

Chapter One: Get Ready. This Will Be Uncomfortable.

Let me be straight with you from the very first page.

If you're going to stop using nicotine—really stop, not just white-knuckle it for a few days before sneaking back—it is going to be uncomfortable. I'm not going to dress that up for you. I'm not going to hand you a pamphlet full of cheerful affirmations and call it a program. You've had enough of those. You know how they end.

The discomfort is real. I lived it. I know exactly what it feels like when your body is screaming for a hit, and your mind starts negotiating, whispering all the perfectly reasonable-sounding reasons why right now is the wrong time to quit. I know what it's like to be so deep in the grip of nicotine that stopping feels not just hard, but genuinely impossible. It's like trying to outrun your own shadow.

So, yes. It's going to be uncomfortable.

But, here's what I also know, and what I want you to sit with for a moment: you wouldn't be reading this if you weren't already uncomfortable. You're uncomfortable right now. The cough that won't quit, the guilt every time you reach for your vape, the way you disappear from your own life—from dinner tables and kids' games and conversations—to go be alone with your nicotine. The way you talk to yourself about what you're doing to your body. The way you feel when someone looks at you a certain way, or when your doctor says those words you keep dreading. That discomfort? It's already here. It's been here for a while.

The question isn't whether you're going to feel some discomfort. The question is which discomfort you choose.

Think about the discomfort of not using nicotine: the withdrawal, the urges, the irritability, the strange feeling of living without something that's been glued to your identity for years. That discomfort is a completely different animal from what you're living with right now. One of them leads somewhere. One of them is building something. The other is just burning you down, slowly, reliably, day after day, with your full cooperation.

If you come to this with an open mind (skeptical is fine, skeptical is actually great, I'd rather have your honest doubt than your performed enthusiasm) I believe we can do something real together. I believe we can shift the inner dialogue. From "nicotine is fucking me up" to something cleaner, something that puts the power back where it belongs: with you.

Just: fuck nicotine.

That shift is everything. And it starts here.

The Two Big Lies You Keep Telling Yourself

Before we go any further, I need to address the two lies. You know the ones. You've been telling them to yourself for so long, they've started to feel like the truth. They're not. And until we call them out clearly, they're going to keep sabotaging you.

The first lie is: "I've got to quit."

How long have you been hearing that voice in your head? Months? Years? Decades, maybe? I've got to quit. I need to stop. I'm going to stop. And yet, here you are. Still using. Still reaching for it without even thinking, the way you reach for your phone or your keys. Still telling yourself the same thing tomorrow that you told yourself today.

Here's the truth buried under that lie: you don't have to quit. Nobody is making you. You are not a five-year-old being sent to your room. You are a grown adult with full autonomy over your own choices. No one is standing over you with a rulebook. You can use nicotine anytime you want. You could use it right now. And if you hate yourself for it, well, you'll still be able to use it tomorrow too. "I've got to quit" is a phrase that sounds like motivation but functions like paralysis. It keeps you locked in a loop of shame and self-judgment that actually makes quitting harder, not easier.

Here's the truth buried under that lie: you don't have to quit.

We're going to replace "I've got to quit" with something much closer to reality. Something that gives you back your agency instead of stealing it.

The second lie is: "I don't want to use anymore."

I hear this one constantly. And I understand why people say it. They're suffering. They're tired. They desperately wish things were different. But, it's not the truth. And, as we all likely know, building a strategy on a lie is like building a house on sand.

The truth—the real, honest, unvarnished truth about you and me and every person who uses nicotine—is that at times, we do want to use. We genuinely want it. That's not a moral failure. That's addiction. The substance has hijacked the part of your brain that processes desire and relief and reward, and it's made itself feel necessary. Wanting to use is not the problem. It's the condition.

What we actually don't want isn't the using itself. What we don't want are the consequences. We don't want the way vaping makes our throat feel raw and strange. We don't want the way pouches tear up our gums and turn the soft tissue white. We don't want the smoker's cough that wakes us up at night, or the shortness of breath, or the quiet, constant fear that the bill is coming due. We don't want what nicotine costs us. But the hit itself? Part of us still wants that.

And that's okay to admit. In fact, it's essential. Because, until we're honest about what we're actually dealing with, we can't deal with it. We can only pretend, and pretending has never gotten anyone free.

Quitting Is Not an Event. It's a Process.

People come to me expecting a moment. A dramatic before-and-after. A switch they flip and walk away from. That's not how any of the meaningful things in life work, and it's not how this works either.

