

Trying to quit

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Scores of smokers know they should quit, have tried to quit, and have in fact actually quit, only to be drawn back into the dangerous habit.

Some north suburbanites have recently found, however, that hypnotherapy and cold laser treatments can help them kick the habit for good

Hair stylist Paula Simone, who smoked for 43 years before quitting last fall with the aid of laser therapy to release endorphins.

(Eric Davis/For Pioneer Press)

There's not much good scientific research on hypnotherapy and cold laser (which is a variation of acupuncture) smoking cessation programs, said pulmonologist Gerald Luger of St. Francis Hospital in Evanston.

But Luger does believe that hypnotherapy and acupuncture can be useful for those trying to quit.

His hospital, in fact, offers occasional group hypnotherapy smoking cessation seminars.

And two north suburbanites have positive stories to tell about these techniques.

Marcy Offit finally kicked the habit after a personal hypnotherapy session, and Paula Simone quit with the aid of laser therapy.

Laser therapy

Simone of Morton Grove smoked for 43 years, starting at age 13 and finally quitting last November, when she was 56.

"I truly loved smoking," Simone said. "The only thing I didn't care for was I'd have trouble breathing if I had too many. Or if I got sick, the sickness would last a very long time and land in my chest."

She'd tried halfheartedly to give up the habit a few times, but last fall her husband made another plea. His birthday was coming up, and he wanted her to quit smoking for him.

"He said, 'We're getting close to retirement and I'd love to spend a long retirement with you,'" Simone said.

And Simone was feeling rather lonely as a smoker.

"You can't smoke anywhere anymore, because the amount of people who are smoking is dwindling, there's sometimes no one to smoke with," she said. "You're running out, having a few puffs, and running back in. It's cold, it's hot, it's lonely."

Simone decided to try again, seeking help from an Acculaser Therapy clinic near her promised results after a single, \$289 session.

Acculaser owner Mario Catanese, a Chicago resident and 15-year-smoker, underwent this kind of laser therapy himself two years ago. He soon became trained in the procedure and opened clinics in Northbrook, Waukegan, Chicago and Hillside.

"It's based on traditional acupuncture, but instead of using a needle we use a laser," Catanese said. "We're stimulating pressure points so your body releases endorphins. It's an aid to help get through the withdrawal period and minimize and eliminate cravings."

Acculaser promises three to five days of an endorphin-fueled "high" to help smokers get through those first difficult hours.

On the morning of Nov. 21, Simone smoked as many cigarettes as she could stomach and then headed in for her treatment. She was out an hour later, but then anxiety set in.

"I had a very rough time the first 24 hours," she said. Yet Simone stuck with her resolve not to smoke and felt better everyday. Fearful of gaining weight, she went in for a free "booster" treatment the following week when she started to crave sugar, but since then has been smoke-free. She also hasn't gained any weight.

Simone was amazed that, even during those first few days, she didn't feel like she was gasping for air as she'd felt during other quitting attempts. Nor did she feel especially irritable, moody or experience the unbearable urge to raise her hand to her mouth, all reasons why she'd never been able to quit before.

"I'm now the poster child for Acculaser," Simone said. "No one would have thought, in a million years, that I could quit smoking."

Hypnotherapy

If anyone knows what an insidious habit smoking is, it's Marcy Offit. The 34-year-old Riverwoods resident had every reason to quit. She's young, she has three small children, and she recently watched her mother-in-law die of lung cancer.

In fact, Offit did manage to quit. Several times. The longest stretch she's been cigarette-free was four years. But then she started up again in January 2006, shortly after her mother-in-law died.

"I'd sleep in the hospital with her while her lungs were filling with fluid," said Offit. "But that didn't stop me. That's how addictive this habit is."

Then Offit heard about Highland Park life coach and hypnotherapist Melvyn Zahn and, though she wasn't even sure hypnosis worked, she was desperate enough to call Zahn. Offit liked that Zahn's smoking cessation program has a 95 percent success rate and that his \$495 fee comes with a lifetime guarantee so she could go back if it didn't work at first.

She also liked that Zahn promised to help her in a single session without any follow-up, books or gadgets.

"I haven't had very many people coming back to me," said Zahn, who started offering his hypnotherapy sessions--for smoking cessation only--two years ago.

Myths about hypnosis abound, Zahn said. First of all, there's no funny business with smoking cessation hypnotherapy. No quacking like a chicken, no trance, no entertainment.

"Hypnosis is just a very deep state of relaxation," he said. "The patient isn't in some kind of Never Never Land. He can hear my voice, he can hear noises, he can even think."

And hypnosis only works for those who truly want to quit smoking, Zahn said.

"People can't stop smoking because the conscious part of the mind wants to stop but the unconscious part doesn't. They're constantly fighting with each other," he said. "In my therapy I get the two to agree with each other."

Zahn first did visualization exercises with Offit until she felt completely relaxed, and then he began to "plant" thoughts in her unconscious mind.

"He said things like, 'I'm adamantly opposed to smokers. I feel bad for people who smoke because they're struggling,'" Offit recalled. After her session ended, she walked out wondering if it had done any good, knowing she could go to the next gas station and buy another pack.

The strange thing was, Offit said, that as the days progressed she realized she didn't really want to smoke anymore. She still had physical and mental cravings, but she endured them until they passed and, even if Offit found herself heading toward the car, she'd hear herself thinking, "No, I don't think so" and go back into the house.

"I used to quit smoking and then see someone smoke and get really envious and jealous and think, 'It's so unfair,'" Offit said. "I'd feel deprived."

This time she doesn't feel deprived. She said she feels empathy for the smoker but also great relief that she's no longer stuck in the habit.

"After a couple of weeks, my cravings abated, and I was done," she said.

Offit knows now that she can never, ever pick up another cigarette or take a puff, or she'll be hooked again. So does Simone. But both women are still amazed that they've crossed over into the nonsmoking world.

"I never thought it would work for me," Offit said.

Information about Acculaser Therapy smoking cessation programs can be found at: www.accumasertherapy.com or by calling (312) 491-0090. Information about Melvyn Zahn's smoking cessation hypnotherapy sessions in Highland Park can be found at www.path-to-wellness.com or at (888) 494-1638. For information on other smoking cessation programs, contact your local hospital or the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago at: www.lungchicago.org or (312)243-2000.