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# A Nation Up In Smoke

My Journey To A  
Smoke-Free Life

*Mothusi Leotlela*

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## ***My Parents***

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to you for being my unwavering support system. No matter the challenges I faced, you were always there, standing by my side, offering support, encouragement and love.

## ***My Incredible Wife***

Thank you for always believing in me and cheering me on in every endeavour I pursued—well, except for the smoking! Your faith in me has been a cornerstone of my journey.

## ***My Son***

Champ, my amazing son, you are the reason I finally found the strength to quit smoking and stay clean. You inspire me every day to be present, healthy, and the kind of father who can guide you to become a responsible and dignified man. Thank you for being my greatest motivation.

## Overview

*A Nation Up In Smoke: My Journey to a Smoke-Free Life* is an honest, humorous, and heartfelt memoir chronicling my battle with smoking and the life-changing decision to quit. This isn't just a personal story—it's a call to action for smokers who feel trapped, non-smokers who deserve their freedom to fresh air, and children who might be tempted to pick up the habit.

Through candid reflections, sobering truths, and lighthearted humour, I explore the physical, financial, and emotional toll smoking took on my life—and the incredible rewards of quitting. From the unexpected lessons learned after a fall down the stairs to the financial relief of saving over R118,000, my story sheds light on the hidden costs of smoking and the priceless benefits of a smoke-free life.

This book is a celebration of second chances, a testament to resilience, and a guide for anyone ready to reclaim their health and happiness. Whether you're a smoker seeking inspiration, a non-smoker advocating for a healthier environment, or a parent educating your child about the dangers of smoking, *A Nation Up In Smoke* offers hope, encouragement, and a few laughs along the way.

Take a deep breath—you're about to discover the joy of living smoke-free.

Chapter 1:

# A Nation Up In Smoke

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Welcome to the streets of Mamelodi, a township once famous for its irresistible jazz tunes wafting through the air like an open invitation to groove. Picture this: harmonious chords escaping from within tarvens and homes, carried by an afternoon breeze so smooth it practically wore a fedora. These melodies were Mamelodi's signature, a kind of musical postcard you couldn't help but take home, whether you wanted to or not.

And then... well, times changed.

These days, Mamelodi's vibe seems to have gone from jazz festival to chimney factory, similar to other townships. Forget the soul-soothing melodies; now, the soundtrack is the on going crackle of lighters and the low hum of someone trying to clear their smoker's cough. It's not exactly Grammy-worthy.

When I visit Mamelodi lately, my lungs and I prepare for war. The air is a smorgasbord of nicotine clouds, hookah plumes, and the occasional puff of a vape. Social gatherings feel more like impromptu smoke-offs. Teenagers, elders, and everyone in between seem to be practicing for some unannounced Smoking Olympics. And boy, are they winning.

Every visit feels like a gauntlet. I leave with an irritated throat, clothes reeking of “eau de tobacco,” and lungs that seem to whisper, “*Really? Again?*” It’s like Mamelodi hands out free secondhand smoke as a parting gift.

But seriously, if I feel like this after a quick visit, I can’t help but wonder: how do the locals do it every single day? Is everyone just walking around with a permanent smoker’s haze in their peripheral vision? And what about the smokers themselves? Are they even aware of what they’re breathing out (and taking in)?

That haze isn’t just air pollution—it’s a cultural wake-up call. When I quit smoking in 2014, after 17 years and 30 cigarettes a day, I wasn’t just saving myself from becoming a walking ashtray. I was breaking free from the unspoken chains nicotine had wrapped around me—and, let’s face it, my wallet.

But quitting wasn’t all heroics and hallelujahs. It took an unexpected twist: something called R.I.S.E Therapy—Reflection Instrument Scanning Electro-pulse. Sounds fancy, right? I thought so too. But after just one

hour, I was done. No cravings. No “just one more puff” moments. I was out of the game for good.

And now, here I am, ready to share my story—not as some holier-than-thou ex-smoker, but as someone who got played by nicotine and decided to quit the game.

This isn’t going to be your typical anti-smoking lecture. You’ve already heard the warnings, seen the gross photos on cigarette packs, and ignored the “smoking kills” ads on the internet. I’m not here to tell you something you already know.

Instead, I want to share the real costs of smoking—the time, energy, relationships, and *dignity* it snatched from me. If you’re a smoker, maybe this story will spark something in you (not literally, please). If you’re not, maybe it’ll help you understand what it means to live in a world constantly clouded by smoke, both literal and metaphorical.

Because if a chain-smoking, 30-a-day enthusiast like me could quit and never look back, trust me—you can too.

So, grab a seat, and let’s dive into this smoke-filled journey. And don’t worry—I promise it’ll be more entertaining than coughing your way through a pack of Marlboros.

Chapter 2:

# The Beginning - My First Cigarette.

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Though I can't quite pinpoint the exact moment I smoked my first cigarette, I vividly recall the glamorous image smoking held for me growing up. My uncles, who lived in the bustling city of Maseru, were the epitome of cool. Unlike us, stuck in the ritualistic grind of church-going in our rural village of Roma, they sauntered into family gatherings with sharp clothes, a laid-back attitude, and cigarettes dangling casually from their lips. To my young mind, smoking wasn't just a habit—it was a lifestyle of the rich, free-spirited, and irresistibly rebellious.

Naturally, I wanted in on the action. My first attempts to emulate them were harmless, involving those old-school candy cigarettes that kids would chew on while pretending to blow smoke rings. In my small circle of friends, I was the master of fake sophistication, flicking my candy "ash" and channeling my inner movie star. If I couldn't be cool, I'd at least fake it till I made it.

My older brother was my childhood hero, and I followed him everywhere. His friends, a mix of characters who smoked with practiced ease, were my gateway to the mysterious world of nicotine. But since my brother steered clear of cigarettes, I felt compelled to do the same. Still, the curiosity was relentless, and the first chance I got to light up on my own, I took it.

One day, with the house empty and no brother to shadow me, I found myself in the backyard with nothing but my daring spirit and a piece of paper. Rolling it up into a makeshift cigarette, I lit it, took a confident drag, and promptly choked so violently that I thought my short life was flashing before my eyes. Tears streamed down my face as I coughed, and I could have sworn the cows grazing nearby were laughing at me. My lungs screamed in protest, and I decided that being cool might come at too high a price.

