

Time for a

SMOKE BREAK?

A harm reduction-focused guide for 2S/LGBTQIA+ people who smoke, vape, or use nicotine alongside other substances and are thinking about making changes.

Helpful for friends, family, healthcare providers, allies, and community workers too!



Inside:

- **Stress + nicotine** smoking patterns explained through 2S/LGBTQIA+ lived experience
- **Practical harm reduction tools** for cravings, habits, and vaping that fit real life
- **A flexible format** - read it front to back or jump to key sections that matter to you

Are you considering taking a smoke break?

Shaped by 2S/LGBTQIA+ communities and Community-Based Research Centre's (CBRC) Smoke Break program, this resource discusses how stress connects with nicotine use, including smoking and vaping, and how these patterns can involve other substances. It also offers practical, non-judgmental strategies grounded in harm reduction approaches to help you reach your goals your way.

Our approach

Key features of this resource:

- **Community-informed tools and supports** inspired by lived experiences and programs like Smoke Break
- **Practical, judgement-free strategies** for reducing or stopping smoking/vaping in ways that fit your life. There's no one "right" way and no pressure to make changes
- **A flexible, choose-your-own-path** resource that you can read front to back or jump to what matters most to you. Take what's useful and leave the rest

Our approach is grounded in harm reduction, humility, openness, and care. Real support doesn't require quitting – small steps like cutting down, delaying your next smoke, or trying alternative products are meaningful choices that matter.

We look at nicotine and substance use through an intersectional lens. We recognize how systems like racism, colonialism, ableism, transphobia, and classism affect how we cope with stress, how we use substances and what kind of care we can access. That's why we strive to centre equity, neurodiversity, cultural safety, and lived experience in our work.

We also recognize that for many Indigenous peoples, tobacco has sacred, ceremonial, and cultural uses/roles that are distinct from commercial tobacco use. This resource focuses only on commercial nicotine products like cigarettes and vaping, and **does not** address Indigenous teachings, protocols, or relationships with sacred tobacco.

Our work draws on a few frameworks:

- **The Substance Use Spectrum** sees use as a continuum
- **Socioecological health models** show how our choices are shaped by social and policy environments
- **2S/LGBTQIA+ community care principles** focus on connection, dignity, and supporting each other

Harm reduction, for us, means meeting people where they are. It focuses on safety, dignity, and reducing harm, not on forcing anyone to stop. How, when, or if someone changes their relationship with nicotine is always up to them.

Programs like *Smoke Break* put this into practice. We create tools and spaces that support people in making their own decisions, whether that means quitting, cutting down, or exploring alternatives. Our goal is health, connection, and care that works for you.

What harm reduction *is* and *isn't*:

- **Is** about safety, dignity, choice, and agency
- **Includes** quitting as one option, but never a requirement
- **Is not** about pressure or judgment

2S/LGBTQIA+ people are *stressed*

We're all living in stressful times, juggling endless demands from work, finances, and relationships, in a world that rarely slows down. 2S/LGBTQIA+ lives often involve ongoing stress from systemic oppression, trauma, and violence, where smoking/vaping can become a quick coping tool. Stress comes in acute (short bursts, like a bad day) or chronic (ongoing, like daily discrimination) form. Stress looks different for everyone.

A 2020 study found significantly higher rates of smoking (34%) and vaping (28%) among 2S/LGBTQIA+ people (Planinac et al, 2023) when compared to 2022 national smoking (10.9%) and vaping (5.8%) rates (Health Canada, 2023).

Types of stress(ors):

Universal stressors (everyone faces these):

- Making ends meet (housing insecurity, bills, food costs)
- The daily grind (work/school, caregiving, burnout, self-care, executive function)
- Connections and community (relationships, networks, conflict, loneliness)

Additional stressors for 2S/LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized communities (influenced by discrimination, stigma, and systemic barriers; this list is not exhaustive):

- Discrimination, queer/transphobia, microaggressions
- Trauma and violence, mental health challenges, healthcare stigma
- Policy debates/public rhetoric; police/state violence
- Migration stress (e.g., displacement), social isolation

Nicotine and the brain:

When you're stressed, your brain releases cortisol and adrenaline. This keeps you in fight-or-flight mode. Rational thinking can shut down, your body stays on high alert, and even small triggers can feel overwhelming. Nicotine works fast. It zips into the brain, releases dopamine, and creates a brief sense of calm, helping you reset during moments like misgendering at work, family tension, or queerphobia out in the world.

In the moment, it works. But ongoing stress keeps the nervous system activated, and without nicotine, tensions can feel even sharper. Over time, smoking/vaping can shift from something that helps to something that feels necessary just to cope. With regular use, the brain also reduces its own dopamine production, so you may come to rely on nicotine just to feel okay. Repeated nicotine use changes the brain's reward pathways, making everyday pleasures like food, connection, or rest feel less satisfying.

