

Miswanting



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By the time you have overcome your physical addiction to cigarettes you are likely to believe that a smoke will relieve the unpleasant sensations of road rage, social anxiety, existential angst, financial insecurity and irritation with the difficult people who surround you. In fact, the only sensation a cigarette will actually relieve is the craving for nicotine itself. Your mistake stems from the fact that for years you were *always* craving nicotine because you were hopelessly addicted to

it, so you were always relieved when you lit up no matter what else happened to be irritating you at any particular moment. In this situation you are like a laboratory animal being trained to smoke a cigarette whenever you have a sensation you don't like. You therefore *miswant* cigarettes after you have quit, even though cigarettes don't actually make you feel better about anything but nicotine withdrawal. If you succumb to this mistake you will quickly reestablish your physical addiction and resume your ongoing misinterpretation of what a cigarette can do for you. Catch 22.

The term *miswanting* was coined by Daniel Kahneman, who won a Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on the psychology of judgment and decision-making. Most of his insights have since been applied to advertising strategies intended to train you to miswant all sorts of things. But miswanting is by no means limited to consumer products. You have also been conditioned to miswant things in your personal relationships, your career, and your life. Many of these unfortunate mistakes can be neutralized by identifying them and learning to want better. Trust me. Call me.

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