But did that stop me? Of course not. My teenage logic insisted I refine my approach. I graduated to rolling paper stuffed with dried cow dung—yes, you read that right. Why cow dung? I couldn't tell you. Maybe I thought it would enhance the “flavour” or give me a buzz. Spoiler: it didn't. The only thing it gave me was a new appreciation for the stupidity of teenage experimentation.

By the time I reached my late high school years, I had become a bona fide smoker. My habit solidified during study sessions at the National University of Lesotho's library, about an hour's walk from my home in the village of Thoteng. My peers and I would often study late into the night, and

sometimes I'd find myself walking home alone under the pitch-black sky. The darkness was unnerving, and in those moments, I figured a lit cigarette might serve as both a confidence booster and a deterrent for any lurking threats. After all, no one messes with someone who looks like they've got life—and a lighter—under control, right?

Whether or not this strategy worked is up for debate. What I do know is that I never encountered any trouble on those lonely walks. Then again, I was also pretty quick on my feet and never stuck around long enough to find out if my "tough guy smoking act" was convincing. However, this phase of my life marked the moment smoking became more than just a survival tactic. It turned into a social activity, a symbol of camaraderie and rebellion.

Looking back, it's almost laughable how much my environment shaped my perception of smoking. From idolising my uncles to trying to ward off imaginary night-time threats, the road to becoming a smoker was paved with absurdity. And while my early attempts at lighting up were more comical than cool, they set the stage for a habit that would stick with me for years.

If there's one thing those early days taught me, it's this: our choices are often shaped by the stories we tell ourselves. And boy, did I tell myself some ridiculous ones.

Chapter 3:

# The Smoking Years.

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Having convinced myself that smoking was the epitome of cool, I did try to quit a few times. But let's be honest, quitting smoking is like trying to diet while living in a bakery—it's a great idea until the smell of freshly baked pastries, or in this case, cigarettes, hits you. Despite my attempts, I found myself unable to stay away from the habit for long, especially when life threw curveballs my way.

One such curveball came in the form of a major car accident. I don't remember much about the moments immediately after the crash, but I do recall one peculiar thing: reaching out to a bystander for a lit cigarette. I was in agony, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought, *Maybe this will help with the pain.* Spoiler alert: it didn't. Turns out, cigarettes are great at creating problems, not solving them. The pain didn't go away or even remotely subside—it just mingled with the burning sensation in my lungs, leaving me worse off.

During my hospital stay, boredom and loneliness became my companions. Between the occasional visits from family and friends, there were long stretches of nothingness. And what does a bored smoker do? Smoke, of course! It wasn't the pain driving me outside for a puff—it was sheer boredom. Those sneaky little "breaks" quickly became habitual again. Before I knew it, I was back on the smoking wagon, as though the wagon had waited patiently for my return.

The real escalation, however, came when I switched universities and degrees. Moving from a Law program to an Arts degree was like trading a library for a backstage pass to a rock concert. And if there's one thing artists are good at, aside from creating masterpieces, it's smoking. They puff away like nicotine is the secret ingredient in inspiration.

I vividly remember my first few weeks in the Arts faculty. Cigarette smoke was practically the unofficial mascot of the department. Conversations happened over clouds of smoke, and critique sessions were punctuated by lighter flicks. Naturally, I dove headfirst into the culture. I smoked during breaks, after classes, and especially during late-night assignment marathons in my apartment.

Picture this: me, hunched over a desk with a cup of coffee in one hand, a cigarette in the other, and the clock ticking past 2 a.m. Nicotine became my fuel, my muse, and my constant companion. I convinced myself that the cigarettes were helping me focus, but in reality, they were just giving me something to do while I procrastinated on finishing my work.

Almost daily, I'd buy a fresh pack of cigarettes, and by the next morning, it would be empty. The convenience store clerk started giving me knowing looks, probably wondering if I was single-handedly keeping the tobacco industry alive. At the rate I was going, I wouldn't have been surprised if a cigarette company sent me a thank-you card.

Looking back, those smoking years feel like a haze—literally and figuratively. Smoking wasn't just a habit; it was a lifestyle. It filled the silence, punctuated my stress, and gave me a sense of belonging in a world that always seemed slightly out of focus. But as much as I romanticised it at the time, the toll it took on my health, finances, and self-esteem was anything but glamorous.

The Smoking Years weren't just about addiction; they were about finding comfort in the wrong places and letting a bad habit define too much of who I was. If there's one thing I've learned, it's this: no amount of cigarette smoke can fill the voids you're trying to escape—it only creates new ones.

Chapter 4:

# The Highs and Lows of Being a Smoker.

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Being a smoker comes with its moments of fleeting triumphs and extended regrets—a mixed bag of highs and lows, quite literally. Sure, there were the temporary “highs,” like that rush of calm that seemed to sweep over me with each drag or how a cigarette paired beautifully with a cold beer, creating a symphony of bad decisions disguised as fun. Smoking felt like a social lubricant, an identity, and sometimes even a badge of rebellion. But the lows? Oh, they had their way of sneaking in and leaving a permanent mark.

Let’s start with mornings. Every day felt like starting from below zero. I was convinced I wasn’t a morning person because, without a cigarette, I was nothing short of a zombie. That first smoke of the day wasn’t just a ritual; it was a lifeline. The nicotine jolt was my version of a cup of coffee. But instead of waking up energised and ready to tackle the world, I’d find

myself coughing and gasping as my lungs protested the abuse. And yet, I'd light up again the next day, convinced it was the "boost" I needed.

The real lows, though, were the ones that crept into my relationships. As a teenager, smoking became my secret, and secrets have a way of building walls. My parents, bless their clueless hearts, were on the other side of those walls. I spent so much time sneaking off to places where I could smoke freely—empty fields, playgrounds, and the occasional bar—that I missed out on the small, meaningful moments at home.