Recognizing your personal smoking/vaping patterns

People smoke/vape because it meets real needs. It can offer a pause from stress, create easy connections in queer spaces, and serve as a familiar ritual tied to community. These benefits are important to us as queer people. At the same time, smoking/vaping may be filling needs that could also be supported in other ways, like counselling, peer support, medicine, cultural or spiritual practices, or with other coping tools.

Reflection prompts related to stress, connection, and smoking/vaping:

- *When does smoking/vaping feel most helpful, and when do cravings or automatic urges show up?*
- *What need does it meet in that moment (e.g., a break, grounding, connection)? What stress or situation is present?*
- *What situations or feelings tend to increase your smoking/vaping?*
- *How else, other than smoking/vaping, have you met these needs before, or could you in the future?*
- *Are there times when it feels easier to smoke/vape less, delay, or skip?*
- *In what ways does smoking/vaping affect your connections with others or add to your stress?*

Understanding connections between stress, smoking/vaping and other substances

Smoking and/or vaping rarely happen alone; they often pair with other substances, health challenges, or coping habits. When one habit (like smoking or vaping) prompts others into play (like drinking), we call that a cross-trigger. Cross-triggers are links between substances, stress, or situations that reinforce each other. Through a harm reduction lens, let's unpack these common connections to help you spot patterns in your own life.



Nicotine loves company: Common overlaps

Nicotine is a stimulant that often pairs with other substances, especially during stress. These combos help us cope through habits and brain chemistry (as discussed earlier).

- **Alcohol (depressant, sedative):** Nicotine enhances alcohol's relaxing buzz while masking sedation. Drinks can feel lighter and more social. But alcohol lowers inhibitions and increases urges. Over time, cravings strengthen.
- **Cannabis (psychoactive):** Nicotine speeds THC delivery for a quicker high. Cannabis smooths nicotine's harshness. Many people pair them when unwinding, which can make both harder to cut back on over time.
- **Caffeine (stimulant):** They boost each other for steady energy. Coffee heightens nicotine's alertness. Nicotine offsets caffeine jitters. But coffee often becomes a strong trigger.
- **Stimulants (including prescription medications):** They amplify focus and reduce anxiety together. Over time, this can create medication-related habits and crashes.

These pairings help us cope with stress and turn into automatic rituals linked with nicotine use: patio drinks, late-night joints, coffee breaks, work sprints. Queer nightlife, chronic stress, or neurodiverse needs make patterns stickier, prompting cravings. Vaping might shift use to home or gaming, but the patterns stay the same.



Cross-triggers in action can look like:

- Social pressures at events (where one habit spikes another)
- Cutting back on one substance while another increases
- Smoking/vaping to cope with body image/anxiety/overload.

For 2S/LGBTQIA+ people, minority stress like discrimination, family rejection, or sensory overload in queer spaces often amps these up.

Noticing your smoking/vaping patterns can help you make choices that fit your life.

Taking a smoke break: Practical tools

A pause from smoking or vaping is progress, even if it doesn't feel like it. Each skipped or delayed cigarette/vape lets your body rest and reset. Heart rate and blood pressure improve. Lungs begin clearing so breathing and movement feel easier. Taste and smell sharpen within days. Over time, many notice better mood and control despite challenges that come with withdrawal. Every pause means healing.

Community tip:

Keep a short list handy of your personal reasons for cutting back for when you experience tough cravings.

The stress-nicotine cycle

Nicotine eases stress fast (20–30 minutes) by slowing your heart and quieting thoughts. But long-term dependence raises cortisol without it, making daily life harder. Withdrawal symptoms can be felt within hours (e.g., irritability, anxiety, restlessness, brain fog) and can mirror what nicotine first helped you manage.

"In the moment" tools

We all have a threshold of stress that we can handle while staying calm and able to think clearly. When stress spikes beyond that threshold, small challenges can feel huge. The following strategies can shift your focus, calm your body, and bring you back to the present moment. Use them to ride out the initial urges (typically 5–20 minutes).

The HALT method

Pause and ask yourself: Am I Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired?

- **Hungry:** Eat a nourishing snack to stabilize blood sugar
- **Angry:** Step away, breathe, or express feelings safely
- **Lonely:** Text or call a friend; it can help to make a short list of people you feel safe reaching out to
- **Tired:** Rest briefly or prioritize sleep

"Urge surfing"

Treat cravings like a wave; waves rise, peak, and fade if you ride it out. Acknowledge the urge's intensity without judging or giving in to it.

