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On Twinkies, Cigarettes and Reason

Dan Edelman's nutrition confessions of a conflicted parent.

By Dan Edelman

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"Barring obvious socioeconomic barriers such as poverty, often the only barrier to a child having access to good nutrition is the parents' lack of access to information, lack of ability to process that information or laziness."

—E.M. Burton (1)

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"Wheat? Wheat doesn't make kids fat. Poor choices make kids fat: Parents' poor choices." —my wife

Let's be clear: You will find no shining insights here on nutrition or food. I am no expert on the subject, as will soon be obvious. This is my perspective and my perspective alone, and I do not labor under any illusions that it is shared by too many people. But it is honest—the perspective and honesty of a father who is trying to be a good dad but constantly battles a sneaking suspicion that he sucks as a parent. So let's get cracking, shall we?

I lifted for the first time at age 12 in the summer of 1978. Out on the back patio, just me and my uncle's cast-off weight set. I remember pressing while looking at my reflection in the slider door. My guiding light was Arnold (57), who was, as far as I knew, the fittest man on Earth. I got hooked pretty quickly, and by the time I entered high school, I'm pretty sure the signs of addiction could be discerned if anyone cared to look.



No nutrition label, no health claims.

In those early years, I never gave a thought to nutrition. Who did back then? My mom, maybe. Four basic food groups and all that. But certainly my family never connected food with fitness or athletic performance. Unhealthy food? Well, we were warned about excessive sugar and lead-based paint. But that didn't stop me from inhaling an entire box of Entenmann's chocolate donuts during an episode of *Happy Days*. I was so active as a kid—all of my friends were. It didn't seem to matter what I ate.

My definition of fitness was based on a bodybuilding aesthetic and influenced by the mass media. I looked fit, ergo And as I matured and began to consider food as an element in my fitness regimen, my "understanding" of proper nutrition followed suit. So when it became apparent to the experts that the way to go was low fat and no red meat, I took that to heart. Nutrition labels meant I could see just how much evil lurked in the food I intended to eat. And I intended to eat only food that kept me "in shape."

Pretty soon my evolving eating habits were rooted in the same emotional disturbances that drove my seven-days-a-week workout schedule. Don't know if you can classify it as an eating disorder, but it was close. For me, red meat was the Great Satan, bacon Beelzebub and avocado the forbidden fruit. A typical workday lunch might be a box of Hanover pretzels (yes, an entire box) or a head of iceberg lettuce or a package of rice cakes or a giant tub of white rice. Get this: I sometimes took that 32-ounce tub of white rice and mixed in fat-free frozen yogurt. Really? Really.

At one point, I remember my weight hitting 158 lb. I was appalled that I had gotten so "fat." A stressful point in my life conveniently freight trained me soon after, and I used it to propel myself down to a skanky 141 lb. (Since starting CrossFit, I am leaner and fitter than I have ever been and weigh in between 160 and 165 lb.) I have no specific recollection of my nutty eating habits during that dark time other than that they were accompanied by an equally nutty workout routine. Over the years, my habits varied, but they always bordered on immoderate if not extreme.

I ate beans and rice because that combo was supposed to be a complete protein. I juiced apples, carrots and, for the love of God, lettuce. I ate tofu. Yes, I did. I also tried Ornish's *Eat More, Weigh Less* diet (45). Yeah, I sometimes ate chicken, fish and pork (and by "ate," I mean ravenously binged), but I also consumed tons of sugar. Why?

Well, apparently sugar is “fat free.” As long as there was little or no fat in my food, I knew I was eating healthy. And as long as I worked out every day, I knew I was staying fit. I mean, compared with the average guy my age, I looked fit. So yeah, I was fit.

When I stumbled onto CrossFit in 2007, all I brought with me from nearly three decades of being into “fitness” was chronic low-grade elbow tendinitis, the Cornfield Principles (some other time, guys), and erratic and quite possibly neurotic feeding practices.

CrossFit has redefined—or I should say finally defined—fitness for me, and that includes clarifying nutrition’s place in the whole thing. But there’s no denying my wandering-the-desert nutritional history, and it continues to feed into decisions I make now. Particularly for my kids.

Food for Thought

About 10 years ago, CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman made a simple recommendation: “Eat meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch and no sugar. Keep intake to levels that will support exercise but not body fat” (12).

