



LESSON 10: "VEGAN SURVIVAL GUIDE: HOW TO DEAL WITH NON-VEGANS AS A VEGAN"

When you go vegan, be prepared – it's going to bother A LOT of people. The trick is to learn how to react and interact in certain situations. Trust me, the more passionate and enthusiastic you are about this lifestyle when you get started, the more of your energy will be drained. To me, the things I started reading about in books like *Eating Animals* were so shocking that I honestly thought anyone who'd learn the truth would immediately go vegan. Therefore, social situations often turned into heated debates. Why is it that eating meat is such a sensitive topic and yet people seem to be so blind to what is really going on?

### **The real problem – Carnism**

Here's a concept you may have never heard of: *carnism*. This might sound a little confusing at first, but I think it will help you understand why it's so difficult to talk to some people about veganism, no matter your approach. The real problem lies much deeper, namely in the fact that most people don't even realize there is a problem. Vegetarians and vegans still represent a minority, while the majority of people won't see anything wrong with eating meat at all. They may even say that it is OK to consume the flesh of animals because that's just the way things are and the way things have always been. Here is what Melanie Joy, author of *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs and Wear Cows*, has to say about that: "It's just the way things are. Take a moment to consider this statement. Really think about it. We send one species to the butcher and give our love and kindness to another apparently for no reason other than because it's the way things are. When our attitudes and behaviors towards animals are so inconsistent, and this inconsistency is so unexamined, we can safely say we have been fed absurdities. It is absurd that we eat pigs and love dogs and don't even know why. Many of us spend long minutes in the aisle of the drugstore mulling over what toothpaste to buy. Yet most of us don't spend any time at all thinking about what species of animal we eat and why. Our choices as consumers drive an industry that kills ten billion animals per year in the United States alone. If we

choose to support this industry and the best reason we can come up with is because it's the way things are, clearly something is amiss. What could cause an entire society of people to check their thinking caps at the door—and to not even realize they're doing so? Though this question is quite complex, the answer is quite simple: carnism.”

Carnism is the invisible belief system according to which it is OK to eat some animals, while it is deemed widely unacceptable to consume others. Which animals are food and which aren't varies depending on the geographical region and the time period. A carnist is so deeply conditioned that even if they are confronted with the definition of carnism and the evidence of animal cruelty, they'll still have a hard time feeling compassion and realizing that there is something wrong with their behavior. They choose, instead, to believe the myths of meat, namely that eating it is natural, normal and necessary. While it can be argued that humans have consumed meat for long periods of time and it might therefore be considered “natural”, so have rape, cannibalism and murder, yet no one seems to be wishing for these to be continued. Eating meat is not in the least bit necessary for good health or survival. In fact, it causes harm to overall health and more and more scientists now acknowledge that a vegan diet is not only safe, but much healthier than one based in meat.

I know this may be a bit much to take in all at once, especially if veganism is still new to you, but I want you to be prepared for the kinds of situations you may be facing as it's not always easy to have to defend yourself over and over again. It'll be worth it though! Here are a few situations you may find yourself in and some tips on how to deal with them.

## Being vegan in a non vegan world

The percentage of vegans worldwide, while rapidly growing, is still minimal. That means that while you have made the realization that cutting out animal products is better for you (for whichever reason, the animals, your health or the environment), most people haven't. You'll notice that even though you are just sharing something about yourself, it is often perceived as a threat to those surrounding you. You'll say something like "I'm a vegan because I care about animals" and all the other person will hear is "You're not a vegan, so you don't care about animals!". While you're busy just doing what you're doing, to others, you're a constant reminder of what they aren't doing or should be doing. To test this theory, try the following, tell some people that you went vegan to improve your health and then tell a few other people that you went vegan because you think it is wrong to kill animals for food. You'll be astonished by the different reactions. I often experience that when people notice that I eat a lot of fruit. They're curious and want to know more about the health benefits of a plant-based diet. As soon as I bring up ethics, however, the same people can get very defensive.

The most important thing I've learned when it comes to those situations is to take a step back and try to see things from the other person's perspective. We eat meat because the society we live in makes us believe that it is natural, necessary and normal, not necessarily because we are evil beings. When I still ate meat, I had no idea that what I was doing could be considered a bad thing. Realizing the truth about the meat and dairy industries can therefore be very shocking and even traumatizing. You need to slowly reconnect the dots and unlearn so much of what you've been taught all your life. For some, this happens in an instant, but for others it may take a while longer and that's OK. As a vegan, what you can do is just continue spreading the word and talking about it. There'll be those who won't want to hear it, but to be honest, I don't necessarily want to hear about all of their stories either, but I listen

politely and patiently, so I don't think it's too much to ask for them to do the same. You will quickly notice whether or not someone is interested. Another important thing is not to expect instant results. You never know what an impact you may have on others, whether they show it or not. I think that it's comparable to planting seeds. Even if the person you talk to ridicules you or doesn't show any reaction at all, they're likely to continue thinking about your words later on and that's a small victory in itself.

