

Coming of age in the years of living dangerously

Bike helmets? SPF? Veggie meals? No way, if you grew up in '50s, '60s, '70s

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When Phyllis Murphy's mother was pregnant, back in the 1950s, her doctor advised her to *take up* smoking for relaxation. A few years later, that same mom smeared her toddler's skin with a concoction of baby oil and iodine for a deep, rich tan. Now, safely in adulthood in Vancouver, B.C., Murphy fondly recalls childhood as a time of leaping from rooftops and accumulating "more scars than Joan Rivers."

And Tim Palla, a 46-year-old pastor, spent his childhood just north of Pittsburgh where he got just one vaccination, gobbled wild berries and mushrooms, drank from the ditch, and chewed road tar like gum.

Like Palla and Murphy, many of us who were raised in the 1950s, '60s and '70s are survivors. We were tiny daredevils: sun-blasted, pocket-knife-carrying, bottom-spanked, cow eaters. We ran the streets armed with BB guns, boxing gloves and bottle rockets, wholly unprotected by bike helmets, sunscreen or Amber Alerts. Our houses were filled with the blue cigarette smoke of our cocktail-drinking parents and we believed it wasn't supper without a mountain of red meat.

We just didn't know then how brave we were. And, surely, future generations will marvel at our physical moxie. Because, truth be told, it was not easy to get here.

Whether you were raised on heaping bowls of Boo Berry (1970s), Quisp ('60s) or Sugar Jets ('50s), you probably, unknowingly, violated every nutrition and safety maxim of modern day childrearing.

And yet, somehow, despite all that, most of us made it out of our childhoods just fine. So what gives? Is there really any point to denying ourselves delicious, sugary, buttery food, stamping out our cigarettes and straining our muscles at the gym?

Despite years of confusing, mixed messages about whether red wine, chocolate, fish, coffee or eggs are a tonic or maybe somehow toxic, there have been enough randomized clinical trials to offer some undeniable truths: high cholesterol, low exercise, excessive sun, inhaling cigarette smoke, failing to wear a seatbelt, and excessive drinking while pregnant can hurt you (or your baby). They may not, but they can, or quite likely will, depending on the behavior. U.S. death rates from heart disease have dropped by 50 percent in the last 20 years — about half the decline is thought to be due to prevention. Today's parenting styles are guided by that knowledge.

"It would be a disservice to say that (modern, healthier habits) don't make any difference," said Dr. Daniel Berman, chief of cardiac imaging at Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute in Los Angeles, himself a vegetarian. More people soon will be pushing age 100 and feeling good, he projects. "I'm 100 percent convinced that the things we're doing are extending our younger years."

"The bottom line is that things like bike accidents where a kid died because they didn't wear a helmet, those rarely occurred. But if your kid happened to fall and was one out of 10,000 who died, you must live with knowing it was preventable," Berman said.

Ann Middleman recalls a friend's 18-year-old daughter died in the '60s while sledding in New York without a helmet.

"I think of all the people who didn't survive," said Middleman, 47, whose father, a lifetime smoker, died of cancer at age 52. "I'm glad I live now, have access to good medical care — as well as the information to make informed choices — and safer products. Seat belts and air bags alone save numerous lives every year. Before we had them, people did die. Needlessly. We may not have known about them, but for their families, the losses were, indeed, tragic."

Genetic destiny?

Many of us weathered our childhood deeds and diets because we heard about the health studies, or the tragic accidents, and changed our ways as adults. But another big factor in our longevity is rooted in our DNA — 50 percent of our health outcome, Berman estimates, is determined by our chromosomes. Which explains how cigar-sucking, overweight Winston Churchill lived to be 90, while running guru Jim Fixx died of a heart attack at 52.

But some unknown quantity, some slice of the equation, is not due our genetics or our subscription to Cooking Light magazine. Some of this, say many folks 40 and up, is a matter of attitude, an edge we still carry from our younger days.

Vikki Smith spent many of her youthful summer nights in Houston on her banana-seat bike chasing mosquito-fogging trucks and "shouting with glee at being able to cruise along, submerged in a chemical cloud." Today, she's convinced that what didn't kill her made her stronger.

"Frankly, I believe that I am alive today because I am a child of the '50s," said Smith, a 57-year-old glassware artist who resides in Austin, Texas. "All those ingested toxins and lack of concern for personal safety measures gave me a clear advantage. Just like a child from a poverty-stricken, Third World country, I believe we develop a cast-iron stomach. A little adversity is the key to longevity."

'We were allowed to live'

Chris Sully grew up in Burbank, Calif., in the 1960s — a time when both his parents smoked and it never occurred to anyone to wear a helmet while riding a bike.

"We survived those years because we were allowed to live," said the 47-year-old mortgage industry worker. "Too much effort is spent protecting us from ourselves these days that we don't just go out and live. This is particularly true of children. Who would have thought 30 years ago that it would be necessary to run public service announcements encouraging parents to get their kids outside playing?"

By today's standards, our playtime perhaps bordered on the lethal yet we didn't over-indulge in those guilty pleasures because we were loaded with homework and house chores, theorized author Carolyn Bartz, who grew up in Vancouver, Wash., during the '50s. "There was more moderation in everything way back then," she said.

Daily routine of 'duck and cover'

The over-40 generation's live-for-today psychology is — and was — largely a product of a dark tension: the constant threat of nuclear war. At school, teachers led us through "duck and cover" drills to prepare for "The Big One."

"Cold War hysteria led to a kind of fatalism and an acceptance of everyday danger," said Mike Barlow, a freelance writer born in 1952, who describes his younger self as "a typical Jersey punk growing up in a tiny, poorly ventilated apartment with two adult smokaholics" where a high-fiber, low-fat diet "would have seemed sissified and un-American."

"Back then, I don't think anyone seriously expected to live past the age of 30, so the very notion of 'healthy living' would have struck us as completely alien," Barlow said.

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