This might tell you to “eat healthy.” Well, that’s not a new message for most of us. A little more sophisticated interpretation might suggest to some of us the notion of “eating clean.” Ultimately, I view Glassman’s prescription as instructions for properly fueling your body for, in this case, CrossFit. Most of you are thinking, “Yeah, so?” Right, nothing revelatory there. But “food as fuel” requires a paradigm shift in terms of the place that eating has occupied in most of our lives—a change that does not compute so easily for some.

Food might be a basic biological necessity, but it is deeply infused with cultural meaning. From its symbolic place in rituals (weddings, Passover, potlatches) to the rising popularity of culinary categories such as “comfort food” to the explosive growth of cooking and food-related magazines, reality TV shows, radio programs and even fiction, food carries serious social, psychological and emotional weight—a weight we begin to bear almost immediately after we pop out of the womb. Couple that with what might be a genetic predisposition toward certain taste preferences (e.g., 67) and trying to get someone to change long-term habits—much less affect a paradigm shift in eating behavior based on cold and imperious “scientific reason”—can be a challenge. To say the least.

Twinkie = Cigarette

CrossFit Kids and CrossFit Brand X founders Jeff and Mikki Lee Martin are always seeking ways to communicate information that has a bearing on the children who are part of CrossFit Brand X and the wider community. Childhood obesity is a serious issue, and the Martins tackled this in the adult classes through a short whiteboard lecture inspired by [this YouTube video](#) of a smoking 2-year-old Sumatran child. The implications of the so-called childhood obesity epidemic and the preponderance of evidence pointing to the cause convinced the Martins to take a blunt approach to the subject.

Much like politics and religion, which are often best left untouched, nutrition and feeding practices can be deeply personal topics. As one would expect from the Martins, the whiteboard discussion was humorous and engaging, but it minced no words. They used the absurdity of a cigarette-puffing toddler and our natural revulsion to the idea to ask parents why they would feed their children foods that were every bit as unhealthy over the long term as tobacco. Thus was unveiled the rather succinct Bad Twinkie Equation.



Sugary beverages: worse than cigarettes?

I could discern a delicate web of tension weaving among the clients as they took this in. Behind the laughter and smiles and nodding of heads, I could see gears whirring. I wondered if at least some people thought they were being called out. Or maybe found out, exposed. Or maybe not; maybe it was just me.

Nutrition and CrossFit Kids

In the Kids classes, for obvious reasons, the scared-straight approach cannot be used. CrossFit Kids trainers can become important to their young clients (8); the things they say and do have an impact. We avoid ranting, dictating or even giving the impression of lecturing the children. CrossFit Kids classes always are conducted in full view of parents, who may know very little about CrossFit, having heard about it through the media or been coaxed to an affiliate by their CrossFitting friends. My experience is that the benefits of CrossFit Kids might not be immediately apparent to new non-CrossFitting parents, so they can be circumspect as they watch their children participating in this new activity.

Want to alienate and lose those new parents quickly? Charge them a considerable membership fee to tell them that their parenting skills blow while proselytizing to their children about food. That's exactly what we would be doing if we stepped on a soapbox during class and, in the guise of a "food lecture," insisted that the kids are eating all wrong.

So CrossFit Kids recommends conducting nutrition chats during the focus work segment and sticking to simple facts about macronutrients and food choices. Discussions and activities are framed within the Martins' dietary recommendation: "Teach children to make good choices about what they eat. Use basic concepts: Sugar is bad, protein is good and you need to eat some in every meal. Nuts and seeds are good fats. Eat them; don't avoid them. Pasta, white bread, and white rice are not that good for you. Stuff that's red, yellow, green and found in the fruit and vegetable aisle is good for you. Eat a lot of it. Look at your plate, then make a fist; eat that much meat. Turn your hand over and fill it with nuts and seeds; eat that much good fat. Fill the rest of your plate with stuff you found in the fruit and vegetable aisle. Fill your plate this way at every meal, and don't eat more."

Although this advice might be off-putting to some vegetarians and vegans, it is an unthreatening anti-rant simply presented for children to digest. It addresses quality and quantity of food in a commonsensical way. I agree with this statement in letter and spirit.