Some say that you shouldn't practice proselytism or push your beliefs on others. I don't think that talking about what you're passionate about is a bad thing as long as you do it in a respectful manner, and using terms like "pushing your beliefs on others" or "proselytism" is meant to dismiss whatever you're saying without taking the context into consideration. Plus, if you don't talk to people about veganism for fear that there might be a few who don't want to hear it, you also miss out on opportunities to talk to people who are open to the message. I wish someone would have told me about veganism many, many years ago. Had I not been interested, I would have sacrificed three minutes of my life and then have been able to move on, but I probably would have been very interested and it could have changed my life so much sooner.

*“And on your analogy between food choices and one’s choice of faith, I’d like to point out just how vastly different is the choice to eat animal products from one’s choice of faith. Just believing in a faith or atheism is a personal decision that does not necessitate harm to others. Any belief system — secular or religious — can become either an impetus for living a compassionate life or justifying a violent way of life. Yet eating animal products always necessitates — at the very minimum — enslavement, violence and death to animals for food products we have no biological need for. We should categorically reject animal exploitation for all the same reasons we categorically oppose the same for humans.”*

– Robert Grillo (from [www.freefromharm.org](http://www.freefromharm.org))

If you see that someone is just trying to provoke you, feel free to simply move on or say whatever you want. I once had dinner with about five non vegans and one other vegan. They bombarded me with mostly rude comments and critical questions and I got very frustrated trying to make them see my point of view. There’s nothing I could have said to make it any better because they were just deliberately trying to provoke me. When they found out that my friend was a vegan too, they asked him “Why?” and he just said “It’s simple. To annoy people.” As they looked at him in confusion, he elaborated: “I thought of becoming a vegetarian, but that’s socially acceptable in so many places now, so I wanted to find something that would really annoy people: veganism.” The others had no idea what to respond to that and after a few awkward moments, they just changed the subject. Had I learned to do the same back then, it would have saved me a lot of energy. Of course, not every interaction will result in conflict. There are also plenty of people who are just curious about veganism and will ask you many questions about it.

### **Eating out as vegan (with or without friends)**

Eating out as a vegan can be pretty unpredictable. I've had some of the best vegan meals at non vegan restaurants and bad experiences in places that looked vegan friendly. A few factors come into play when eating out (especially with non vegan friends). One of them is the choice of restaurant. The easiest solution would be to find a vegan restaurant (you can find vegan and vegan friendly cafes and restaurants anywhere via the websites and apps [www.happycow.net](http://www.happycow.net) and [www.vegman.org](http://www.vegman.org)). If there aren't any vegan restaurants near you, you can find vegan options at almost any place (although they may not be on the menu and you'll have to ask the waiter or chef). So, in theory, even if your friends chose a steak house, you could still find something to eat. What often surprises me though is how forthcoming my friends are in those situations. Often, they will be the ones suggesting a place with more vegan options so as not to make me feel uncomfortable. Once you're at the restaurant, you can either explain to the waiters that you're a vegan or, if you're tired and impatient, just say you're a vegetarian who's allergic to eggs, dairy and honey. The phrase I use most often is "I don't eat any animal products, including fish, dairy, eggs and honey. Do you have any options for me?". I've eaten at many different restaurants since going vegan (almost all non vegan) and I have never been in a situation where the answer was no. Tip: if you can, call or e-mail the restaurant a day or two in advance. Chefs often love a challenge and if you give them enough time to prepare, chances are you will get a more creative and elaborate meal.

So, what about when someone invites you over to their place for dinner? So often, I hear people say that they don't really like meat and would love to be vegetarian or vegan but they wouldn't want to be impolite by imposing their culinary choices on their hosts. I don't know about you, but if a friend of mine hates carrots, the last thing I would want to do is make them feel like they have to eat carrots when they're at my place because I happen to like them (makes sense, doesn't it?). If the people

who are inviting me over for a meal don't know I'm vegan, I just say "Thank you for inviting me, I'd love to come. I just need to tell you that I don't eat any animal products/that I'm a vegan. But don't worry, I can bring my own dish." In 90% of cases, they tell me that it's not a problem and that they'll gladly prepare a vegan option (which I have learned to just accept and not feel guilty about. After all, it's not like I'm asking them to loan me a million dollars...). The other 10% are either a bit annoyed or have no idea how to prepare anything vegan, in which case I'm more than happy to bring my own dish and have them try it.