When I'd return from these clandestine smoke breaks, I'd launch into an elaborate self-cleaning operation. Teeth brushed, face washed, breath mint in place—it was a full-on production to erase the evidence. But even then, I couldn't face my parents, so I'd retreat to my room and avoid them until dinner. What started as a habit became a pattern, and before I knew it, my teenage years were marked by my absence more than my presence.

By the time I got to university, the stakes were higher—and so was my smoking. It was no longer just a habit; it was a lifestyle. That's when I met *her*, the anti-smoking crusader who also happened to be my girlfriend. She was everything I wasn't—disciplined, health-conscious, and, above all, determined to save me from myself. She issued an ultimatum: quit smoking, or we were over.

Now, I liked her a lot—maybe even loved her. But love doesn't stand a chance when it's up against a nicotine addiction. I genuinely tried to quit. I

even managed a smoke-free streak from Monday to Friday. But then she came over, took one sniff, and declared, “You’ve been smoking.”

I panicked. Was she psychic? Did I reek of cigarettes, or was she just fishing for a confession? Either way, I cracked like an egg and admitted to my Monday slip-up. That was it—the relationship ended faster than a cigarette burns in the wind.

Looking back, it wasn’t just the smoking that doomed us; it was the hold it had over me. Smoking wasn’t just a bad habit; it was a barrier. It kept me from being present with my family, from maintaining relationships, and ultimately from being the person I wanted to be.

But hey, I wasn’t ready to admit that then. After all, it’s hard to see the lows when you’re too busy chasing the highs, even if those highs are just a puff of smoke that disappears as quickly as it arrives.

Chapter 5:

# Smoking on the Clock.

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When I transitioned from the carefree days of student life to the working world, one thing stubbornly followed me: my dependence on cigarettes. Now armed with a steady paycheck, I no longer had to endure the familiar panic of being out of smokes and scrounging for loose draws. Financial freedom meant my nicotine cravings were almost always satisfied. But while I was no longer scheming about where my next cigarette would come from, smoking still managed to wreak havoc on my life in new and creative ways.

For one, smoking made me an unintentional regular on the sick leave roster. My habit of puffing away at every chance didn't exactly boost my immune system. I was more prone to colds and flu than anyone else in the office. And when I got sick, it wasn't just a sniffle; it was a full-blown production—complete with nosebleeds that made me look like I'd walked

off a horror movie set. Those sick days piled up quickly, earning me a reputation as “that colleague” who was always out.

Even when I did show up for work, my productivity took a major hit. On an average day, I smoked about five cigarettes at the office, which doesn't sound like much until you realise each break was 10 to 15 minutes. Add that up, and I was spending at least an hour a day outside, doing nothing but burning through my pack and my employer's patience.

The “smoke breaks” weren't just casual; they were social events. My smoking colleagues and I would gather, swapping stories and complaints, and what was supposed to be a quick five minutes often ballooned into 20 or 30. These little escapades cost our employer more than just time—they were losing money paying us to stand around like chimney stacks.

As if that wasn't bad enough, my mind wasn't always at my desk, even when I was. Between breaks, I'd obsessively calculate my next move. “Is it too soon to go out again? Will the non-smokers notice how often I disappear? Can I slip away unnoticed?” The mental gymnastics alone could've been a full-time job.

And because of this, I often found myself scrambling to meet deadlines. Tasks that should've been completed during regular hours spilled into overtime, leaving me stuck at my desk after hours. I'd work through the evening at 1.5x my regular rate, billing my employer for hours I wouldn't have needed if I wasn't busy chasing cigarette breaks all day.

Looking back, I can't help but laugh at the irony. Smoking wasn't just burning through my paycheque; it was also stealing my time, my health, and my productivity. Yet, in the moment, it felt like the solution to everything—a stress reliever, a social lubricant, a ritual I couldn't do without.

In reality, it was the opposite. Smoking wasn't solving my problems; it was creating them. And while it took me years to see it, the habit wasn't just hurting me—it was hurting everyone around me, too.

Chapter 6:

# Smoking and Marriage - A Rocky Relationship.

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Looking back, I often wonder how my wife managed to endure those ten long years of dating and marriage while I was at the height of my smoking career. Reeking of cigarettes, armed with breath that could scare off even the boldest vampire, and perpetually tethered to my nicotine cravings, I wasn't exactly a catch in that department. But she stayed, and for that, I owe her the world.

Still, there was one thing she couldn't handle: the emotional roller coaster I'd become, courtesy of my smoking habit. Mentally, I wasn't in a good place. I didn't realise it at the time, but my reliance on cigarettes wasn't just physical—it had me in an emotional chokehold. Smoking dictated my mood, my reactions, and ultimately, my ability to engage in a healthy relationship.

Our arguments were the worst. A small disagreement could escalate into a heated battle, with me flying off the handle faster than a malfunctioning kettle. The irony? It was never really about the argument itself. I was constantly on edge, triggered by the smallest things, and unable to process emotions without spiralling into frustration and anger.

My wife, ever the problem-solver, resorted to a tactic that now seems both genius and absurd: hiding cigarettes around the house. Whenever things got too heated and I turned into an unmanageable storm of emotions, she'd pull one out, hand it to me, and say, "Here, smoke this." It wasn't a bribe—it was her survival strategy. She knew that nicotine would calm me down faster than any logical discussion could.

This wasn't just a quirk of our marriage—it was a wake-up call. I began to realise how much power cigarettes had over me, not just physically but emotionally. My dependency wasn't just making me irritable between smokes; it was eroding the foundation of our relationship.

I wasn't present for her in the way a husband should be. Smoking wasn't just stealing time from my workday; it was stealing time from my marriage. Every argument, every moment spent searching for my next cigarette, every instance where I let nicotine dictate my mood—it all added up.

Eventually, the reality became impossible to ignore. If I wanted to be the husband she deserved, I had to change. I needed to be more stable, more emotionally grounded, and more engaged in our life together. Cigarettes were a crutch, and it was time to learn how to stand without them.

In many ways, my wife's patience and persistence were what finally pushed me toward quitting. It wasn't just about my health anymore—it was about our life together. I didn't just want to exist as her partner; I wanted to thrive in that role. And I knew, deep down, that as long as cigarettes held the reins, I'd never be able to.

