Body Basics:
What Happens When You Use Tobacco

If you are a Laborer who says that using tobacco helps you feel less stressed and more focused on your work, you’re not the only one. But have you ever wondered why that happens?

The plain truth is that it’s the rush of nicotine that causes those feelings. When you inhale tobacco smoke, here’s what happens:

1. tar particles carry nicotine to your lungs, where it gets absorbed
2. blood carries the nicotine from your lungs to your heart
3. once it hits your heart, the nicotine gets pumped to your brain and the rest of your body

And this is no slow-moving job: your body is so efficient at moving blood that it takes only about 8 seconds for the nicotine to go from your mouth to your brain.

Once the nicotine hits your brain, that’s when it really begins working, by causing the brain to secrete certain chemicals. Some of these brain chemicals can make you feel more alert or like you have better judgment. Others may seem to improve your mood or even your memory.

As your brain is feeling the effects of nicotine, the rest of your body feels it, too. The nicotine starts to:

- raise your blood pressure and heart rate
- make your skin temperature go down
- increase the levels of some hormones (including adrenaline, which gives you an energy rush)
- affect your muscle function and tone

So as you can see, using tobacco is much more than a habit, because nicotine is very addictive. (In fact, it’s so addictive that some scientists compare it to heroin and cocaine) Your body gets physically dependent on the nicotine, and your mind gets psychologically dependent on it. It can be hard to win the fight when you’ve got a powerful opponent like nicotine in the other corner.

But the good news is that it’s not impossible. And a nicotine patch can help. Talk to your doctor to learn more.
You work hard and take what you do seriously. Your job or your boss may push you to work even harder. You’re exposed to lots of risks on the job. You worry about layoffs. You change jobs or job sites often. For Laborers like yourself, this all adds up to one thing: **stress**.

Some Laborers who use tobacco say they do it to get a handle on stress. They say that it makes them feel more in control and helps them calm way down.

But if you think that using tobacco helps you calm down or relieves stress, you’re not really seeing the whole picture. Nicotine also makes your heart beat faster and makes your blood pressure go up. So smoking causes stimulation and relaxation. You might feel calmer when you use tobacco, because you’re doing other relaxing activities at the same time. For example, you may be on a break at work and relaxing while you’re using tobacco, so you connect the two things.

Learning how to deal with stress is important, so you can feel more relaxed and better able to take on challenges at work and at home. LIUNA offers skill-building workshops and materials to help keep workplace stress in check, so don’t hesitate to talk to your steward for more information. Dealing with stress is one of the many services that your local Member Assistance Program (MAP) can offer. Call your Local to find out if there is a MAP in your area, or ask your doctor for a referral.

Remember, dealing with stress doesn’t have to involve using tobacco. Here are a few things you can try to relieve your stress right now—without needing to reach for your cigarettes or chew:

- breathe in and out deeply 10 times
- take a quick walk
- take a hot shower
- drink a glass of water
- eat vegetables with crunch, like carrot sticks
- hit a punching bag
- talk to a buddy or coworker

Some people have stress or anxiety that they just can’t put aside. If you have constant anxiety or worries, it’s important that you talk about this with your doctor.