### **The undercover approach**

As soon as you go vegan, you'll be viewed as a self-proclaimed expert (on health, nutrition, the environment, biology, evolution, ethics, psychology and much more) by those who aren't vegan. That's not always a comfortable situation to be in, especially if you're one of those people who find the transition difficult. I often receive messages and comments from people who tell me they'd love to go vegan but they're afraid to fall off the wagon and have other people judge them. I knew someone who was in that very situation. He wanted to be a vegan, but at times he still had cravings for non vegan foods. The thought of being labeled and having everyone watch his every step put so much pressure on him that it almost made him no longer want to go vegan. What he did instead was kind of brilliant. He went vegan, but didn't tell anyone, not even his closest friends or family members, about his decision. And guess what? No one noticed. For months, he'd just choose vegan options without calling them that. If people did notice something, he would simply say that he didn't feel like eating meat that day or make up some other excuse. In the first five months of being an undercover vegan, he had meat twice and other animal by-products a handful of times. It was something he needed to do in the beginning to make it easier, but soon enough he noticed that he just didn't like or want these foods anymore and only then did he feel comfortable enough to tell people that he was a



vegan. My mom, who's in her 60s, went vegan shortly after I did and had to deal with a lot more criticism from people her age. So, on nights when she just wanted to be left alone and not be attacked, she also chose not to say she was a vegan. Once she prepared a vegan meal for 7 people without telling them the food was vegan. Everyone talked about how delicious it was, no one noticed the absence of meat, eggs and dairy.

### **It's the end result that matters most**

Ultimately, it's never fun to be told that what you're doing isn't great. It's not about what should work, but about what actually does work. Take it from someone who's spoken to a lot of people about veganism. Wouldn't it be great and easy if you could just tell someone "Eating meat is bad for everyone involved, you really shouldn't be doing it" and they would just listen and then immediately stop eating meat forever? Yeah, I wish. Most people, including me, are like big kids. We love to be encouraged for what we're doing right and aren't really fans of being told off for what we're doing wrong. When someone tells you that they significantly reduced their meat consumption, applauding them for it and encouraging them is going to be much more effective than criticizing them for not cutting it out completely. Like I mentioned above, some people just need a little more time than others and that's OK. There is a big debate in the vegan community between those who encourage so-called "baby steps" and those who think that only being 100% vegan is acceptable. I definitely think that no kind of animal exploitation is ever OK, just as no kind of human exploitation is ever OK. We need to distinguish between "baby steps" that encourage animal welfare as opposed to the abolition of animal exploitation altogether (such as "humane slaughter", "free range", "organic meat" etc.) and steps that ultimately lead to veganism. I agree that the first kind of "baby steps" are absolutely counterproductive since they send out the message that under some circumstances, it is fine to kill and eat animals and their by-products. To me, that

would be the equivalent of encouraging gentle human exploitation because it is too unrealistic to stop exploitation altogether. See why something like that would be sending out the wrong message? [Note: I used to draw a comparison between eating meat and specific kinds of human exploitation, which many vegans still do and which guarantees a shock factor. After much thought and countless discussions on the topic with both vegans and non-vegans, I've come to the conclusion, however, that since the main point of such comparisons is to equate meat-eaters with those who commit crimes against humans, there is a flaw in the argument. The comparison makes sense when its aim is to draw parallels between the victims and therefore call upon the reader's/listener's compassion to be extended from human victims to non-human victims. Realizing that animals feel pain and aren't so different from us may make us realize that they shouldn't be raised for meat. When the comparison targets those who commit the crimes, however, one very important aspect often seems to be overlooked. We live in a world where human exploitation is, for the most part, condemned and illegal. Animal exploitation, on the other hand, is the norm and if the animals are raised for food, legal. The person who eats meat therefore doesn't realize that they are committing what could be considered a moral or ethical crime. That is why informing people instead of accusing and judging them right away is so important.]

To briefly go back to the comparison between the victims, I know a lot of people have a problem with comparisons between animals and humans, but I think that's exactly why these comparisons are so necessary. For the most part, we were raised to be compassionate people, so cruelty to other human beings seems outrageous to us. At the same time, we've been brainwashed so as not to feel the same empathy for animals. However, with time that connection can be re-established, even if right now that may seem impossible. So, when I say I encourage even the tiniest step and applaud every effort, I mean those efforts that will eventually lead you to a vegan

lifestyle. I know from experience that the things we once thought were impossible to achieve can become very easy with time. Just because you can't do everything right now, that doesn't mean you should do nothing. If veganism seems like the most impossible task in the world to you, start with one vegan meal a day, or start by cutting out meat first, then dairy etc... It will become easier, I promise!

Here's another type of situation I quite frequently find myself in:

Meat-eater: Want some cheese?

Me: No, thanks, I don't eat cheese.

