

E-cigarette users seeking help in lonely struggle to quit vaping

By **Ysabelle Kempe** Globe Correspondent, July 7, 2019, 8:22 p.m.



Kyle, a rising senior at BU, has tried to quit vaping. His last attempt was unsuccessful and he found himself switching to Smok Novo (above) instead of Juul. (NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

Connor hated feeling like a slave to the slender metal device in his pocket. That's why the rising junior at Boston College recently wrote his first-ever Reddit post on the page "QuittingJUUL," a virtual space populated by more than 800 others who are also battling e-cigarette addiction.

Connor's post begins with an introduction: He is 20 years old, has been vaping for almost two years, and has tried "like hell" to quit before addiction becomes a part of his personality. Ready to make another earnest attempt, he was searching for a "quit buddy" — someone to "suffer and conquer with."

It is a simple online forum, but "QuittingJUUL" is one of the most structured resources Connor has found in his struggle to quit vaping. Although the surgeon general classified youth vaping as an "epidemic" last year, there have been few studies on how to treat e-cigarette addiction.

This lag in medical research has left many, like Connor, to devise strategies for quitting on their own, such as using online support groups and weaning themselves by trying to make the nicotine experience less pleasant.

"We don't really know [how hard it is to quit vaping]," said Dr. Michael Siegel, a community health professor at Boston University, who researches tobacco control and has served as an expert witness in several major tobacco litigation cases. "We have no data. The truth is that the only real evidence is based on anecdotes."

E-cigarettes — also known as vapes — are hand-held, battery-powered devices used to inhale aerosol, produced by heating a liquid. Most brands, including Juul, contain nicotine salts, which leave the bloodstream quickly and trigger cravings. These types of e-cigarettes are highly addictive. Although vapes are less dangerous than cigarettes, any nicotine can harm the developing brain and increase susceptibility to future addiction, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

On its website, Juul — the leading e-cigarette manufacturer — says the nicotine in its products has not been proven to cause cancer but can create dependency. The American

Cancer Society, however, says e-cigarette vapor contains some cancer-causing chemicals, although in much lower amounts than in cigarette smoke.

People quit vaping for a variety of reasons, including the cost, health concerns, and social stigma. Only one user interviewed for this story was willing to be fully identified. The others declined because of professional or familial concerns, a testament to the shame associated with addiction.

Matt Murphy, a rising junior at UMass Lowell, quit vaping last June, when his mother unearthed his graveyard of used Juul pods, the refill cartridges that click onto the top of the device. The subsequent blowout fight was the nudge he needed.

Although he still has cravings (and sometimes dreams) about hitting a Juul, Murphy credits a large part of his ability to quit to the support of his parents.

“A lot of parents decide to go the punishment route,” he said. “That doesn’t work because then you have to worry about your parents on top of the neurological dependence. It’s important to remember you both have the same goal, which is not to Juul.”

Today, the Reading native is an ambassador for the Truth Initiative, a nonprofit working to curb teen vaping.

“When you get a 40- to 50-year-old health teacher [wagging] their finger about the Juul, that’s not going to get anywhere,” he said. “I’m trying to be a big brother who is like, ‘Hey, don’t go down that road.’”

In Massachusetts, [a class-action lawsuit initiated in April](#) against Juul Labs by the Public Health Advocacy Institute at Northeastern University demands that the company

fund addiction treatment and research initiatives throughout the state.

A handful of resources to quit vaping have sprouted this year, including the national program This Is Quitting, launched in January by the Truth Initiative. This texting program allows users to set a quit date and receive encouraging messages in the subsequent month. Since launching, more than 43,000 people have signed up. Almost 80 percent of the participants are between ages 13 and 24.

Two months after enrollment, 22 percent of users reported they had not vaped in the previous week and nearly 13 percent reported they had not vaped in the past month.

If an e-cigarette user is unable to quit cold turkey, Siegel recommends switching to a vape liquid that doesn't contain nicotine salts. Over time, this can reduce the physiological addiction.

While nicotine patches may be helpful to some, their success rate in getting people off nicotine is "dismal," according to Siegel.

Many young people opt for their own strategies, some of which are misguided.