So why do I have such a hard time getting my kids to eat this way?

Movement Disorder

Eat healthy. Makes sense. Just like "be fit." Simple concept, right? Except that when asked what "being fit" meant to us prior to accepting Glassman's definition (12), many of us had only vague notions that proved difficult to articulate. For example, I was chatting with a woman one night at a party. She's a runner and plays basketball and soccer, maybe more sports, too. She knew I was involved with CrossFit, and her sister happens to be an avid CrossFitter who keeps asking her to try it. The conversation ground to a halt when she said: "I'm not interested in CrossFit. I'd rather be fit than strong." Which is a bit like saying, "I'd rather be a basketball player than have a jump shot." And which is why I try to avoid parties.

A similar apparent disconnect can be seen in people's views on eating healthy. In the U.S., public health policy first addressed this in the 19th century (36). Over the years, as the cause of malnutrition was seen to shift from under- to overabundance, private and third-sector and less formal citizen concerns have generated a vast "food movement" (e.g., 35,54,55). The movement is far-flung, multipolar and often uncoordinated (4,36,70). There is the good-food movement, the slow-food movement, the locavore movement, the healthy-school-lunch movement and the anti-GMO movement. More broadly, there are the fair-trade and anti-globalization movements. There is sustainable farming, small farming and micro-farming, and people chatter about organic foods, real foods and whole foods.

All these causes, campaigns and trends overlap, all of them carry ethical and "green" components, and all of them—although ostensibly well-intended—should not, as far as I'm concerned, escape some critical scrutiny.



It's easy to get distracted by the latest diet or scientific study and forget the basics of good nutrition.

This massive, disjointed and, some might say, self-serving movement runs up against powerful and equally self-serving forces driven by bureaucratic groupthink and expedience and what really appears to be outright profit-motivated deceit. For example, Jamie Oliver (44) has exposed the hypocrisy in U.S. schools—what many parents desperately need to view as a bastion of safety and trust—that pay a lot of lip service to the idea of child health but then offer what are, to put it mildly, questionable lunchtime meals. My kids' home-packed lunches have even been subject to search and seizure for offensive treats, yet the cafeteria sells cookies, ice cream and chocolate milk, and teachers often reward (i.e., bribe) their students with candy for jobs well done.

Meanwhile, the food-industrial complex protects its interests through rebranding, public relations and lobbying (36,37,38,71), with buzzwords such as "certified organic" and "Paleo" subject to manipulation (e.g., 16,65,74) or opportunistically—and absurdly—co-opted (e.g., 47) even by those who we'd consider outside the industry establishment (e.g., 2).

Then there is the never-ending variety of "diets" competing for our attention. People bandwagon on the hottest one without necessarily knowing what they're doing. Once while minding my own business shopping at Home Depot, one of the employees—apparently taken with my traveling gun show—waylaid me and asked where I work out. He had not heard of CrossFit and felt compelled to explain that he used to do some modeling ... and did I know the best way to burn fat and get ripped (presumably to model again)?

"Well," I said, cringing a bit, "it begins with nutrition."

"Right, right," he said. "Have you heard of the Zone Diet?"

"Yes," I said.

"You think it works?"

"Well, are you pretty strict about measuring?"

"Measuring?"

"Uh ...," I said. "Um, do you measure out all of your blocks?"

"What?"

The guy seemed sincere enough, had a goal, and apparently had done some research that led him to choose the Zone. But he seemed clueless. Is this an extreme case? Could be. Could also be that the movements, the industry, the magic-bullet marketing generate a flurry of information that is at the very least overwhelming to the average person just trying to make the "right" choices in a media-saturated world. Take for example the recent dustup over the egg yolk (6,17,43,63). I once said that, given the profound influence of the media and other kinds of communication, there is no reality (7). Product sales, political campaigns, the culture wars ... truth is as fluid as language and information is a tool used to set agendas that benefit a very select few.

Caveat Emptor

In a recent mail order from Steve's Original, I found a card (that I assume pays homage to Coach Glassman) titled "Nutrition in 100 Words" recommending a Paleo-style diet. Its tone is mellow and its message sensible. It closes with this sentiment: "Connect with your intuition and allow it to guide you." That's sensible, too. Except I can't help but wonder how many of us have had our intuition confounded by the onslaught of not just passively and freely available information but also purposeful marketing strategies.

