

# Tranceformed



Inspired by last week's smoking ban feature, hardened smoker *Mark Smith* decides to kick the habit, with a little help from his subconscious and one of Dubai's resident hypnotherapists.

I'm an expert at quitting smoking, having done it pretty much every day for the past nine years. I'd wake every morning, breath stinking of last night's poison, and make a solemn pact with myself never to do it again. I'd spring reformed from my bed, drink in the ozone and feel smug about my life-changing decision all day. Or at least until 7.30pm, when I would allow myself to scrounge a cigarette from a smoker mate or colleague. An entire packet of Marlboro Lights later, and I'd be back to square one. This *Groundhog Day* scenario

played out over the best part of a decade. And every day I looked a little bit more like Bill Murray.

I hated smoking – my friends' disapproval, the expense, the smell – but I loved it too. Sometimes the intense desire for a cigarette would wash over me, only for me to realise that I was already puffing on one. Smoking had sent me bonkers, and will power alone was clearly not going to cure me – I simply didn't have any. More regimented efforts to kick the habit had also ended in failure.

Sick of watching me chain smoke my way through family gatherings, my parents had enrolled me in Allen Carr's Easy Way To Quit Smoking classes, which don't even require you to want to quit, and boast a 90 per cent success rate. I went to five before the clinic offered to refund the enrolment fee. I spent it, of course, on Duty Free cigarettes.

More recently, I've tried British TV hypnotist Paul McKenna's optimistically titled *Quit Smoking Today Without Gaining Weight* book and CD set. The book is so dull it

I wanted it. The cost of cigarettes in the UAE – practically free by British standards – had sent me into a smoking frenzy. I had a hacking cough, and the index finger of my smoking hand was saffron yellow, like that of Shane MacGowan in the video for 'Fairytale Of New York' (look it up on YouTube and show your children – they'll never take up the habit). It was not, as supremely irritating people say, a good look. Perhaps sensing my desperation, Alla agreed to see me on a Friday morning.

Formidable but glamorous and friendly, Alla moved to Dubai from Russia 12 years ago. She is now a practitioner with the Change Associates, helping people deal with all sorts of problems, from alcoholism to post traumatic stress disorder, through hypnotherapy. Save for a few framed certificates, the white walls of her office are bare and, as far as I can tell, there are no panpipes: I'm reassured. She starts with some questions: do I have brothers and sisters? What is my favourite number? And colour? (No, eight, green).

After quizzing me on my attitudes towards the evil weed, she explains why I'm in the state I'm in: my conscious mind wants to quit, but my subconscious is resisting, because of deep-seated feelings towards smoking that I've built up over the years. I may say I want my lungs to be as pure as Dakota Fanning, but my subconscious would rather I lived my life like Keith Richards. As long as there's *Celebrity Death Match* going on in my head, I'll find it impossible to progress.

Alla asks me about my smoking habits, and we establish that I only ever smoke when I've got a drink in my hand. I had assumed that this was because cigarettes and alcohol are somehow inherently complementary, like fish and chips, or Brangelina. Not so, it transpires: Alla postures that I'll actually drink anything to wash away the taste of cigarettes, which I can't stand on its own. I dismiss this at first, but it dawns on me that she's absolutely right. Many a the time I've denied my nicotine craving because there's no liquid handy. In any case Alla explains that such associative habits can easily be broken, and demonstrates this with an exercise that has me clapping my hands together: intuitively they fall left hand over right, but it's not difficult to train my brain to do the opposite automatically, so that I don't even have to think about it. The theory goes that, with a bit of reprogramming, I should be able to enjoy a pint or a cup of coffee without reaching for the cancer sticks.

Dubai-based hypnotherapist Alla Tchemodanova wasn't going to tolerate any such pessimism. 'What do you mean, you want to try to quit smoking?' she snapped, when I called her practice in Knowledge Village. It turns out that, as far as hypnotherapists are concerned, 'try' is a dirty word, steeped in failure. 'You are going to quit. You just have to want it.'

The actual hypnosis takes up less than half of the two-hour consultation. I can't recall everything, but I do remember being incredibly relaxed, to the point where I could barely lift my arm. There is no pocket watch, no pendulum, but Alla does ask me to do some breathing exercises, to count backwards from a hundred, and to keep relaxing 'deeper and deeper, deeper and deeper'.

Once I am sufficiently zonked, she initiates a series of conversations, some of which involve me regressing to the age I was when I first tried smoking (15). When she wants to speak to the teenage me, Alla taps me on the forehead and says 'fifteen'. Suddenly, I'm covered in acne, hanging around in a shopping centre in rainy Bradford, spluttering as I pull on a friend's Benson & Hedges: regression indeed. At one point she asks me to imagine all the cigarettes I have ever smoked in reverse order. A kaleidoscope of ashtrays flashes before my eyes.

Much of what Alla says during the hypnosis is repetitive, and sounds like an incantation or spell, even. She says again and again that I will find it easy to let go of smoking because I no longer need to 'fit in': that I can assert my independence by quitting. She reminds me that this is my chance to stop punishing myself with poison, to move on, and to start looking after my health. Increased consumption of fruit and veg is mooted, and I am asked to imagine the satisfaction of refusing a cigarette at a party: 'No thank you, I don't smoke'.

Now the above may all sound a bit too trite, a bit too much like *Oprah* for your liking, and believe me, I was more sceptical than anybody. But it's been nearly a week since I left Alla's office, and I've hardly thought about smoking at all, except to marvel at the fact that I'm no longer doing it. I haven't avoided the pub or any of my smoking buddies. I've attended a shisha party and declined the pipe, and refused the offer of cigarettes from strangers, without feeling like I'm missing out on anything at all. It's early days, but it honestly feels like there's a force field between me and tobacco. My inner Keith Richards, it would seem, has left the building. And he's not coming back. ●

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