

# Backpack Journalism Fall 19

Stories



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## What's for Dinner?

On a cold and snowy January morning, Patrice Roy came back from a long walk in the French woods. Ready to hop in a shower, Roy caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and stopped, frightened by his reflection.

He had lost over 30 pounds. Since October 2016, Roy had lived eating only 10 percent of what he used to eat. He felt great, but his relatives worried—he did look

really skinny. He was curious though, how much lower could his weight drop? What else could his body do?

In his bathroom that day, Roy was scared, but excited. He was going to stop eating.

Roy isn't alone in his journey. According to [Nexus magazine](#), a publication devoted to "alternative news" about "health, suppressed news, consciousness, ancient mysteries, future science, unexplained, free energy and much more," between 40,000 and 60,000 people choose to stop eating—completely. These people practice what some call Inedia, Latin for 'fasting' or breatharianism—the belief that it is possible for a person to live without consuming food.

For over a year, Roy set the table with only one glass, all he needed to drink what he called meals. These often were comprised of oat milk, broths and some light juices. His teeth were retired, he said.

According to Michelle Felton, the clinical director of Monte Nido, a residential eating disorder treatment center in Medford, Massachusetts, practicing fasting as a lifestyle can lead to extremely dangerous mental and physical health consequences.

"Honestly my professional opinion would highly recommend not fasting, as a way of life, given all the negative side effects that can happen," Felton said. "One of the negative side effects being the development of an eating disorder. That would not be something I would recommend anyone to try."

At the True North Health Center in Santa Rosa, California, Alan Goldhamer, doctor of chiropractic, the founder of the center, received over 20,000 people in his 35-year career. All of them came to participate in medically-supervised fasting. Fifty percent come from out of California, and 15 percent come from outside the country.

Chiropractors do not hold medical degrees and aren't considered medical doctors, nor are they certified as dietary practitioners. Lainey Younkin, a Boston registered

dietician, emphasized the importance of the distinction.

“Anybody can call themselves a nutritionist, it’s not a regulated term,” Younkin said. “Dietitians are like, you know, the nursing of nutrition. You don’t call yourself a nurse unless you took the national exam right? So it’s similar with a registered dietitian.”

Younkin said to become a dietician, one has to have a bachelor’s or master’s degree in nutrition, complete a supervised internship at a hospital, and take the national board. In her professional opinion, she also would not recommend fasting to anyone.

“So anybody can call themselves a nutritionist and everybody like chiropractors, [...] personal bloggers, influencers, [are taking] their personal experience and putting it onto the rest of the population, and it’s frankly dangerous and outside of their scope of practice, and questionably unethical,” Younkin said.

In the California center, Goldhamer said patients are closely monitored by doctors, and they learn how to live a healthier lifestyle.

Goldhamer said long-term fasting can reduce inflammation, allowing patients to get off pain medication, and can help reduce high-blood pressure, arthritis and tendonitis, among others.

“We took 174 consecutive patients in a row,” Goldhamer said. “And 174 people achieved normal blood pressure without medication. It turns out, if you undo the cause of the problem, the problem often times resolves itself.”

“After fasting, it’s like rebooting the hard drive on the computer...,” Goldhamer said. “I think that analogy holds true with fasting. Reboot the system. Now good food tastes good.”

Goldhamer founded his center in 1984 with his wife, after learning about some of the benefits of fasting while training in Australia.

“Conventionally, medical treatment of say, diabetes or high blood pressure or obesity or autoimmune disease, we’re all told that if they followed the medical advice, they would be on drugs for the rest of their life,” he said. “So essentially, doctors were telling patients do what we tell you and we promise you, you’ll never get well. You’ll be sick forever. And I thought, maybe there’s a better way.”

Geoffrey Halverson has been a physical therapist assistant for more than 15 years. He founded Boston Fasting Solutions, a support group for fasters in the Boston area, over two years ago. He said fasting relieved him of his allergies.

“In every field, whether it’s cancer, whether it’s in brain sciences, whether it’s arthritis, it’s really clear that there’s a whole other way of treating them that’s not being done through the regular medicine,” Halverson said. “And it’s quite possible that fasting is one of the main ways that you could actually do that.”