Just turn on the TV—particularly the children's networks—and enjoy the commercials. Or watch Food Network. I was doing just that when I saw a couple of ads. The first was a PSA beseeching us to help end child hunger in the U.S. in a somber (and sociologically intriguing) manner. Rolling in right after that was an ad celebrating—in a most festive way—the unending cornucopia of gastronomic delights one might enjoy at some restaurant chain.



Fresh, colorful food found in the vegetable aisle will seldom lead you astray.

So commonplace are such vivid bursts of color and sound that I almost failed to appreciate the juxtaposition. But the more I processed what I was seeing, the more disturbing it became. The second commercial seemed like a sort of sensory palate cleanser to vanquish not only the images of hungry children but any remorse that might sully our viewing experience of whatever faux-reality cooking porn we were watching.

Research suggests a biological basis for the pleasure we get from eating certain kinds of food (3,18,23,28,29,33,46,64,67,75). Sure seems this is what the food industry appeals to with its marketing efforts, which include not only the targeting of kids (e.g., 14,15,19,20,22,24,25,27,32,71,73) but also the use of [food stylists](#) to ensure products present as delectable a visual as possible. This “hedonic appeal” can trump homeostatic eating, a natural governor on intake that treats food as fuel (e.g., 21). This is powerful (e.g., 28), particularly given hedonic eating’s emotional dimension (e.g., 31). I believe this link to our emotional state internalizes the outside forces influencing our eating behavior. And this brings me home.

The Cult in Culture

No surprise I met my future wife at the gym (at a 24-Hour Fitness back when it was still Family Fitness). And way back in the early 1990s—just as she taught me the importance of technique over all else in the gym—she changed the way I thought about food. My wife-to-be was always on the lookout for a “healthier” way to eat, and I joined her on that odyssey.

Over the years, she explored many nutritional ideas and frameworks—from food combining to complete proteins to juicing and vegetarianism. Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007) moved her deeply, and she made a moral decision to pursue locavorism. Today, almost all our produce comes from our backyard, friends, or farms in Ramona or somewhere else in Southern California. Eggs come from our chickens and raw milk from a local farmer who also provides us with some of our beef.



For locavores, the source of food is as important as its nutritional content.

One way to look at locavorism is as a concern for pedigree and chain of custody. Where the heck is your food coming from? Origin? Waypoints? What happens to it on its journey? My wife finds greatly distressing the idea that so much of the meat and produce available in supermarkets has traveled thousands of miles to get there. What compromises or enhancements are made for produce to survive the trip? Aside from apparent environmental costs (e.g., 42,56), nutritional value drops off (e.g., 68) and, speaking from personal experience, flavor fades markedly. Locavorism gives my wife genuine pleasure.

But health and nutrition are only one side of her interest in food.

My wife is Mexican and, like all groups of people, food figures centrally in her culture. All family get-togethers, large or small, revolved around food, and much of her childhood was spent in the kitchen with her mother and grandmother preparing fare that is classically comforting: beans and rice, green chili, calabacitas (corn and squash medley), salsa. Her grandmother's Christmas empanadas are legend. Made with lengua (beef tongue), these empanadas were always spoken of in hushed, reverent tones. After much cajoling from me, my wife finally agreed to make these celebrated dough pockets. Well, she made the damned things then wouldn't let me eat them. As far as she was concerned, they were the palest of homages, nowhere near the real thing, and maybe she refused to profane the memory of her grandmother's empanadas. I couldn't touch them.

They languished in the freezer for more than a year before she finally relented. I had maybe a couple and the rest found their way unceremoniously into the trash.

This emotional response remains a powerful driver when it comes to feeding our kids. She instills even the simplest meals with the warmth and love she recalls from her childhood kitchen time with her mother and grandmother. And there is more to this.

When I met my wife, she knew her way around a kitchen, but over the last two decades, she has worked endlessly to develop and fine-tune her cooking skills, which are applied whether she is laboring over some gourmet entrée or whipping up a quick snack. This is especially apparent when it comes to baking. She bakes all the time, and she really goes on a tear during the holiday season, which begins around Halloween.