Chapter 7:

# The Day I Chose Life - May 7, 2014.

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The birth of my son in 2013 didn't just change my life; it rewrote the rules. Suddenly, the world didn't revolve around me, my wants, or my habits anymore. It was as though someone had flipped a switch, and I was now living for something far greater. His arrival wasn't just a joyous occasion; it was a wake-up call, and it came with a sobering sense of responsibility I couldn't ignore.

But let me be honest—it wasn't an overnight epiphany. It started with little things, creeping thoughts that wouldn't leave me alone. I'd hold him, marvel at his tiny hands and the way they instinctively grasped mine, and then a pang of guilt would strike. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was holding him hostage to a life of secondhand smoke.

I'd read enough over the years to know the damage cigarettes could cause, not just to the smoker but to everyone around them. I knew about

secondhand smoke. I knew about the risks it posed to children—respiratory problems, asthma, even long-term illnesses like cancer. But it wasn't just the physical effects that haunted me. It was the emotional toll. I didn't want my son to grow up associating me with a habit that could rob him of having a healthy, active father in his life.

The guilt gnawed at me. Every time I came home, I felt like I was dragging a storm cloud behind me. My first instinct was always to shower, to scrub away the stench of cigarettes from my skin and hair. I'd swap out my clothes for something fresh, thinking it would make me feel better, but it never did. No matter how much soap or water I used, I still felt dirty, unworthy of holding my child.

And then there was the car. For years, it had been my private sanctuary—a place where I could light up without judgment. But now, every puff in that confined space felt like a betrayal. I imagined the residue settling into the upholstery, lingering there like a ghost, waiting to haunt my son's lungs. The thought of him growing up in a home or riding in a car tainted by my smoking made my stomach turn.

The real turning point came during one of those quiet nights when everything slows down, and you're left alone with your thoughts. My wife was asleep, and my son lay peacefully in his crib. I sat there, watching him breathe, his tiny chest rising and falling with such fragile innocence. And I started to think about the future.

What kind of father did I want to be? Did I want to be the dad who missed milestones because he was battling health issues caused by smoking? Did I want to be the dad who couldn't keep up with his son on the soccer field because his lungs were shot? Or worse, did I want to be the dad who wasn't around at all because he let cigarettes rob him of the years he should have had?

The answer was clear, but that didn't make it easy. Quitting had always been on my mind, but the timing never seemed right. There was always an excuse—a stressful day at work, a social gathering, or just the comforting ritual of lighting up. Cigarettes had been my crutch for so long that the thought of letting them go felt like losing a part of myself.

But this time, the stakes were too high. It wasn't just about me anymore. It was about my son, my wife, our family. It was about being there—not just physically but emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I wanted to be present in every sense of the word, and smoking was standing in the way.

On May 7th, 2014, I made the decision that changed everything. I didn't just decide to quit smoking—I decided to choose life.

The process wasn't magical, but it was transformative. I had quit before, only to fall back into old habits. But this time, something was different. The thought of my son—his future, his health, his happiness—gave me a resolve I'd never felt before. It wasn't just about willpower; it was about purpose.

In the days and weeks that followed, I started to notice changes—not just in my body but in my mindset. I felt lighter, freer, more connected to the people and moments that mattered most. I could hold my son without that nagging guilt, kiss my wife without the lingering taste of smoke, and look in the mirror without feeling ashamed.

Quitting wasn't just about letting go of cigarettes; it was about reclaiming my life. It was about proving to myself that I could be the father, husband, and man my family deserved.

Looking back now, I can't believe I waited so long. But I also know that everything happens in its own time. May 7th, 2014, wasn't just the day I quit smoking—it was the day I started living. And I haven't looked back since.

Chapter 8:

# The Therapy That Changed Everything.

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When I finally decided to quit smoking for good, it felt like the universe was conspiring to help me. I stumbled upon an advertisement that claimed it could help me quit smoking in less than an hour. It sounded too good to be true, almost like a scam. But something about that moment—the timing, the readiness in my heart—made me give it a chance. After all, I had tried almost everything else: cold turkey, nicotine gum and even cutting down gradually. None of it had worked. I was desperate for a permanent solution.

I booked an appointment with the clinic, and a nurse introduced me to what was called **R.I.S.E Therapy**—Reflection Instrument Scanning Electro-pulse. A treatment that promised to address both the physical and psychological grip smoking had on me. Before anything else, though, I was required to watch a 30-minute educational video.

## **The Eye-Opening Video**

The video wasn't just informative; it was brutal. It laid out, in excruciating detail, what smoking does to the human body. For the first time, I saw my habit from an outsider's perspective. It wasn't just about the cravings or the social aspect anymore; it was about the raw, unfiltered truth of what I had been doing to myself all these years.

I learned about nicotine's role as the puppeteer in the smoker's cycle. From the moment you light up, nicotine hijacks the body's receptors, creating a dependency that only deepens with every cigarette. These receptors multiply, demanding more frequent doses to achieve the same effect, all while shutting down the body's natural ability to produce endorphins—the hormone responsible for feelings of well-being.

This creates a cruel reward system: the more you smoke, the worse your body feels without it, and so you smoke again to feel "normal." It was as if nicotine had built its own prison within my body, and I had willingly handed over the keys.

## **The Physical Toll**

The video also delved into the harrowing journey of cigarette smoke through the body:

- **Lips and Teeth:** Starting with the lips, where tar and heat char the skin, causing discolouration and cracking. From there, the tar

builds up on the teeth, rotting them and the bones beneath the gums, leading to tooth loss.

- **Throat and Breath:** The smoke travels down the throat, leaving it vulnerable to cancer and other deformities. The combination of a damaged throat, tarred teeth, and the chemicals in cigarettes causes chronic bad breath, a problem I had long normalised but now found horrifying.
- **Lungs:** The lungs, designed to inhale clean air, become clogged with tar. The tiny hairs in the lungs (cilia), meant to clear mucus and debris, get overwhelmed and trapped under a sticky network of toxins. The lungs start to rot, unable to clean themselves, leaving the smoker prone to chronic coughing, infections, and eventually, diseases like Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung cancer.
- **Bloodstream and Brain:** Smoke enters the bloodstream, attaching itself to red blood cells and stealing space meant for oxygen. This deprives the brain of oxygen while delivering more nicotine to feed the ever-growing receptors. The nicotine also damages artery walls, making them thinner and more prone to clots, leading to strokes and heart attacks.
- **Bones:** Smoking doesn't spare your bones either. Bone density diminishes, making smokers more prone to fractures and tooth loss.