Roy’s journey started almost accidentally. He is a 63-year-old nurse who lives in the Jura, in the northeast of France. He said he woke up one morning with a feeling in his stomach. He said it felt like a force within him stronger than hunger, and he wanted to explore it.

“Only a few people can stop eating, and even fewer have the luck to get this as a gift like me,” Roy said in a Skype interview from France. “Most people went to centers, fasted for three weeks or stopped drinking for one week, then they restarted again, then fasted, then restarted—the most common journey is like that. People remove something from their diet, then start again. They go through juices, or raw vegetables—most of the people I met did that.”

Roy said many of the doctors he interacted with refused to explore fasting as a successful alternative treatment. Roy turned to one of his life-long friends, an

oncologist, and talked to him about his experiment.

“For him it was absurd. He told me ‘you will have [physical] deficiencies, it’s too late,’ Roy said. “So I told him, ‘give me a full blood test.’ And I did so many tests. I went the next day because he had scared me. I sent the results [to him] and he never bothered me with it again. He expected deficiencies and there was none. And there were even improvements from previous blood test results. And for him, that’s absolutely inexplicable.”

Roy said he now feels amazing. He said that he used to suffer from hip tendonitis. Getting up in the morning, just putting one foot down from the bed, made his hip hurt. He couldn’t sit down for an hour straight.

After only two months of changes in his diet, the pain disappeared, he said. He had been on medication for four years for the pain. Today, three years later, he said he still hasn’t taken his pain medication again.

“I had the feeling of not having the same body anymore,” Roy said. “I lived so many years in overweight with a belly that embarrassed me, and the heaviness. And all of the sudden it wasn’t the same body. And of course the fat disappeared, but also the belief that you can’t live without eating. I didn’t think it was possible.”

When Roy found a new doctor, he said he shared with her the improvements of his hip tendonitis. He told her about his new diet and how it allowed him to stop his pain medication. Roy said she didn’t ask him any questions about it.

“It just sounds so counterintuitive, that you can go without eating,” Goldhamer said. “People think if you started fasting, and you got on the plane in New York, and you flew all the way to California and you didn’t eat anything, you’d probably die somewhere over Colorado of starvation.”

Goldhamer said, if correctly monitored, a 150-pound male in a resting state can fast up to 70 days. He emphasized that the idea that one, two, three or even four weeks of fasting is not dangerous.

“In terms of calories, I think I was under 300 calories,” Roy said. “Even though theoretically, with my age and my weight I would need 1,200 [calories]—just to maintain the vital functions at rest. It’s fantastic to live. I had the impression to be beyond life’s norms.”

But Felton, the eating disorder clinic director, said that that misleading ecstatic state Roy and others fasting feel could be created by the effects fasting has on the brain.

“When you engage in an eating disorder behavior such as purging, binge eating, or even restricting, which would be fasting, the brain does have a chemical response and can release dopamine,” Felton said. “So you do feel good when you’re in this behavior, because it alleviates any other stress that you’re feeling in your life or anxiety for short periods of time.”

For Felton, this temporary state isn’t worth all the other negative consequences that she said fasting can have on the body. Once the body, and more importantly, the brain become malnourished and underweight, the brain develops eating disorder tendencies.

“In regards to fasting in population you know there’s a lot of things, like emotionally, that happen to the brain when you do fast that can really interfere with your daily life, such as increased rates of depression, anxiety, irritability, intense mood fluctuations and inability to control your moods,” Felton said. “We see a lot when you have a starved brain.”

What first started for Roy as an experiment in October 2016 turned into a year-and-a-half long journey where he completely stopped chewing solid food, transforming

his body drastically.

Roy said his hunger quickly disappeared. Three bites for lunch, three bites for dinner—Roy felt full.

“Often something else I would hear was, ‘you’re refraining yourself from some pleasure’ and it took me time to explain, I’m not refraining from pleasure, I ate for 65 years I know what the pleasure of eating feels like,” Roy said. “But now, I take a greater pleasure.”

Goldhamer described the pleasure some take in eating as “the pleasure trap,” a form of addiction.

“The pleasure trap is this artificial stimulation of dopamine in the brain by concentrated substances,” Goldhamer said. “And that’s why people are fat, sick and miserable. So fasting is just a tool to make the transition to health a little bit quicker if you do the diet and lifestyle long enough you get well.