I think it's been three years since I've eaten anything my wife has baked. On one level, I consider this a decision to avoid sugar and bad carbs as I journey through a long-term personal experiment tied to CrossFit. But on a deeper level, my rational choice seems like a rejection of an expression of my wife's love, which is kind of sad to me.

If accosted at a home-improvement center, I might be inclined to say my experimental regimen is "Paleo" based. But you know what? I'm coming to hate the term. Paleo? Really? I don't eat anywhere near strict Paleo as understood in Cordain's book (5) and sure as heck don't eat like a "caveman" I imagine might wander about consuming whatever he might find whenever he found it given the hit-or-miss nature of hunting and gathering 40,000 years ago.

Glenn Pendlay's (48) incisive description of a meal he had in Guatemala resonated sharply, but for me his perspective is an ideal and not something I can easily realize for myself. I try to eat clean, real food, but as soon as I relinquish control of my food to someone else—say, a local restaurant—I no longer know for sure what I'm consuming. And I said I came to CrossFit with some odd eating habits. And they persist, distorting the food-as-fuel/eat-to-live paradigm. I typically eat only twice a day. And I eat too fast and too much. Granted, my meals are meat and vegetables and good fats, but make no mistake, it is "comfort fuel" and that comfort is as important to my emotional well-being as are my workouts.

He Likes It. Hey, Mikey!

My wife and I made decisions as new parents when trying to get our mewling little cubs to please, God, stop kvetching and eat something—anything. On the menu? The unholy trinity of bread, pasta and cereal—none of which struck us at the time as unhealthy—hot dogs, butter, cheese, all manner of juices. Sweet and fatty stuff—the tasty stuff (18,34,67,75). And we fell into a stressful routine of preparing multiple meals, sometimes up to four per dinner, just to ensure that the kids would eat. In doing our best to care for them, we spoiled them, and our boys grew accustomed to immediate gratification—apparently en route to becoming a health problem (10). And their eating habits reflect that.

Now I'm trying to undo this misstep. And it's tough.

Recently, E.M. Burton (1) offered guidance on how to feed our children in the vein of Glassman's 100 words. It is well worth your time to read—it is packed with solid, reasonable information based on her experience, and she recognizes the incremental, imperfect and long-term nature of the project. And yet . . .

Hectic scheduling often means expedience rules the day to keep the petty stressors of middle-class American family life at bay. When I'm moving in three directions at once, meals can become a burden precisely because I'm trying to do the "right thing." I consider it a coup if I can get the kids to eat jerky or deli meat or an egg, maybe a banana, carrot or melon even as I'm running out the door to squeeze yet another errand in before I have to be somewhere else, but so often the boys passively resist that and figure out a way to get the stuff they find more satisfying. The solution is simple, you say: If you don't want your kids to eat it, don't keep it in the house. I agree. Except.

Except in a reversal of roles that while not unique still remains outside the norm: I'm a house dad and my wife is the chief breadwinner. She ain't around like society says mothers are supposed to be. She's 50 miles away downtown. She hates it and is filled with guilt. My boys are sharp; they know a patsy when they see one. She keeps them in chips and cereal and bagels and all manner of yummy homemade treats. Locavorism is trumped at times, and frankly, bread and pasta are bread and pasta whether they are locally made, artisan or organic and preservative-free. She'll make that 50-mile commute home and, regardless of how tired she may be, she'll stop on the way to pick up something that the boys have requested by backroom channels or



Living in Ramona, Calif., offers the author access to local farms that offer produce year round.

get home and hit the kitchen to prepare something more palatable to them than the dinner I made. And I submit to this rather than run head first into an intangible man-trap of psycho-sociocultural forces. And if you don't know what I'm talking about, you're either not married or living some kind of *Brady Bunch/Cosby Show* fantasy.

Some of you may remember [this video](#). If you can manage to get past the oodles of cuteness and Fran fables, you can see that the little squid understands on a then-9-year-old's intellectual level what his audience accepts as "healthy eating." But believe me, rather than lettuce, the kid prefers pizza and Starbuck's foo-foo drinks (decaf of course) and his mom's preservative-free chocolate malt sandwich cookies. One reason for this is that children's taste preferences are different from those of adults (e.g., 34); most kids are going to choose ice cream over chamomile tea, a banana over kale and mac 'n' cheese over broiled chicken breast or salmon.