Think about the things in your life that actually matter. If you're married, your marriage wasn't an event. It was a ceremony, yes, but the marriage itself is a daily ongoing process of choosing each other, negotiating, growing, sometimes struggling, always continuing. If you're a parent, parenthood wasn't an event. The moment your child was born may have been a moment, but the actual being-a-parent part never stops. It's a process. Your career, your health, your relationships — all of it is process, not event.

Getting nicotine-free is the same. It is not a moment you cross through, and then you're done. It is an ongoing, daily, sometimes hourly practice of making a particular choice. And I want to be honest with you about what that process looks like, because I think the truth, even when it's not comfortable, is always more useful than a fantasy.

There will be times in this process when getting free from nicotine will feel like one of the most significant and valuable things you've ever done for yourself. You'll breathe easier, literally. You'll

taste food differently. You'll have money in your pocket that used to go up in smoke or get dissolved into your bloodstream through your gums. You'll stop calculating when you can get your next hit. You'll feel a kind of self-respect that's hard to describe until you've experienced it. It's the specific satisfaction of knowing that you did a hard thing, and that you didn't flinch.

There will be other times when it feels like one of the hardest things you've ever done. When an urge hits at the exact wrong moment, and you're not ready, and everything inside you is pulling in one direction. That will happen. Let's not pretend it won't.

But, here's what I've learned from decades of living this and from working with people through it: the hard moments don't last. The urges don't last. And most of what makes those moments feel unbearable is not the urge itself. Rather, it's the story we tell ourselves about the urge. The meaning we assign to it. The terror we feel at the idea of sitting in discomfort without reaching for relief.

We're going to change that story. That's the work.

The Magic Trick

You want the secret? I'll give it to you right now, because I'm not in the business of making this more mysterious than it is.

The entire trick — the whole mechanism — is this: whenever you're ready, just don't take the next hit.

That's it. That is genuinely it.

Getting nicotine-free is that simple. It is not that easy — I'll never tell you it's easy — but it is that simple. There is no complicated biochemical protocol. There is no perfect day you have to wait for. There is no special sequence of events that needs to fall into place first. There is just this moment, and the next one, and the choice that lives in the space between the urge and the action.

The entire trick — the whole mechanism — is this: whenever you're ready, just don't take the next hit.

Don't take the next hit.

Now, I know what your mind is doing right now. It's saying sure, but what about when I really want one? What about stress at work? What about after dinner, when the craving is strongest? What about the way I've used nicotine to manage boredom and anxiety, celebration and grief, and everything in between for however many years? How do I just not take the next hit when the hit is the only thing that feels like it will help?

That's exactly what the rest of this book is for. Over the next chapters, we're going to take the simple truth of “don't take the next hit,” and we're going to make it not just simple, but genuinely doable. We're going to get underneath the urges. We're going to understand what they actually are, what they're made of, and why they have so much power over you. And then we're going to take that power back.

But the principle itself? It never changes. Every person who has ever gotten free from nicotine did it the same way: they just didn't take the next hit.

I want to say something about timing, because it matters. Every person who uses nicotine today will stop at some point. That is not inspirational guessing. That's just statistics. You will stop using nicotine. The question is whether you stop while you're in good health, on your own terms, with your quality of life intact — or whether you stop because your body has finally sent you a bill you can't pay? Because that's what the other option looks like. That's where the road goes if we stay on it.

I think about it this way: when I was using, it was like a bullet had already been fired in my direction. I could wait around and hope it missed me, or I could get out of its path. The bullet was already in the air. The only question was what I was going to do next.

The question is whether you stop while you're in good health, on your own terms, with your quality of life intact — or whether you stop because your body has finally sent you a bill you can't pay?

Does Nicotine Come First?

I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to really sit with it before you answer.

In your life, right now — who or what comes first?

When I ask my clients this, I get the answers you'd expect. My partner. My kids. My faith. My health. Myself. And I believe them when they say it. I believe that's how they think about their lives, how they've organized their values, what they care most deeply about.

And then I ask: if that's true, why are you still using nicotine?

Because here's the thing about addiction that's hard to look at directly: when nicotine calls you...when that urge arrives, that pull in your chest or your hands or the back of your throat, you will walk away from every single one of those things faster than you'll walk away from nicotine. You leave the dinner table. You step out of the conversation. You drive somewhere, or you excuse yourself, or you find five minutes you didn't think you had. You will go be with your nicotine.

You never consciously decided it would be this way. You never sat down and thought, "I'm going to make nicotine the most important thing in my life." Nobody does. That's not how addiction works. It doesn't announce itself. It just gradually, quietly, completely rearranges your priorities until one day you look up and realize that everything in your life gets organized around this one thing — when you can have it, whether you have enough, what you'll do if you run out.

