

Smoking triggers more stress: Survey

BY MISTY HARRIS, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE APRIL 14, 2009



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Photograph by: Marwan Naamani, AFP-Getty Images

Canadians hoping to blow off economic anxiety with cigarettes could get burned, according to new research linking smoking with significantly higher-than-normal stress levels.

Drawing on data from 2,250 adults, Pew Research — a non-partisan American think-tank — found half (50 per cent) of all smokers claim to experience frequent stress in their lives, compared with just 35 per cent of ex-smokers and 31 per cent of non-smokers. Even controlling for basic demographic traits such as sex, age, education, income and parental status, the researchers say current smokers are still significantly more likely than non-smokers and quitters to have self-reported stress.

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"Many smokers perceive smoking as a way to calm stress, when, in fact, what they're doing is satisfying nicotine cravings and withdrawal," says Rob Cunningham, senior policy analyst for the Canadian Cancer Society. "In many respects, smoking — or the delay in having a cigarette — is the cause of stress."

Cunningham believes Pew's report supports the need for more educational messages about the link between stress and tobacco use. At the same time, he's not convinced the deepening economic turmoil will necessarily increase smoking rates in Canada, which have remained flat (roughly one in five

people) since 2005.

"Clearly, a recession is bad news for Canada," says Cunningham. "But less disposable income may be a motivator to quit, or not start."

But Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress*, says she's concerned the recession will cause people to "revert to old bad habits of self-soothing," including the use of tobacco products.

"There's insufficient publicized information about the stress smoking causes, as opposed to the mythic relaxation response it induces," says Mandel, citing such pop-culture imagery as smoking after sex.

The Pew report draws on data from a nationally representative U.S. poll in mid-2008, when economic anxiety was still months from peaking. It leaves open the question whether stress is a byproduct of using cigarettes or if smokers are predisposed to anxiety.

"(Smokers) tend to be lower on the classic socio-economic scales, and some of that correlates with stress," says Paul Taylor, director of Pew Social & Demographic Trends. "But we did a regression analysis that tried to hold those factors constant, and we still found an independent relationship between smoking and reports of being stressed."

Vince Harden, a smoker for nearly 40 years, is skeptical of the findings and points to the fact that tobacco rations were given to soldiers during the Second World War as an aid to relaxation. If his stress is any higher than the non-smoking population, the Winnipeg man says, it's not because of cigarettes, but rather the "anti-tobacco people" crusading against their use.

"Smokers were doing just fine before everyone started bashing us," says Harden, 55.

According to the Pew report, about a quarter of smokers consider themselves "very happy," compared with more than a third of quitters and nearly four in 10 non-smokers. When asked about family life, smokers were also less likely to report being "very satisfied:" about six in 10, compared with seven in 10 non-smokers and quitters.

Health Canada declined to comment on the report. The data, collected by Princeton Survey Research International for Pew Research, is considered accurate within 2.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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