Further, for most reasonably active children, there is no immediate consequence to eating the kinds of stuff that many ardent CrossFitters have sworn off as evil. My kid can show up for CrossFit after a day of sloth and carbo-loading and have a dandy workout. My admonitions that poor nutrition carries a cost fail to impress. And remember, I also ate garbage for years and years as a child with no appreciable cost to me, so maybe he sees something in my eyes while I lecture him. Besides, we're always "just one meal away" from healthy eating, so why sweat it?

When my wife, who works all week, wants to take the time to make my kids a pizza or batch of brownies, I am not getting in the way. After watching her spend two decades turning herself into a wonderful cook, like her mom and grandmother before her, I will never tell her to stop baking treats. What fool would tell his wife to stop nurturing his children?

“When engaged in eating, the brain should be the servant of the stomach.” —Agatha Christie

Just like my self-proclaimed lettuce-eating kid, intellectually, I get the importance of sound nutrition. Given the clinical and popular uproar over the dangers of consuming sugar, wheat, soy and so much else, the equation of eating processed food with smoking cigarettes is compelling. So what is the problem? Are these forces I claim to be arrayed against me really so powerful? Advertising, culture, nostalgia? Are they really undermining my efforts to parent my children responsibly? Aren't they just excuses for laziness and willful neglect? For poor parenting?

It should be a no-brainer to demand that my children eat in a manner that I understand provides the best basis for a healthy life. But that's just it: the whole issue might be thought of as a “no-brainer” in the sense that the “brain”—that is, rational thought—is often absent from the decisions we make. Love for your child in whatever form it might take



The author owns chickens, allowing him to take firm control of one aspect of his family's nutrition.

is quite possibly the most powerful force we know.

Accusations of food Nazism and outright belligerence might have been lofted at me from across our dinner table, but I swear I'm simply trying to do right by my kids. I suppose it can get shrill, but that might simply be the sound of reason crashing into the ooey-goey mass of emotions, psychological whizz-bangs and fundamental biological diktats driving human preferences.

Just One Meal Away

My youngest expects to dethrone Rich Froning Jr., and he wants to be like some of the older CrossFit kids who are just beginning to embrace Coach Glassman's dietary recommendation. I encourage that because when he says he wants a certain protein shake to “aid in recovery,” even if it really isn't doing anything for his prepubescent body, he is making a “healthy” choice, and that kind of empowerment can be a key means by which children can arrive at the places parents want. My older boy will occasionally discover a real food at a friend's house. Something I could never get him to eat, like artichokes. Nothing like positive peer influence—we see it in CrossFit Kids all the time—and allowing children to make certain decisions on their own terms.

My wife insists we eat pretty well relative to the average family. She takes umbrage if I venture to say otherwise and sometimes surreptitiously points out apparent proof of the obesity epidemic when we're at the supermarket: overweight parents with overweight kids pushing a cart piled with processed food. My kids do eat chicken and beef; locally or homegrown broccoli, spinach, cucumbers, artichokes and romaine lettuce; and avocados, pistachios, almonds, and almond butter. And, although they would choose pizza and french fries and garlic-cheese bread and tortilla chips and cookies every time, I want to believe she's right about how we eat.

Am I really allowing my kids to smoke? It might be that bad. I do not feel misinformed, so am I lazy? One has to wonder in light of Burton's reasonable advice. I do what I can. I model the behavior I want my children to emulate and explain why, figuring that, like me, my kids will eventually sort it out for themselves. I take heart knowing that my children are CrossFit Kids and so they work out and learn about food from significant others who are not their guilt-ridden and dinged-up parents.

In fact, many of the oldest CrossFit Kids—the OG CrossFit Kids—have adopted a food-as-fuel nutritional regimen as they exit adolescence, making the choice themselves. This is critically important. This is evidence that CrossFit Kids can guide children to a lifetime of fitness—of super-wellness. This is evidence that, as they mature, children can decide on the basis of their own experience to take healthy actions despite the influence of the media, non-likeminded peers and the mistakes—past and ongoing—that their parents made. That is comforting food for thought.

Long-time smokers quit all the time and they experience healing. Sounds reasonable to me.



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