breaking the habit

The workshop ends with light hypnotherapy and Clays talks to us in soothing tones. Too soothing for Richard; he starts snoring.

Before we leave we make our own contribution to the gargantuan pile of cigarette boxes by throwing out our own, for good.

Walking into a non-smoking world feels weird at 3.30pm on a Saturday. We'd usually be thinking about going out and maybe having a drink and, naturally, a smoke with friends, so getting through that night isn't easy.

But in the days that follow my resolve doesn't die. I discover there are different situations to conquer. Richard ends up being quite social during the first couple of weeks and is out at restaurants and pubs. This worries me, but he gets through fine. At home, I have to resist smoking to relax. When our situations are reversed we realise it's another adjustment, but we get through that too.

It's been 12 weeks since we gave up smoking. We count down the weeks, and it's a victory countdown.

We've noticed physical changes too. Richard's skin looks different – it's pink! We both breathe and sleep better and have a better sense of taste and smell. As for my skin, in Richard's words, not mine: “It's as soft as a baby's bottom”.

further information

Allen Carr's Easyway workshop costs \$420 per person. This is refundable if you fail to quit and provided you go to the follow-up sessions (at no extra cost). For more information see www.allencarr.com.au