Think about what happens when you run out. What occupies your mind? How long before getting more is all you can think about? And think about what happens when you have plenty of it with you. You think about everything else. You think about work and family and what you want for dinner. The nicotine is there in the background, but it's not consuming you because the supply is secure.

That's why I tell the people I work with to keep their nicotine with them, even after they've stopped using. *Especially after*. Because the moment you're without it is the moment your mind fixates on it completely. Having it with you means you're making a choice, not managing a scarcity. And choice is what this whole thing is about.

You never gave nicotine permission to become the most important thing in your world. But if you're honest, really honest, that's what it's become. And recognizing that isn't a reason to hate yourself. It's a reason to understand what you're actually dealing with. You're not weak. You're not stupid. You're not broken. You have a real addiction to a real substance that was specifically designed to create exactly this kind of dependency.

My mother used to smoke. My grandmother on her mother's side lived to ninety-three. Her grandfather lived to a hundred. My mother died at seventy-five from breast and lung cancer. She outlived neither of her parents. She smoked.

My mother was not a punchline. She was the most vivid, real, full person I have ever known. And nicotine took twenty years from her. I don't tell that story to scare you, though maybe fear is useful sometimes. Maybe her story should scare you a little. I tell it because I know what's at stake here. I know it personally, in the most permanent and irreversible way possible.

My mother finally did stop smoking. The last time she smoked was when she was cremated.

I told you this would be unfiltered.

You never gave nicotine permission to become the most important thing in your world. But if you're honest, really honest, that's what it's become.

Understanding the Addiction: The Physical and the Mental

There are two sides to nicotine addiction, and understanding both of them is essential to getting free.

The physical side is the one most people know about. Your body becomes dependent on the substance. It reorganizes around it. When the nicotine isn't there, you feel it: restlessness, irritability, a creeping discomfort that your body has learned to interpret as urgent. This is real. It is physiologically real. And it is also, in the grand scheme of things, relatively short-lived.

Here's something that surprises most people: within twelve hours of your last hit, the vast majority of nicotine is already out of your system. Within seventy-two hours (three days), it is not traceable in your blood or urine. It is physically gone. The acute physical withdrawal, as uncomfortable as it is, resolves within a matter of days.

Three days. That's the physical timeline.

But then there are the urges. And the urges don't follow that timeline. The urges don't read the chemistry textbooks. The urges show up whenever they want — days later, weeks later, years later. They can arrive like a freight train out of nowhere, triggered by a smell or a memory or a certain time of day or a moment of stress. Or they can arrive so quietly you almost don't notice them, like a low-grade background hum that's always there if you pay attention.

That's the mental side of the addiction. And it's the part that lasts. Not because it's undefeatable, but because the brain doesn't unlearn associations the way the body clears substances. The neural pathways that link nicotine to relief, to pleasure, to comfort, to reward — those don't just dissolve. They fade. They become quieter. But they don't disappear overnight.

So, which side of the addiction is more powerful? Most people say the physical. But I'd argue the mental side is the one that actually keeps people using. Because by the time the physical withdrawal is

over, the mental game is still fully in play. And if you're not prepared for that—if nobody told you that urges can arrive years after you've stopped using and that doesn't mean you've failed, it just means you're an addict like me—that surprise can knock you back to the beginning before you know what happened.

Here's what I want you to understand about urges: they're your condition, not your problem. Wanting to use nicotine is something that will be part of you for a long time. Maybe forever, at some level. That's not a tragedy. That's just the honest reality of having been addicted to this substance. The problem isn't the urge. The problem only starts when you act on it.

Here's what you need to know about that: once you've crossed the line from social use to addiction (and you've crossed it, or you wouldn't be here) you can never go back. Being a social smoker, the occasional vaper, the person who uses it once in a while without thinking much about it is not available to you anymore. A grape can become a raisin. A raisin cannot go back to being a grape. You might look like a grape from the outside. You might even feel like a grape sometimes. But all it takes is a little concentrated nicotine, and you're right back where you started.

One hit is not a slip. One hit is a reboot. I've seen it happen too many times to think otherwise.

Here's what I want you to understand about urges: they're your condition, not your problem.

Nicotine Addiction Is OCD

Let me offer you a frame for understanding your addiction that I think changes everything.

Nicotine addiction, at its core, is an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

I know that might sound strange. But think about it honestly. Have you ever been in a situation where you were obsessed—genuinely, uncomfortably obsessed—with the thought of using? Where the thought wouldn't leave you alone, kept circling back no matter what you tried to focus on? And did you feel compelled to use, even in moments when part of you genuinely didn't want to? Even in moments when you were aware, in real time, that you were about to do something you'd told yourself you wouldn't do?