The most haunting revelation was that every cigarette had been a step closer to a slow and painful deterioration—not just of my body but of my quality of life.

### **The Promise of Healing**

Despite the grim realities, the video ended on a hopeful note: **the body is designed to heal itself**. The moment you quit smoking, it begins to repair the damage. Within hours, carbon monoxide levels drop, allowing more oxygen to circulate. Within weeks, lung function improves, and within months, the risk of heart disease starts to decrease.

The ultimate goal, they said, was to reach the 15-year mark, where a former smoker's health risks aligns with that of a non-smoker. That seemed like a lifetime away, but knowing that my body would reverse some of the damage gave me hope.

### **The Therapy**

After the video, I met with the nurse for the actual therapy session. R.I.S.E Therapy was a mix of behavioural reinforcement and a form of neurolinguistic programming aimed at breaking the chains of addiction. This groundbreaking therapy combines personalised treatment, auriculotherapy, and advanced electro stimulation to deliver remarkable results. The process involved:

1. **Assessment:** A comprehensive evaluation of the smoker's physical and psychological readiness to quit.
2. **Personalisation:** Using specialised "No Smoke" software to customise the treatment based on individual factors, such as age, smoking history, and tobacco use.
3. **Auriculotherapy:** A modern adaptation of acupuncture, stimulating precise points on the ear associated with nicotine cravings and addiction. This is achieved through gentle electro-stimulation, eliminating the need for needles.
4. **Endorphin Release:** The treatment stimulates the release of endorphins, natural chemicals that promote relaxation and reduce nicotine cravings.

The entire process takes approximately one hour and is painless, with no side effects. It not only addresses the physical dependence on nicotine but also supports psychological adjustment by alleviating stress and controlling appetite, minimising the risk of weight gain during cessation.

In less than an hour, I walked out of that clinic feeling something I hadn't felt in years: freedom.

## **Moving Forward**

The days that followed weren't without challenges. I just had to regulate or avoid my triggers. I reminded myself that every urge I resisted was another step toward healing. I leaned on the knowledge I had gained from the video and therapy, using it to fortify my resolve.

Each morning, as I inhaled the fresh air and felt my lungs expanding without protest, I was reminded that quitting wasn't just a decision; it was a gift to myself and my family.

Looking back, R.I.S.E Therapy wasn't just the method that helped me quit —it was the spark that reignited my commitment to life. It showed me that the power to change was within me all along. Smoking had taken so much from me, but quitting gave me everything back and more.

Chapter 9:

# A Fresh Start - Rediscovering Life After Quitting.

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To say that a few days after the therapy I felt like a new person is an understatement. Yes, my body was still grappling with withdrawal symptoms, but having my newly born son as a lighthouse helping me navigate to shore gave me a renewed sense of purpose. I felt transformed. Having spent most of my teenage years and young adulthood as a smoker, I had never experienced my body and mind performing at their peak. It was exhilarating to imagine what this newly unleashed version of myself could achieve.

One of the first changes I noticed was how vibrant my senses became. Suddenly, I could smell the true aromas of my environment. Walking into a room or stepping outside, I was enveloped in scents I had never truly appreciated before. But it was my sense of taste that underwent the most

dramatic transformation. It felt as if I was experiencing food for the first time. Each bite was an explosion of flavours I had been missing. Dining out and exploring new dishes became a newfound passion, and I suspect my wife secretly loved this shift—it meant more time spent together, discovering new culinary experiences.

The boost of energy I felt was unparalleled. Tasks that once seemed daunting became manageable, and I had the stamina to keep up with my newborn son's needs. My wife, recovering from the rigours of parenting and breastfeeding, often relied on me to hold the fort. From preparing fresh bottles to changing diapers or rocking the baby to sleep during restless nights, I found myself stepping up with newfound vigour. Remarkably, for the first three years of his life, my son would only fall asleep while lying on my chest—a bond I doubt I could have managed as well if I had remained the grumpy old smoker.

Quitting smoking not only impacted my physical health but also reshaped my outlook on life. I began appreciating the small things, the subtle joys that had once escaped my notice. I felt a profound connection to my family and an eagerness to embrace life's challenges. This mental clarity and emotional resilience were gifts I had never anticipated.

The physical benefits were undeniable. My breathing improved significantly, and the chronic cough I had come to accept as part of my life disappeared. My skin started to look healthier, and I felt lighter, both

physically and mentally. Each day brought small victories, reinforcing my decision to quit.

My decision to quit smoking also had a ripple effect on my relationships. My wife and I became closer, bonded by shared experiences and mutual support. A critical aspect of this transformation was the newfound emotional stability. No longer were heated arguments as aggressive as before. My stable level of endorphins helped me stay composed, avoiding major outbursts that once escalated conflicts. This calmness brought a healthier dynamic to my relationships at home, fostering a more loving and supportive environment for my family.

Quitting smoking wasn't just about breaking a bad habit; it was about rediscovering life. I found new hobbies, explored old interests with renewed enthusiasm, and became more involved in my community. It was as if a veil had been lifted, revealing a world of possibilities I had ignored for far too long.

To anyone considering quitting smoking, know this: the journey may not be easy, but the rewards are immeasurable. It's not just about extending your life; it's about enriching it. Quitting smoking isn't just an act of self-care; it's an act of love—for yourself and those who care about you. Take the leap—you might just discover a version of yourself you never knew existed.

Quitting smoking brought about a renewed sense of presence, both at home and in my relationships. It was as if the fog that had dulled my connection to loved ones had lifted. With my marriage, I found myself

more engaged and attentive, able to truly invest in building a stronger partnership. It was a joy to be fully present in moments that I might have previously taken for granted.

