Stubbing out smoking can light up your mental health

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Stopping smoking is associated with a significant improvement in mental health, equal to or larger than the effect from a course of anti-depressants, researchers at the University of Birmingham and Oxford have found.

The findings should give hope to those people who are desperate to quit smoking but rely on the vice as a stress reliever or anxiety buster.

And healthcare professionals who have been reluctant to offer smoking cessation advice to people with mental health disorders, for fear of quitting making them worse, should also be encouraged by the findings, which show that symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress are all reduced by stopping smoking.

The researchers carried out a review, published today (Friday) in the BMJ, of 26 studies looking at a wide range of mental health issues in people who stopped smoking. The results showed significant improvements in all mental health issues considered when people stopped smoking.

Although one explanation could be that people whose mental health improves for other reasons could be tempted to quit because they did not need to smoke to alleviate symptoms – but the inclusion of some studies in the review where all participants attempted to quit, regardless of their current mental health ruled this out.

The researchers were also able to rule out a deterioration in mental health as a reaction to failing to quit smoking, as some of the studies looked at people who were not motivated to stop in the first place – and would therefore not be adversely affected by continuing to smoke.

In addition, the reduction in mental health problems was equally evident for both the general population, and people who had already been diagnosed with mental health disorders, suggesting that clinicians should no longer be wary of intervening with smokers who have mental ill health.

The added mental health benefits of quitting smoking should also function as an added incentive for smokers to stop.

Gemma Taylor (/staff/profiles/haps/students/taylor-gemma.aspx), the University of Birmingham researcher who led the study, said: “It is hugely encouraging to be able to demonstrate that smoking cessation leads to an improvement in mental health. Smoking rates in the general population have declined substantially over the last 40 years. However, the rates of smoking in people with mental health problems have barely changed. Part of this disparity is due to the myth that stopping smoking will worsen mental health. I believe this research debunks this myth and I hope that these findings motivate people with and without mental health problems to stop smoking.”

Prof Paul Aveyard, from the University of Oxford, said: “Patients often say to me ‘doctor I’m too stressed to stop smoking now’. I hope doctors will now reassure those patients that there’s a good chance that stopping smoking will make you less stressed. In fact, for people with chronic mental health problems, stopping smoking might be an effective treatment.”

Notes to editors

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A full copy of the paper *Change in mental health after smoking cessation: a systematic review and meta-analysis* is published in the BMJ today (Friday 14 February).

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