SMOKE OUT THE HABIT

Campaign ropes in youngsters to get their peers to quit smoking

LAURENCE TION
laurens@news.todays.com.sg

JUST two months ago, Jamie (not her real name) smoked her way through 80 sticks of Marlboro weekly. Then, the 23-year-old undergraduate suffered a serious asthma attack linked to her smoking habit and was hospitalised.

"I had asthma only during my childhood. When my lungs started to seize up after a smoke, I couldn't believe it was happening."

Jamie took her first puff at 15 when older friends started encouraging her to light up. She tried to quit several times last year but her attempts to stay off cigarettes were always short-lived.

"Quitting the habit is not that difficult, it's 'quitting' from my circle of friends who smoke that proved to be the problem," she said.

Since her episode in the hospital, she has been attending a smoking cessation programme. She said: "You finally realise what those health pamphlets mean by long-term effects."

Her experience sums up the feelings of other youth smokers whom TODAY spoke to: Long-term health effects are not a strong deterrent and quitting is more than just going cold-turkey – it involves choosing to distance oneself from smoker friends.

According to a 2004 National Health Survey, the mean age at which young smokers aged 18 to 24 years pick up their smoking habit is 17.

Figures from the Health Sciences Authority also indicate a rise in the number of underaged smokers (below 18) who were caught, from 3,349 in 2002 to 5,884 in 2004.

In 2000, the Singapore Youth Tobacco Survey revealed that one in four secondary school students have tried smoking. And among those who smoked, about 22 per cent obtained their cigarettes from friends.

LET THE YOUNG HELP THE YOUNG

With the aim to actively engage youth to reach out to their peers, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) launched its Youth Advolution for Health (YAH) programme last September.

Said Dr Wong Mun Loke, head of HPB's school health promotion department: "Youth have a good understanding of the challenges they face and the kind of activities that will appeal to their peers. Peer and youth-led activities are innovative, creative and generally well received."

HPB supports these programmes by providing funds and professional expertise for committees under YAH.

And by roping in Singapore Idol winner Taufik Batara as one of its "smoke-free ambassadors", the message is clear: Get influential young adults and youth leaders to rally around their friends and channel positive peer pressure to get young smokers to stub it out.

The YAH executive committee is formed by youth from tertiary institutes. Felix Tang, a third-year student from the Singapore Management University (SMU) and chairperson of the committee, agreed that for many youth, quitting could mean isolation and awkwardness among smoker friends.

"We need to work on both the policy and peer support networks to encourage smokers to quit," he said.

FRIENDS, DON'T KEEP QUIET

Meanwhile, several smoke-free events and campaigns supported by the YAH programme were held last month, such as SMU's Love Depot Roadshow and Ngee Ann Polytechnic's Refreshing Campus Run.

Said Celeste Phua, 21, a first-year student at SMU and project manager for the roadshow: "When we choose to remain silent among friends who smoke, it is a form of encouragement to them to continue the habit.

"We (need to) show our love for them by getting more people to speak up and support their choice of quitting."

SMU's three-day roadshow was held as a pre-run up to Valentine's Day and revolved around the theme of love as a source of encouragement for smokers to quit.

Students and faculty members pledged signatures to stay smoke-free, while young smokers were encouraged to throw their cigarettes away into a hollow-heart art installation.

Friends of smokers could also record personal messages in video booths set up around the campus and Celeste said they will put up these clips on a blog soon.

At Ngee Ann Polytechnic, twins Lawrence and Simon Tan, 23, said it was the death of a close friend from a smoking-related disease that compelled them into action.

With the message that "cigarettes are killers in packs", they organised a 2km-run around the campus with smoke-free messages printed on banners and planted along the running route.

"Youth do know about the consequences of smoking. Many just think, 'It won't happen to me now' and underestimate how serious it is. They don't see how much damage it can do in just one year," said Simon.

HEALTH PROBLEMS TOO FAR OFF

Pharmacist Lee Yee Ming, Alexandra Hospital, said many of the long-term effects such as lung cancer and heart problems may not manifest themselves at an early age.

Thus, youth smokers often "ignore smoking advertisements showing gruesome pictures of the effects of smoking on their health."

They tend to associate those diseases with adult smokers, without realising that as they continue smoking, their bodies are already accumulating the effects of over 4,000 harmful chemicals in a cigarette."

The dangers of youth smoking is twofold, said Dr Audrey Tan, a consultant for health promotion at the National Healthcare Group.

"The exposure to tobacco is much longer and the cumulative effects will be more. Hence, their risk of smoking-related diseases is higher. They will become more entrenched in their smoking and more addicted to it. It will become harder to quit," she said.