With my parents, the journey began with a heartfelt confession of my past mistakes. To my surprise, they received it with grace and understanding. I suspect they had known all along but chose not to confront me directly. My mother, for instance, would often ride in my car shortly after I had smoked in it. Despite my best efforts to mask the evidence—windows wide open and the cigarette kept outside the car—I now understand that she must have noticed but chose patience over confrontation. Today, both my parents are among my strongest supporters in my advocacy for a nicotine-free lifestyle through my nonprofit organisation. Their encouragement fuels my mission to help others escape the grip of nicotine addiction.

Financially, quitting smoking was a revelation. For years, I had unwittingly short-changed my family by funnelling money into my habit. The realisation hit home when, just twelve months after quitting, my life insurance coverage doubled without any increase in premiums. This tangible shift underscored the risk I had previously posed as a smoker and the financial benefits of embracing a healthier lifestyle.

Moreover, the small change that once disappeared into the purchase of loose cigarettes found a new purpose. Instead of funding a harmful habit, those coins began filling a piggy bank for my son. Over time, this simple

act of saving enabled us to make significant purchases for him, including his first recreational motocross motorbike. Witnessing how these small, positive changes added up was a powerful reminder of how much my habit had been robbing my family—not just financially but also in terms of opportunities and shared joy.

Professionally, the impact of quitting was equally profound. As a self-employed individual, I could no longer afford the luxury of sick days. Free from the physical toll of smoking, I became more productive, channeling my energy into my work with greater focus and creativity. Smoke breaks, once a routine disruption, were replaced by uninterrupted stretches of design thinking and strategising for my clients. Life became a pleasant flow of productivity and innovation, unhindered by the cravings and distractions that had once held me back.

Quitting smoking wasn't just about giving up a habit—it was about reclaiming my life in every sense. It allowed me to be a better spouse, a more attentive parent, a healthier son, and a more effective professional. The ripple effects of this decision continue to enrich my life, affirming that the choice to quit was one of the best I've ever made.

Chapter 10:

# From Smoker to Advocate.

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With all the marvellous changes happening to me, I began to reflect deeply on the harm I had caused to others through my smoking habit. It was sobering to recognise the extent of the damage I had inflicted, often unintentionally, on innocent non-smokers around me. My wife, for instance, had been intimately involved with what could only be described as a human chimney. I had unknowingly subjected my son to the perils of third-hand smoke, the residual toxins lingering on clothes, car interior, and skin. And then there were the thousands of rands I had effectively stolen from my former employer, taking excessive smoke breaks that compromised my productivity.

As I became an advocate for the wonderful life after quitting, I noticed a shift in the attitudes of those in my circle. Many envied my achievement and, in some cases, began to feel guilty or ashamed to smoke in my presence. This realisation sparked something profound in me. If my

journey could inspire those around me, perhaps I could use my experience to make an even broader impact.

It dawned on me that I could become an activist, advocating against nicotine smoking, especially around children and non-smokers. The idea of educating people about how pleasant and liberating a smoke-free life could be became a driving force. I wanted to raise awareness not just about how smoking affects smokers but also the loved ones who share their spaces—partners, children, domestic helpers and even colleagues.

In 2017, I channeled this passion into establishing a non-profit organisation called Smokeless Lifestyle. The mission was simple yet profound: to encourage a smoke-free lifestyle and empower individuals to make informed decisions about their health and well-being. Through educational talks at schools and wellness sessions at corporate events, the initiative was to take root.

At schools, the talks aims to reach young, impressionable minds, preventing some youngsters from ever picking up the habit. I encourage children to speak up to elders who smoked around them, giving them a voice in environments where they often felt powerless and to avoid being influenced into future smokers. At corporate events, the focus is on educating employees about the impacts of smoking—not just on their health but also on productivity and workplace harmony.

Over time, Smokeless Lifestyle has achieved tangible results. Non-smokers who once silently endured the oppression of cigarette smoke find

the courage to demand their rights to clean air. Some smokers, moved by the stories and information shared, decided to quit. These victories, both big and small, are the fuel that keeps the initiative alive.

Establishing Smokeless Lifestyle was more than just a professional milestone; it is a personal redemption arc. It allows me to turn my mistakes into lessons, my regrets into purpose. Every person who embraces a smoke-free life is testament to the fact that change is possible—and that it is worth it. As I stand in front of audiences, sharing my journey, I realise that quitting smoking was not just about reclaiming my own life. It was about helping others see the potential in theirs.

Chapter 11:

# A New Perspective on Mamelodi.

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Returning to Mamelodi post quitting continuously feels like stepping into a familiar yet profoundly altered world. As someone who once contributed to the haze of smoke that seems to hang over gatherings, streets, and social circles, I now see the township through a different lens. Back then, I was a willing participant, puffing away in the name of camaraderie, blending seamlessly with the so-called “cool cats.” Yet, beneath the surface of that supposed ease was a deep, private struggle—a reality that most smokers often hide behind a veil of nonchalance.

These days stepping out in to public come with a heightened awareness, an almost visceral sensitivity to the ever-present clouds of smoke that still punctuate the air. Where I once found solace in the act of smoking, I now feel a sharp pang of concern. Watching others light up, seemingly oblivious to the impact on the people around them, especially the children absorbing these behaviours, is both heartbreaking and galvanising.

I realise just how normalised smoking has become, how it has woven into the cultural fabric of the nation. The casual disregard for its effects—whether it is the toxic air children inhale or the impressionable minds witnessing the act—strike me in a way it never has before. It is in these moments that the fight I have committed to feels even more urgent and necessary.

Despite the uphill battle, there are glimmers of hope. Among my closest circle, I notice small but significant shifts. Friends who used to light up without a second thought now step away to smoke privately, or refrain altogether when we amongst people. It doesn't seem to be just out of respect—it's also a reflection of a growing awareness, a subtle acknowledgement that their actions have broader implications.

These small victories remind me of why I began advocating for a smoke-free lifestyle. Yes, the cultural ties to smoking remain deeply rooted, and many still justify the habit by pointing to anecdotes of relatives who smoked their way into old age. But those justifications don't erase the silent toll smoking takes on individuals and communities.

South Africa, with its vibrant energy and rich culture, deserves better than to have its air and lives clouded by smoke. I dream of a future where gatherings are filled with laughter untainted by the haze of nicotine, where children can grow up without thinking of smoking as an inevitable rite of passage.