Meat-eater: Lactose intolerant?

Me: Vegan.

Meat-eater: But you still wear leather, don't you?

Me: No, actually I don't.

Meat-eater: Do you buy everything organic?

Me: I try to whenever possible.

Meat-eater: What about human exploitation? I'm sure you buy clothes from sweat shops.

Me: Actually, I don't anymore.

Meat-eater: The drink you're drinking right now, I'm sure someone was exploited for that.

Me: Maybe, I didn't check.

Meat-eater: Ha! See? You can't avoid exploitation altogether!

This is a conversation I actually had with someone a while ago and that even went a lot further. My point (and the reason I wanted to share this) is, there's no way we can all be 100% perfect and even as a vegan there will always be things you could do better. Vegans are often accused of feeling and acting superior and while we should definitely do everything it takes to get rid of every kind of animal exploitation, we should also meet people with patience, make them understand that we're not claiming to know it all and that there is always room for improvement.

Lastly, when you go vegan, you may feel very alone and misunderstood at times, especially if none of your friends or family members are vegan. This is where turning to the vegan community might help. There are many online groups and platforms where you can meet and/or ask fellow vegans for advice. You're not necessarily going to get along with someone just because they're vegan, but there is definitely an instant sense of community. You can also use Facebook groups, Instagram and Twitter to look for potlucks and meet-ups near where you live.

### **Vegan activism**

*"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do."*

– Edward Everett Hale

Once they've started feeling more or less comfortable with their new identity as a vegan, many people start asking themselves how involved they should get. Some fear that they will come across as too insistent and are afraid of ruining relationships with their loved ones, others just want to do anything they can in order to spread the message and there are even people who, while being passionate vegans, simply

don't want to spend the rest of their lives talking about nothing but veganism. Is promoting veganism a must? Personally, I would say that once you are aware of social injustices, it becomes an unspoken moral obligation to inform others about it. The way in which you do that, however, and to what extent, is totally up to you. Different approaches work with different kinds of people and that's why I think it is important not to expect all vegans to spread the message in the same way.

Let's take my example. A year before going vegan I watched an episode of the Oprah Winfrey show in which Kathy Freston helped Oprah and most of her staff during their one week vegan challenge. Kathy's tone is very encouraging, sweet and nice, she applauds every effort and it's fair to say that she's rather uplifting and motivating. Here's the problem though, while that approach works with a lot of people, the only feeling I was left with after watching the episode was 'hmm... interesting, I guess I could try it for a week'. I didn't feel any sense of urgency though and after my vegan week, I went straight back to eating meat without ever second-guessing myself. That doesn't mean that Kathy's approach doesn't work, on the contrary, I think it works very well for a lot of people, it simply didn't work for me, or at least not instantly. What did work were Jonathan Safran Foer's detailed facts mixed with Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin's "no bullshit" straightforward tone and the shocking quotes from Gail Eisnitz's *Slaughterhouse* they included in their book, *Skinny Bitch*. Had I watched them first, Gary Yourofsky's speech "The Best Speech You'll Ever Hear" and the documentary *Earthlings* would have done the trick as well.

Logically, that was the kind of approach I tried to imitate when I first became a vegan. I certainly didn't expect the defensive reactions and attacks I got in return. I argued with people constantly and felt emotionally drained. I then switched to a somewhat nicer and more encouraging approach (I would say a mix between the "in your face" and "encouraging and nice" approaches). What really changed things for

me was when I interrupted feeling frustrated about people just not getting it and started asking people *why* they were just not getting it. I approached some of my friends who, although they'd read the same books as me and watched the same documentaries, weren't vegan. The answers were honest and sometimes unexpected. From "I know and you're right, but I just can't get myself to care" to "I try to get it in my head, but right now it's still a reality that's far too removed from mine for me to actually grasp it", they helped me gain a better understanding for why we all have such different reactions.

Your activism can be as diverse as your personality allows for and as the people you're trying to reach. Just because you don't go out in the streets to protest doesn't mean you can't make a difference. You're a shy introvert, but you love to write? Start a blog. You like to be active and of help? Volunteer. Your passion is cooking? Make delicious vegan meals to show those around you how good vegan food is. You do want to go out and protest? Find or start a local outreach or activist group. Activism can take many forms, some of them more effective, but most of them helpful and necessary in their own way.

*"We can't plead ignorance, only indifference. Those alive today are the generations that came to know better. We have the burden and the opportunity of living in the moment when the critique of factory farming broke into the popular consciousness. We are the ones of whom it will be fairly asked, What did you do when you learned the truth about eating animals?"*

– Jonathan Safran Foer

[this lesson is adapted from my ebook *The Practical Vegan's* chapters "The Social Vegan" and "The Activist Vegan"]