



Pick Your Path to Health

Kicking the Habit by Reclaiming the Sacred

By Cathy McCarthy
Anishinaabe - Metis (Non-status)

From the beginning of time, every Nation has passed down stories of how Creator gave us tobacco so that we could use it to pray. In all our languages there is a word for tobacco; asema, kinnick kinnick, ihchitchiae, chanee, tsalu.

When we want to ask a favor of someone or something, we offer them tobacco in a skin bag as a symbol of our respect. When we dig up herbs for our medicine, when we ask a sapling to sacrifice itself for our ceremonies, when we take the life of an animal, we offer tobacco in respect for what was sacrificed for our wellbeing and in thanks to Creator who has provided for us. In ceremony and in prayer, we take tobacco in our left hand, the one that is closest to the heart. We breathe our spirit and our prayers into that tobacco and scatter it to the four directions or burn it in fire or on Inipi stones.

When it is loaded into the pipe and smoked in the most sacred of our ceremonies, we link all things together and share that relationship with each other. The smoke is taken into the mouth where it is mixed with our prayers and sent back out into the sky.

Taking smoke any further into the body than the mouth is not ceremony, it is abuse of the Creator's gift. This is what the Elders tell us.

Even so, American Lung Association research tells us that 36.2 percent of the 2 million American Indians and Alaska Natives living in the United States take commercial tobacco into their lungs and are addicted to it. Among Native American women of childbearing years, the percentage is even higher at 44.3. On average, 2 out of every 5 Native Americans die from tobacco abuse.

Apart from commercial tobacco being an abuse of tradition, we all know from being bombarded with messages everyday that it damages our overall health and can lead to heart disease, strokes and cancer. It is no coincidence that these diseases are the leading killers in Native communities. It even affects the health of those around us, our children and our Elders who must breathe in our second-hand smoke.

Why is commercial tobacco so toxic while a ceremonial mix is not?

Commercial tobacco can contain over 4,000 chemicals including pesticides, herbicides, and heavy metals. Many of these, including nicotine, benzene and cyclopentane cause cancer. Many others like ammonia and strychnine (rat poison) are just plain poison to the human body. Even the cigarettes manufactured on reservations that are meant to be taken into the lungs, contain nicotine and tar, which are deadly in the long term.

Many Native ceremonial mixes do not contain tobacco as we know it. Mixes like Kinnick-Kinnick contain bear berry, mullen, red willow bark, osha root, and yerba santa. Traditional forms of tobacco like *Nicotiana rustica* still contain nicotine. But if used respectfully, in the traditional way as an offering and in the Sacred Pipe, it poses little to no risk. To quit abusing the Creator's gift of tobacco, is to return to our fundamental tradition of respect. That includes respect for ourselves, our families, our communities, and our way of life.

There are many ways to quit smoking with or without the help of chemical substitutes or medication. The way that is best for you is best determined by you. Sometimes it can take more than one try involving different methods. Just remember that switching to other forms, like chewing tobacco or smokeless cigarettes, is not quitting.

A good starting point is to discuss your plan with your health care provider, a smoke cessation counselor, or community healer. Talk it over with your family and get them to buy into your plan. If other family members smoke, encourage them to stop as well, or at least not smoke in your presence. Then, get rid of the ashtrays and all the cigarette packs laying around your house and workplace. Forbid smoking in your house. Cut down or stop drinking alcohol. It will weaken your resolve.

Now comes the hard part - resisting the urge that is being triggered by the addiction in your brain. When it hits, try doing something else if you can, like going for a walk or taking a warm bath. If you really want to tie in your efforts with reconnecting to your heritage, take up a craft like beading, designing regalia, or making your own drum. Learn the fancy shawl, traditional, or jingle dress dance, it's good exercise. Go fishing, herb gathering, berry picking. Find an Elder and listen to your tribal stories, learn to cook traditional foods.

If your willpower needs a boost, consider the patch, nicotine gum, or prescription medicines. If you fall off the wagon, don't despair, plan your next attempt instead.

If you want to replace commercial tobacco products with traditional ones in your ceremonies, you can contact Joe Winter, a Native anthropologist who has made it his life work to collect and grow traditional strains of tobacco so that he can give it back to the people. His organization, the Traditional Native American Tobacco Seed Bank and Education Program (TNAT) will send you seeds or processed leaves that are close to what your ancestors used. He already sends 3,000 packets of sacred tobacco each month to prisons, halfway houses, and substance abuse centers to help in their healing processes. In fact, you probably have run into his volunteers passing packets out at powwows across the country. Joe is also looking for volunteers to grow and distribute his sacred tobacco and especially to get the message out about commercial tobacco abuse.

Here is his address:

The Traditional Native American Tobacco Seed Bank and Education Program (TNAT)
University of New Mexico
1717 Lomas Blvd, NE
Albuquerque, NM 87131
Telephone: 505 277 5853
FAX: 505 277 6726
E-mail: jwinter@unm.edu

As Indian people, we have the added incentive of reclaiming our cultural relationship with tobacco for helping us break our addiction to commercial tobacco products. Our Elders and our traditions tell us how to respect and use tobacco to achieve the same high through prayers and offerings. With that we have little need to endanger ourselves by bringing tobacco into places in our bodies where it was never meant to go.

There are many free resources on quitting. Many of them are available for download from the Internet. Here are some to start you off on your path to better health and cultural renewal.

The National Women's Health Information Center, How to Quit Smoking
<http://www.4woman.gov/QuitSmoking/howtoquit.cfm>
or call, 1-800-994-WOMAN (96626) - toll free

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Tobacco Information and Prevention Source (TIPS)

<http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/index.htm>

or call, 1-800-311-3435 - toll free (general CDC number)

E-mail: tobaccoinfo@cdc.gov

You Can Quit Smoking: Consumer Guide

<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/tobacco/consquits.htm>

or call, 1-800-358-9295 - toll free

Here are some resources for Native Americans trying to quit.

Tobacco: Sacred Smoke/Addictive Weed (Canadian, really great site!)

http://www.ayn.ca/quit/en/c7_1_sacred_smoke.asp

Native Counseling Services of Alberta

Rocky Mountain Plaza

#640, 615 Macleod Trail SE

Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 4T8

Telephone: (403) 237-7850

Fax: (403) 237-7857

Tobacco Use Prevention Education: Sacred Use, Not Abuse

<http://www.ncidc.org/tupe>

Address

NCIDC

241 F Street, Eureka, California 95501

Telephone: 707-445-8451

Fax: 707-445-8479

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."