For now, I continue to share my story, hoping it resonates with others as a testament to the possibility of change. Each person who steps away from the habit, each young mind I encourage to resist the lure of smoking, feels like a step closer to that vision. While my fight is far from over, it's one I'm proud to take on—not just for myself, but for the entire nation and all the other nations I hope to impact.

Chapter 12:

# The Therapy That Changed Everything.

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Quitting smoking opened my eyes to lessons I had never anticipated, each wrapped in its own layer of humour, irony, and sobering truth. Life after cigarettes wasn't just about feeling better—it was about seeing the stark contrast between what I had lost and what I had gained. As I reflect, these lessons carry a deep sense of gratitude and the hope that sharing them might inspire someone else to quit or never start in the first place.

## **Relationships**

**The folks** - Smoking created an emotional distance between my parents and I. It wasn't just the physical act of sneaking off for a cigarette; it was the mental distraction and guilt that came with it. Every conversation felt rushed, every visit truncated by the invisible pull of my next smoke.

Now, our time together is cherished, free of rushed conversations or excuses to sneak away for a drag. More importantly, I'm present—not just physically but emotionally. Quitting smoking has allowed me to make up for lost time, creating memories that feel authentic and enduring.

**The Mrs** - My relationship with my wife is one of the most vivid testimonies to the power of quitting. Smoking had tainted not just my breath but the intimacy and closeness we shared. The ashtray scent, the nicotine-stained teeth, and the mood swings were all barriers to a deeper connection.

Since quitting, it's as though I've rediscovered what it means to be a partner. My improved health and energy have rekindled a spark in our relationship. I'm more attentive, more engaged, and more present. Even our arguments have changed—no longer fuelled by the irritability of nicotine withdrawal but by genuine efforts to understand and resolve.

**Champ** - One of the most heartwarming aspects of my journey is the bond I've built with my son. When he was a baby, his comfort lay on my chest—a bond that transcended those early years and remains strong today. Quitting smoking has made me a role model for him. I've watched him internalise my message, advocating against nicotine among his peers. It's a legacy I'm proud to pass on, knowing that my choice to quit has a ripple effect extending into the next generation.

### **Time: The Hidden Thief**

Smoking was a master manipulator, quietly stealing time under the guise of routine. The minutes spent lighting up, the hours lost to cravings, and the mental energy wasted on planning the next cigarette added up to significant lost opportunities.

At work, smoke breaks were more than just a quick escape—they were productivity killers. Five smoke breaks a day, each lasting at least 10 minutes, added up to an hour lost daily. Over a year, that's roughly 200 hours—a full month of work! Outside of work, the time spent avoiding loved ones or hiding the habit robbed me of moments that could have been spent strengthening relationships or pursuing meaningful activities.

### **The Financial Burden of Smoking**

**Purchasing Cigarette** - The financial toll of smoking is staggering. Over the past 11 years, I have saved an astounding R118,131.83 by quitting—a figure that would have otherwise literally gone up in smoke. According to the anti-smoking app I use to track my progress, that averages to R11,052.82 in annual savings. This money has been redirected toward the well-being of my family, contributing to tangible improvements in our quality of life.

When I look at the savings, I don't just see a number—I see the choices we've been able to make as a family. The money that would have been wasted on cigarettes has gone into better nutrition, meaningful

experiences, and even long-term investments. For instance, it has funded family outings, helped with education costs, and supported savings goals.

The app itself has been a motivator. Watching the numbers grow on the screen provides a tangible, fulfilling sense of accomplishment. It breaks down how much I've saved day by day, reminding me that every cigarette not smoked is a victory for my wallet and my health.

What's even more rewarding is knowing this decision has a ripple effect. By quitting, I'm not just saving money for my own use; I'm reducing financial stress for my family in the long term. From lower medical bills to improved life insurance premiums, the financial benefits extend far beyond the immediate savings.

It's true, I may not own a Lamborghini from the savings, but the intangible rewards—better health, stronger relationships, and peace of mind—are worth far more. Quitting smoking doesn't just save money; it transforms how you allocate resources and ultimately enriches your life in ways that can't be measured by a price tag.

**The Cost to Employers** - For employers, smoking translates into a significant financial burden that often goes unnoticed. Beyond health-related absences, the simple act of taking smoke breaks costs businesses substantial amounts of money.

Let's break it down: If an employee earns R100 per hour and the average working month comprises 160 hours, each smoke break adds up to lost

productivity with real financial implications. Assuming a smoker takes five 10-minute breaks daily, they lose about 50 minutes of productive time per day. Over a month, that's approximately 16.7 hours—or over 10% of their paid working time.

In monetary terms, this translates to R1,670 per month in wages for time not worked. Over a year, that's R20,040 per smoker. Now multiply that by the number of smokers in a company. For example, if a business has 10 smokers, the annual financial loss balloons to over R200,000—an amount that could otherwise be reinvested in business growth, employee development, or other crucial areas.

These figures don't even account for additional costs such as increased healthcare premiums due to smoking-related illnesses or productivity losses from sick leaves. Smoking isn't just a personal habit; it's a significant financial liability for businesses.

For companies, these insights highlight the importance of creating smoke-free policies and supporting employees in their efforts to quit. Offering smoking cessation programs, incentives for non-smokers, or even on-site wellness initiatives can help reduce these costs while fostering a healthier, more productive workforce.

Employees, too, must recognise how their habits impact their employer's bottom line. As a former smoker, I now understand how much of my productivity—and my employer's money—I effectively wasted. Quitting

smoking isn't just a personal win; it's also a step toward fairness and accountability in the workplace.

### **Life Insurance and Medical Costs**

Quitting smoking has financial benefits far beyond the cost of cigarettes. Within just a year of quitting, my life insurance premiums decreased significantly, effectively doubling my coverage without requiring any additional cost. Reflecting on this made me realise the long-term cost of smoking—not just for me, but for my loved ones. Had I passed away during my smoking days, my family would have been left with a reduced payout, financially shortchanged because of my high-risk status as a smoker. This thought alone was enough to make me appreciate the decision to quit.