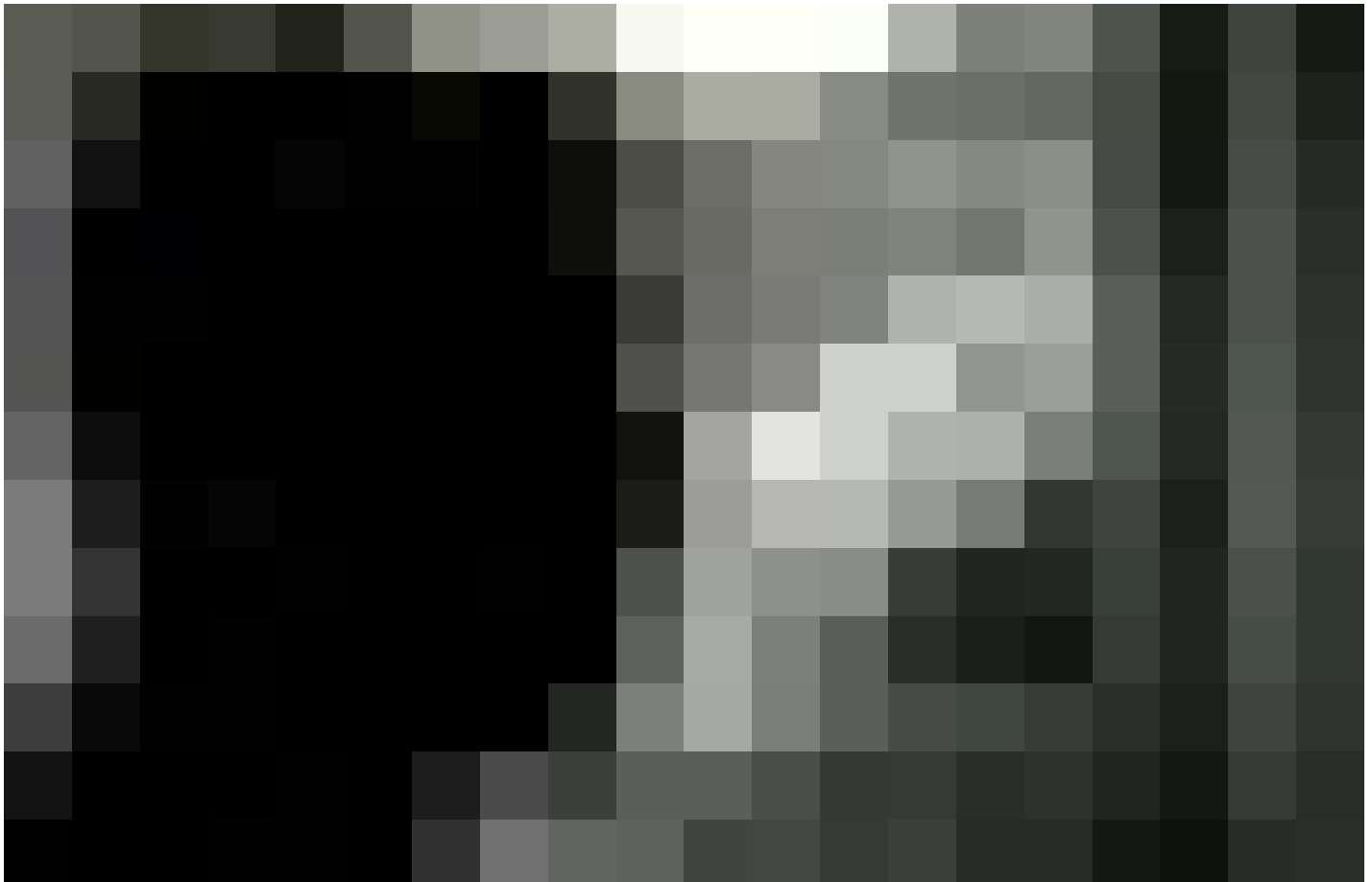
One of the first times Connor tried to quit vaping, he switched to cigarettes in an attempt to make the nicotine experience less enjoyable. In a phone interview, he described the strategy as "as dumb a plan as it sounds."

"I wound up getting hooked on cigarettes," Connor said. "I started using Juul for its intended purpose, which is to quit cigarettes."

After his failed attempt, Connor set a quit date for May 11, just two days after he posted on Reddit. The best time to stop is right before summer starts, he said, because there is less school-related stress and social pressure.

This time around, he's trying healthier strategies: Connor threw out his device. He does push-ups as soon as he awakes to replicate the head rush he used to get from vaping. He frequently drinks water to replace the oral fixation. When Connor gets a craving, such as when he wakes up in the middle of the night wanting nicotine, he messages two "quit buddies" he found through Reddit.

Quitting e-cigarettes is not for the uncommitted, however. Kyle, a rising senior at Boston University, has half-heartedly tried to quit multiple times, primarily for financial reasons. The most painful part of quitting, he said, was constantly being surrounded by vapes.



Kyle takes a hit of his Smok Novo vape in his Brookline apartment. (NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

I kind of just end up taking a break and then looping back,” Kyle said. “I’ll sell a Juul or something, and then people around me have vapes, and I’ll hit those. Then I feel bad and get another because I don’t want to mooch off of the people around me.”

Kyle was unsuccessful in his attempt to quit, which he blames on a lack of motivation. Now, he uses a Smok Novo rather than a Juul. This new device still contains nicotine salts, but costs almost \$200 less per month.

A rising fifth-year student at Northeastern University, who declined to have his name published, understands the challenge of quitting all too well. He was clean for almost four months, he said, when a messy breakup sent him careening back to e-cigarettes.

The student was able to quit again, but the relapse reminded him that the cravings might never truly disappear.

“I’m not going to say I wouldn’t love to do it at the moment, but it scares me enough,” he said. “The temptation doesn’t really go away. That’s always going to be present.”

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