That's the obsession and the compulsion. That's OCD.

And here's the loop: throughout the day, your nicotine level drops. As it drops, you start to feel a discomfort. It's subtle at first, just a kind of restlessness, a pull. The discomfort grows. You use. The discomfort goes away. You feel relief. And then the cycle begins again, and will continue beginning again, every few hours, every day, for as long as you use.

You think you're using nicotine for the pleasure of it. And sometimes that's part of it. You want that first hit of the day, or after a meal, or in a moment of high emotion. But, most of the time, if you're really honest, you're not using for pleasure. You're using to make the discomfort go away. You're using to chase zero. Not to get high. Just to get to baseline. Just to feel normal.

Think about that for a moment. All this, from the expense, the health consequences, the social stigma, the self-judgment, the logistics of always having enough, and always knowing where you can use, to always calculating when your next hit can be, is occurring for the privilege of feeling normal.

That's the trap. And naming it clearly is the beginning of getting out of it.

Quality of Life vs. Poison

Let's talk about what nicotine actually is, because I think most people have a surprisingly fuzzy understanding of the substance they're putting in their bodies every single day.

Here's the dictionary definition of nicotine. This comes from standard reference material, not from an anti-tobacco advocacy group: "Nicotine is a colorless, oily, highly toxic liquid alkaloid found in tobacco and valued as an insecticide."

An insecticide. A highly toxic insecticide.

The amount of nicotine you put into your body over the course of a single day, if you took it all at once, in a single dose, would kill you. Quickly. That's not an exaggeration. The dose that you ingest gradually, spread over twelve or fourteen waking hours, is lethal in a single exposure. You've built a tolerance to something that is, by any objective measure, poison.

And whether you're smoking it, vaping it, or tucking a pouch under your lip, you're not just getting nicotine. When you smoke, you're releasing thousands of compounds — formaldehyde, benzene, lead, cadmium, carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide, ammonia, arsenic — over seven thousand compounds in all. Vaping produces fewer of them, yes, and pouches fewer still, but none of these delivery systems are good for you. None of them. The "safer than smoking" label on certain products doesn't mean safe. It means less immediately catastrophic. That's not the same thing.

Nicotine raises your blood pressure every time you use it. Always. It's always a stimulant, even when it feels like it's calming you down. What it's actually calming is the withdrawal that began the moment after your last hit. It's not relaxing you. It's returning you to where you were before it created the problem it's now solving.

Tobacco and nicotine products are, remarkably, among the only consumer products sold legally in this country that are not required to fully disclose their ingredients. They are also, uniquely, the only products legally sold here that, when used exactly as intended—not abused, not misused, but used exactly as directed—are designed to harm the consumer. There is a surgeon general's warning on the package. Has been for decades. We know. We've always known.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, tobacco and nicotine use is the single largest preventable cause of disease, disability, and premature death in the United States. More than 480,000 Americans die prematurely from nicotine-related disease every year. To put that in perspective: if you add up all the deaths from fire, suicide, and homicide, then add car accidents, plane crashes, and train wrecks, then add all deaths from drug and alcohol abuse (including opiates and fentanyl) then add every American death from September 11th and from every war we've fought in the decades since — you get roughly 345,000 deaths a year. Nicotine kills more. Every year.

More than sixteen million Americans are currently living with the chronic diseases caused by nicotine — COPD, heart disease, stroke, various cancers, and diabetes. Living in hospice. Living in long-term care. Still here, but diminished. Still breathing, but not fully alive.

I'm not telling you this to make you feel terrible about yourself. I'm telling you this because you deserve to make choices based on accurate information. And because the frame I care about, the frame that I think actually changes behavior, isn't quantity of life. It's quality.

My goal isn't to live forever. My goal is to be fully present for the things that matter to me. These include my daughter, my son-in-law, my dog, my music, and my friendships. My biggest fear isn't dying young. My biggest fear is living a long time with no quality left to the life I'm living. That fear was a much more powerful motivator than any statistic. And I think it might be for you too.

The dose that you ingest gradually, spread over twelve or fourteen waking hours, is lethal in a single exposure.

Getting Ready to Start

Now we get practical. And I want to tell you upfront that some of what I'm going to suggest is going to go against everything you've ever been told about how to quit.

Most conventional approaches tell you to announce your quit date to everyone you know, so they can support you. To throw away all your nicotine. To identify your triggers and avoid them. To replace nicotine with something else, and proceed to walk, deep breathing, into some form of nicotine replacement.

I'm going to suggest something different. Almost the opposite.