However, this story isn't just about financial calculations; it's also a stark reminder of how smoking can rob us of the life and health we might otherwise enjoy. One of my closest friends, someone I looked up to as we were growing up, serves as a heartbreaking example. He quit smoking just a few months before I did, but only after a devastating wake-up call.

At 40, during his first-ever health check-up, his doctor delivered a sobering diagnosis: unless he quit smoking immediately, he wouldn't live to see another year. He took the warning seriously and stubbed out his last cigarette that same day. Unfortunately, the years of damage couldn't be undone. Within months, he developed a severe lung infection and

experienced swelling in his brain. This led to a series of minor strokes—five in the past seven years, by my count.

Today, my friend is barred from any mentally or physically strenuous work. Once a proud breadwinner, he has had to let go of his career and become a full-time househusband. The financial strain on his family has been immense, with his wife now the sole breadwinner and their medical savings depleted from numerous hospital stays and costly brain procedures.

His story is a sobering reminder of the high price of smoking—one that goes far beyond the smoker themselves. It impacts families, careers, and futures. Had my friend quit earlier, he might have avoided these life-altering consequences.

For anyone hesitating to quit, let his story be a motivator. Smoking doesn't just take a toll on your wallet; it costs your health, your independence, and potentially your family's well-being. Quitting now, before irreversible damage sets in, is a gift you give not only to yourself but to those who love and depend on you. Let's not wait for a life-altering warning before making the change.

## **Performance and Health**

Physically, quitting smoking was like flipping a switch. I had more energy, sharper focus, and an overall sense of vitality. Mentally, the fog lifted,

allowing me to think clearly and approach challenges with a fresh perspective.

Looking back, I wonder how smoking affected my ambitions. Could I have pursued my passion for basketball more seriously? Would I have had the focus to complete my law degree? Smoking robbed me of more than just health—it stole opportunities and potential.

### **Bone Health: A Cautionary Tale**

Quitting smoking has a way of revealing just how deeply the habit affects the body. One seemingly unrelated incident—a fall down the stairs—offered me an unexpected lesson about the hidden dangers smoking poses to bone health.

A year or two ago, I stumbled down a flight of stairs and landed face-first. Miraculously, I escaped with only a sprained pinky, a cut lip, and a loose tooth. At the time, I considered myself lucky, but when I shared this story with a cousin, her experience shed a different light on the situation.

My cousin, an avid quitter, had been in a car accident years earlier and suffered a badly fractured shin. She underwent surgery to have a metal plate and screws installed. However, she endured years of excruciating pain and repeated hospital visits for complications. It wasn't until a more recent surgery that her condition improved. During her hospital stays, doctors noted that her bones were unusually brittle and fragile—attributes linked directly to her smoking habit.

Hearing her story made me pause and reflect. Smoking affects more than just the lungs; it compromises bone density and overall resilience. Had I still been a smoker during my fall, the outcome might have been drastically different. Perhaps I would have suffered fractures instead of walking away with minor injuries.

This realisation hit home even harder when I visited my dentist about the loose tooth. To my surprise, they informed me that the tooth had re-lodged into the bone and showed no signs of instability—a testament, perhaps, to the body's ability to heal when given the right conditions. I couldn't help but wonder: would my recovery have been so seamless if I were still smoking?

My cousin's ordeal and my own close call serve as stark reminders of smoking's far-reaching consequences. Brittle bones may not be the first thing smokers think about, but they should be. Quitting smoking isn't just about breathing easier; it's about fortifying the body to withstand the inevitable knocks of life. For anyone struggling with the decision to quit, remember: your future self will thank you—not just for the breath you save but for the strength you preserve.

### **The Health Gauge Myth**

One of the most insidious aspects of smoking is the mental gymnastics smokers perform to justify their habit. I used to compare myself to heavier smokers, convincing myself that I was “healthy” by comparison. But quitting taught me the danger of such myths. Every smoker's body reacts

differently, and relying on anecdotal evidence to gauge health is a recipe for disaster.

Chapter 13:

# Puff-Free and Proud.

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As I close this journey down memory lane, I can't help but feel a wave of gratitude. First, to my lungs, for sticking with me through my years of foolishness, even when I treated them like the exhaust pipe of an old diesel truck. I owe you guys big time! To my wallet, I'm sorry it took me that long to realise you deserved better. And to my family and friends, thank you for not giving up on me—even when I smelled like an ashtray on legs.

Quitting smoking has been like breaking up with a toxic ex: tough at first, full of drama, but eventually, life got so much better. No more sneaky smoke breaks, no more freezing my toes off outside at parties, and no more breath that could scare off a vampire. Instead, I've got more energy, better health, and a pocket full of cash I didn't even realise I was missing.

To anyone still holding on to that last pack of smokes, let me tell you: it's not worth it. I get it—quitting is hard. It feels like losing your best frenemy.

But trust me, life on the other side is so much better. Food tastes amazing, hugs don't come with complaints about your smell, and your wallet will love you forever.

Take it from someone who has been there. You don't have to wait for a dramatic moment—a health scare, a family intervention, or the realisation that you're paying a month's salary just to feed your habit. The best time to quit is right now. The second-best time is tomorrow. Just don't wait too long. Your future self will thank you, and so will everyone around you.

As for me, I'm living proof that quitting is possible—and dare I say, even enjoyable. My life is better, my relationships are stronger, and my lungs? They're finally getting the fresh air they deserve.

So here's to cleaner air, healthier bodies, and wallets that stay full. If I can do it, you can too. Just take it one day, one hour, one craving at a time. And when you finally kick the habit for good, you'll realise, as I did, that life smells, tastes, and feels so much sweeter on the other side.

Stay strong, stay smoke-free, and remember: you're not just quitting for yourself—you're quitting for everyone who loves you. Cheers to that! Now go breathe easy—you've earned it.



Mothusi Leotlela is a passionate advocate for health, wellness, and personal growth. A creative professional with over 22 years of experience, he has channeled his skills and life lessons into inspiring others to embrace positive change. Smoke-free for over 11 years, Mothusi shares his journey to quitting smoking with humour, honesty, and insight. Through his work, he aims to empower smokers to quit, encourage non-smokers to cherish their freedom to fresh air, and inspire the next generation to lead healthier lives.

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