

OPINION

We increasingly empathize with addicts. But we still tar smokers

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Several years ago, I witnessed a scene that still haunts me.

Two young Indigenous people were kicked off a train for sneaking a smoke in the bathroom during a nine-hour trip.

When a discriminating passenger reported a discreet waft of cigarette smoke, the rule-abiding conductor contacted the RCMP. Under federal law, smoking on the train is prohibited. “No Smoking” signs were everywhere, even in what were known only a few years earlier as “smoking cars” – with built-in ashtrays at every seat.

The Grand Nab of the lawbreaking smokers went down on an unscheduled stop at a tiny, dilapidated station in the wilderness. The young couple were escorted off the train by the steward. He didn’t quite have them by the ear, but he may as well have.

The twentysomething girl placed her modest, frayed suitcase on the ground and stood looking off into the distant fir trees. I admired her ability to dissociate as the harshest of public shaming was on display. Everyone on the train stared at the smokers through the long row of windows, until the waiting officer whisked the criminals away in his police car. I couldn’t help but wonder if white, middle-class travellers who had sneaked a puff would have received the same treatment.

As the train slowly chugged away, rid of the king-size culprits who had succumbed to their addiction, a righteous passenger broke the unfiltered silence: “Rules are rules, after

all.”

I’ve thought of this moment, increasingly, as the conversation around addictions in Canada has shifted. If you are addicted to cocaine, opioids or alcohol, you might get shunned by a few; but Canadians – many with experience of addiction in their own families – are beginning to drop the moral judgments and appreciate that addiction is a widespread health problem. We recognize that addictions of all sorts affect entire communities and that we need to work together to move forward. We understand there are many reasons people develop addictions and that every individual has a different capacity to break free.

A variety of 12-step programs abound in every city on our merciful, maple-leafed landscape. We encourage addicts to seek help, not just for their own sake but for that of their family and friends. Counsellors try to help addicted clients figure out unmet needs. Brain stimulation, mindfulness training and harm reduction are just a few of the successful and humane approaches in the science of addiction. Supplying drugs to people who are addicted has a proven record of reducing deaths and drug-related petty crime. Our addicted populations are slowly morphing from prison inmates to patients at supervised drug-use sites and treatment centres.

It may be a generalization, but with many complex societal issues, Canadians seem to be striving and evolving toward a kinder, more civilized and empathetic world. At the moment, we are all on high alert to the potential harm from vaping – the newest nicotine-delivery system.

And yet: There is no empathy for cigarette smokers. Those zero-tolerance pariahs are a whole different ball of tar. If you need to smoke – you, you reprobate – you are on your own. There is scarce reticence among a pack of vitriol-blowing smoker-haters. With chin-raised smugness, they will let you know you are killing them with your filthy, stinking, second-hand smoke and that you are, well, despicable. Truly dirty, smelly people.

When my sister, Barb Hicke, went to the designated smoking area outside her office building in downtown Victoria for a few puffs to satisfy the relentless cravings of a personal nicotine addiction battle, a passing man in his 70s taunted: “How can anyone be stupid enough to smoke these days?”

Of course she didn’t answer. Smokers must silently inhale the constant abuse. The

OF COURSE SHE CAN'T ANSWER. SMOKERS MUST SILENTLY BIDE THE CONSTANT ABUSE. THE responsible, intelligent and respectful mother of three, who has been working hard for 35 years, is silent. If my sister were a big burly biker instead of a slight, middle-aged woman, there would have been no harsh provocation. Bullies pick their targets.

Normally, anyone ranting at random drug addicts on the street would be suspected of mental illness. But aggressive, self-appointed anti-smoking police feel justified in harassing those who still need to light up to feed their addiction. The trend of judgmental meanness to smokers presents a distinct double standard: We are empathetic when it comes to people addicted to opioids, but ironically less so toward people addicted to a legal drug that is heavily taxed and not mind-altering.

Few smokers enjoy smoking. Most, I think, would love to quit and have tried and failed countless times. The sole reason for continuing the habit is to avoid nasty nicotine withdrawal. The compulsive need to have a drag of a cigarette isn't logical – it is a physiological response. (I say this as someone who has been a non-smoker for decades and a hospice volunteer for several years who has witnessed too many smokers die of lung cancer.)

According to the World Health Organization, more than a billion people smoke. The conundrum is that social pressure, via ostracism and shunning, helped reduce smoking rates in the past. But when does enmity go too far?

While I don't generally agree with breaking rules, if I could go back in time, I would get off the train and hug those two kids and let them know that society had a harsh overreaction that day. I would tell them two things: Human beings are susceptible to addiction, and cigarette smokers are not moral failures or bad people or criminals.

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