Keep it to yourself. Don't tell everyone you're stopping. Or, if you must tell someone close to you, say only this: I'm going to try. I'm not making any promises. Because here's the thing about publicly declaring a quit: it puts the motivation in the wrong place. You end up doing this for other people. For their pride in you, for their relief, for their approval. And other people, no matter how much they love you, will at some point frustrate you. They'll say the wrong thing, or they'll be watching you too carefully, or they'll catch you in a weak moment, and the shame will be so overwhelming that "screw it, I already failed" becomes the easiest thought to have.

Do this for you. Then for them, if you want. But you first. Always you first.

Don't throw away your nicotine. This one surprises people the most. But think about what happens when you don't have it: all you think about is getting it. Having it with you means you're making a choice in every moment. Choosing not to use when the nicotine is sitting right there is a completely different and much more powerful act than not using because you don't have access to it. One is deprivation. The other is freedom.

Don't try to avoid your urges. This might be the most important one. Every approach that tells you to distract yourself from urges, to run from them, to fill the space with something else—that approach is treating urges like threats. Like things that will destroy you if you look directly at them. They're not. The urge is not your enemy. The urge is just information, information that you have a condition called nicotine addiction. That's all it is. We're going to turn toward the urges, not away from them. We're going to learn to sit in them, to observe them, to let them move through us without acting on them.

That's the skill. That's the thing we're going to build together.

I also want to address the fear. Because there's so much fear wrapped up in the idea of stopping. Fear of failure, again. Fear of how bad it might feel. Fear of who you'll be without this thing that has been such a constant presence in your life. Fear that the urges will never stop, that you'll spend the rest of your life white-knuckling it, forever on the edge of relapse.

I've heard "fear" broken down as: False Evidence Appearing Real. And that's exactly what's happening with most of the fears around stopping. Everything you're afraid of is about the future. It's not about right now. Right now, in this moment, you can read this. You can breathe. You can think. The suffering you're afraid of — that's a projection, a story your addiction is telling you to keep you from leaving.

Here's a promise I can make you: you can always use nicotine again. It will always be there. I'm not asking you to give it up forever in one enormous act of willpower that you have to sustain for the rest of your life. I'm asking you to not take the next hit. Just that one. And then the one after that. And so on, one decision at a time, for as long as you keep choosing freedom.

**Do this for you.
Then for them, if
you want. But you
first. Always you
first.**

This is not a quitting program. I want to be very clear about that. Quitting implies deprivation. Quitting implies sacrifice. Quitting makes it sound like you're giving something up.

What we're actually doing is getting out of a bad relationship you never meant to get into. Think of it like a divorce from something that has been controlling you, draining you, demanding your time and money and attention and health, without giving you anything real in return. You didn't choose this relationship consciously. You drifted into it, the way we all drift into the things that end up holding us. But you can choose differently now.

This is about reclaiming what was always yours. Your health. Your attention. Your money. Your time. Your self-respect. Your quality of life.

You were not born addicted to nicotine. There was a version of you that existed before this substance got its hooks in you, a you who breathed freely, who didn't organize the day around hits, who wasn't a slave to a master who doesn't care whether you live or die.

That version of you is still in there. That's who we're working toward.

Now let's go get free.

Think of it like a divorce from something that has been controlling you, draining you, demanding your time and money and attention and health, without giving you anything real in return.

Exercises

Before we move on, I want you to do some writing. Not because journaling is magic, but because putting words on paper forces you to be honest with yourself in a way that thinking alone doesn't. The thoughts stay slippery in your head. Written down, they become real. You can look at them.

Exercise 1: The Honest Accounting

Write down, without censoring yourself, exactly what nicotine costs you. Not just money—though write that too—but everything. Time. Health. Self-image. Relationships. Anxiety. Write for as long as it takes to feel like you've been genuinely honest. Don't skip the things that are uncomfortable to admit.

Exercise 2: The Two Lies

Write down the last time you said "I have to quit" or "I don't want to use anymore." What was happening? What triggered it? And what did you actually do next? Be truthful. The gap between what we say and what we do is where the work lives.

Exercise 3: What Comes First?

Write an honest account of a day in your life organized around nicotine. When was your first hit? What did you leave or interrupt or postpone to use? How many times did you think about it when you couldn't use? What does this tell you about where nicotine actually ranks in your life versus where you'd like it to rank?

Exercise 4: Your Quality of Life

Write about what you actually want from your life. Not what you're supposed to want — what you genuinely want. Who do you want to be present for? What do you want to be able to do physically? What do you want to feel like when you wake up in the morning? Keep this somewhere you can return to. These are the things we're working toward. These are what's on the other side.