“However, for some reason, people have some trouble making those changes, just like you have trouble quitting drinking and smoking and using cocaine. Because they are addicts. And they’re addicted to that artificial stimulation.”

Once Roy broke what Goldhamer called an addiction, he wanted to go further. After reducing the amount of calories he consumed every day to only 300 for five months, Roy was tempted to push the experiment a little further—what if he stopped eating?

“I didn’t know what was going to happen, and since I like doing experiments and adventures, I was quite enthusiastic,” Roy said. “And I was living something so incredible that I wanted to push further and transition to only beverages, and not crunching anything anymore—and that makes a big difference.”

Roy decided to plan his last meal. It would be with his father in the Jura, a region in the northeast of France, in March 2017, five months after he changed his eating habits.

When the day came, they started with some sweet but strong Macvin, a regional wine. Roy then prepared his favorite, roasted potatoes. He wanted them crispy, and didn't skimp on olive oil.

After the meal, the two men sat by the fireplace for a moment. Roy realized he didn't know the next time he would eat. The next morning, Roy weighed himself—134 pounds. That's when Roy stopped crunching any physical food and transitioned to his beverages, which he believed would be enough to keep him alive and well.

He only ate again a year and a half later.

Physical therapist Halverson said that with electrolytes, Roy's diet was sufficient to live a healthy life.

"There are different kinds of juices or broth that have some magnesium, potassium, and salt," Halverson said. "Because if you don't have that, for a longer term, you might end up kind of getting dizzy and really having troubles."

Today, Roy eats again. In a typical day, he continues to drink his beverages in the morning and at night, but will eat a plate of vegetables at his job's cafeteria for lunch, making relationships with colleagues easier. If invited at someone's house or to a restaurant, Roy will eat but his relationship with food has changed forever.

While Roy's experience with fasting seems successful, he admitted it can't be for everyone. Roy's entourage disapproved his lifestyle and the social pressure around eating became too much.



“No, I would not recommend,” Roy said. “The people that are interested, I’ll tell them about my experience with pleasure. But I won’t do proselytism. Because I know it doesn’t always work.”

For many patients, Halverson said lowering insulin levels can help them reach a state of ketosis. In that state, fatty acids are released from body fat stores. These fatty acids are transferred to the liver where they are turned into ketones, molecules that provide energy for the body. According to [Healthline](#), unlike fatty acids, ketones can cross the blood-brain barrier and become the main sources of energy for the body and brain in the absence of glucose.

Halverson said by lowering levels of insulin, one would make their metabolic system overall more efficient.

“You have people actually controlling their insulin and controlling the blood glucose, because glucose is floating around in the body,” Halverson said. “It is known to be reactive. It essentially causes trouble at all the proteins, all the cells of your body. And that’s why doctors want to bring the sugar down.”

Halverson said by bringing the glucose levels down, by burning fat instead of sugar in the bloodstream, the body will get more and more fat adapted. One’s body would not rely on sugar for energy, but rather on fat.

“If you think about it, there’s a lot more fat on your body than there is sugar, right?” Halverson said.

However, Felton, who runs the eating disorders clinic, said that is dangerous. If the body relies on fat for energy, it will draw its energy from the brain, which contains fat. The effects of long-term starvation would lead to the loss of gray matter in the brain—a major component of the central nervous system.

“The brain is malnourished...,” Felton said. “Using behaviors where your brain is not getting enough fuel. So if you’re purging that can also beat to it as well. It doesn’t necessarily have to be dependent on weight all the time. But if you’re not getting the proper nutrients your body needs, it’s really hard for your brain to be functioning in the way it’s supposed to.”

As a professional, Felton strongly advised against fasting as a way of life because of all the negative effects on the brain, heart and muscles.

Still, Roy pushes back at the criticism of fasting.

“It’s categorized as impossible, so either you’re a liar and you’re eating in secret, that’s the medical answer,” Roy said. “That you have doubts, I understand, it’s so unlikely. But after all, why not study the question? One liar, ten liars, a thousand liars, I don’t know how many there are in the world, but there are some relevant studies done out there. But the only proof is to experience it yourself.”

Roy paused and smiled.

“But, it’s true you have to be a little crazy to stop eating,” Roy laughed.

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