- Clench and release both your fists repeatedly while counting breaths
- Shrug your arms/shoulders or tap your foot rhythmically
- Sip water slowly or chew gum

"Smoke Break-style" strategies

When an urge rises:

- **Delay** (i.e., wait 5 to 10 minutes before you have that smoke/vape)
- **Distract** (i.e., text a friend, scroll on your phone, move your body, step outside)
- **Replace** (i.e., chew gum, use a fidget toy, sip a drink, practice slow breathing exercises)

Body-first exercises

- **Box breathing:** Inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4
- **5-4-3-2-1 grounding:** Name 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you can taste
- **Finger tracing:** Trace the edges of your fingers on your opposite hand. Inhale up, exhale down, focusing on breath and movement. Switch hands. Repeat
- **"Butterfly" hug:** Cross arms over chest, hands on opposite arms, and tap gently in a slow rhythm with your fingers with deep breaths

Distraction or movement

- **Move** your body: Walk, stretch, jump, exercise
- **Occupy** your hands: Crochet/knit, doodle/color, organize a small space
- **Engage** your senses: Listen to music, a podcast, watch a video
- **Connect** with someone: Text/call a friend or "sober buddy" when riding out urges

Remember: These tools help you pause and meet other needs instead of the craving — like a sensory break, snack, something for your hands or mouth, or just a change of pace. **For those who vape:** You may notice there are times you reach for your device out of habit rather than a strong nicotine craving. Try interrupting that habit with some of these tools first.

Practical harm reduction

Set realistic, personal goals

- Focus on one change at a time rather than everything at once
- Choose changes that feel most manageable right now
- Avoid starting changes during especially stressful or overwhelming periods when possible
- Build in flexibility and self-compassion

Disrupt automatic pairings

- Some smoking/vaping urges come from habit, not craving. Gently interrupting these patterns can reduce how often smoking/vaping happens
- If drinking triggers smoking/vaping, try skipping the cigarette after the first drink
- Sip water or a non-alcoholic drink between rounds
- Step outside or take a break without smoking/vaping
- Change the routine just enough to break auto-pilot mode
- The goal is not elimination. It's interruption

Normalize slips (they can and do happen – and that's OK)

- Slip-ups are a normal part of change, not a failure
- If a plan does not hold up, pause and reset rather than giving up
- Try not to turn one moment into a full setback
- Ask yourself, "What can I do differently next time?" rather than "What went wrong?"

Plan smoke-free times or spaces

- Choose specific moments, activities, or places to be smoke-free
- Start small, for example one evening, one outing, or one room
- Build confidence by noticing what does work

Consider professional options

Talk to your healthcare provider about:

- Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT)
- Medications for cravings/stress
- Counselling to address root stressors, where possible

What about vaping?

Many people start with/switch to vaping as a step away from smoking, and we respect that choice. While it carries its own health risks, it can feel like a viable option for some as an alternative nicotine delivery method; a way to experiment with nicotine levels, or to avoid cigarette smoke and chemicals (though vaping introduces others). For cutting back on vaping, folks also use strategies like time/place limits (e.g., no vaping indoors), setting "vape breaks" instead of constant use, reducing nicotine levels, or pairing with NRT to cut back.



When possible... set yourself up for success!

- **Sleep and nourish your body:** Get enough rest, stay hydrated, eat regular, balanced meals
- **Move and stretch:** Improve your physical and cardiovascular health and take moments to be present in nature
- **Create structure:** Develop a routine, build predictability, and schedule time for rest, pleasure, or mindfulness
- **Connect with others:** Maintain social networks, engage with community, and talk with supportive friends, family, or partners about your goals

Collective care: The role of community

Longer-term / Ongoing supports

Getting support for smoking/vaping and stress can be rough with long waits, high costs, and not enough culturally safe options. Free online programs like Smoke Break help fill those gaps. Lean on/into your community when you can via:

- Accessing peer groups and programs (2S/LGBTQIA+, Indigenous cultural, BIPOC/identity-based, Smoke Break, etc.)
- Connecting with friends, family, and social networks

If you are Indigenous, supports may also include community wellness through access to Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and spaces where traditional or sacred tobacco is used in line with your Nation's teachings and the laws that protect those practices.

In addition to leaning on community for support, as a community member you may also have the power to help others by building safer spaces where stress eases and connection replaces isolation.

Simple actions make this real:

- Designate outdoor areas where people can smoke or vape without fear of harassment or stigma (e.g., clear signage, away from entrances but welcoming)
- Create policies that support people who smoke or vape without punishment or shame
- Embed trauma and violence-informed practices in workplaces and programs

These steps help 2S/LGBTQIA+ folks and anyone who smokes, vapes, or uses substances feel like they belong. They cut isolation by seeing substance use as a real coping tool, not a personal failing.

Final thoughts:

Change can be hard. Stress, smoking/vaping, and substance use often connect to real life circumstances. Small steps matter, and community supports like [Smoke Break](#) (available until March 2028) can help you reach your goals.

**Support is available,
whenever you're ready.**



Production of this document has been made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.

Financial contribution:



Health
Canada

Santé
Canada



 [Smokebreak.cbrc](#)

 [@Smokebreak.cbrc](#)