

NO SMOKE OR MIRRORS



Clinical psychologists Sidney Pratt, Martha Sanchez and Karla Rovira of Sin Humo (a treatment program meaning “without smoke”) in Costa Rica described an unusual top-10 illusion at the contest gala: they made pleasure disappear by blocking vision. Their idea came about after finding that a relaxation technique that involved closing the eyes while smoking could decrease the enjoyment people felt from a cigarette. Less enjoyment, they reasoned, would lead to weaker addiction. Pratt’s team then wondered whether the patients’ reduced grati-

fication resulted primarily from the closing of the eyes—which prevented them from seeing the burning cigarette—rather than from relaxation per se.

To test this idea, they simply blindfolded patients while they smoked—and found that this manipulation accounted for the reduced pleasure of smoking. The contest judges classified this demonstration as an illusion because the smokers’ perceptions did not match the biochemical reality of smoking, in which the amount of pleasure from a cigarette should be based on the amount of nicotine delivered. That amount, however, is the same with and without the blindfold.

In light of this effect, the researchers reasoned that seeing the smoke from a cigarette, along with its presumed association with smoking satisfaction in the past, might bolster nicotine addiction among smokers. The blindfolding technique is now the cornerstone of the team’s antismoking treatment plan.