

Surviving Your Lifestyle Change

How to maintain decorum without sacrificing your values

Ok, you've taken the leap. For good, personal reasons, you've decided to change your lifestyle and eating habits.

Whether environmental principles, ethical issues, health incentives, or a combination thereof convinced you, you've made a commitment that has your full attention and motivation. Not only will you pass on meat, chicken, fish, or any other type of critter flesh, but you've decided that your diet will no longer include dairy products, eggs, and honey. Nor will you willfully purchase any item that contains animal byproducts, whether it's toothpaste or perfume. (Because of the Mad Cow disease scare in Europe, China has removed the sale of all cosmetic that come from Europe and have animal byproducts in them. That's 99% of them.)

Perhaps you're one of the lucky one's and your family and friends are supportive of your lifestyle change. If so, consider yourself extremely fortunate and kiss each one individually.

If, however, you live with a family and interact with relatives who are less than enthusiastic about your new lifestyle, tighten up your bootlaces and get ready for a bumpy ride. Fortunately, the bumps can usually be worked out -- or worn down. And if those closest to you choke on your lifestyle change, you can still attain peaceful co-existence.

Keep a Sense of Humor

For family members who have the hardest time accepting your lifestyle change, you have become a sort of earthly alien. They don't quite see a green head with antennae, but I guarantee they see you a *little* differently now. All they know is they've known you all their lives, and you were

perfectly "normal" before you took up this crazy, extremist notion of not eating meat or consuming animal byproducts.

Alien or not, you're quite happy with your vegan choice, thank-you-very-much. And you can take comfort in the fact that your brethren are not quite as obscure as they used to be. According to a 1997 Roper Poll, they estimated that the number of vegans in the States was between half a million and two million. Today almost one out of ten people you meet are vegans. Check it out yourself, start asking people.

Still it's "normal" for family to be concerned about your decision, because most of them are not yet educated on the subject of veganism. Skepticism, bewilderment, frustration, fear, and even anger can surface from their ranks at any given moment. If daggers or similarly unpleasant verbal devices get pitched your way, polish your lighthearted disposition, and turn up the patience button. The peace path can be championed much more easily if at least one of you keeps their sense of humor. This is not necessarily easy to accomplish at first. You know your convictions are strong, but you may feel a little uneasy and defensive once you've been engaged in a line of discussion that turns out to be a tad more lively than you had anticipated.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Do yourself and your family members a big favor. Take a deep breath, look within, and declare yourself a non-preaching zone. One of the fastest and most annoying ways to turn people off is to rant and rave about the virtues of your new way of life. It's one thing to have fervor about what you believe. It's a whole different enchilada if you try to choke it down peoples' throats or cop an elitist attitude.

If you're tempted to get up on the vegan pulpit, think how you'd feel if a couple of family members resolved to convert you to their belief system by preaching to you until you saw the light (or at least until you saw red). You must have encountered well-meaning meat eaters who've expanded liberally on their concerns for your protein intake.

Don't reply in kind. Treat them the way you'd like to be treated. If they get haughty, patiently and kindly point out that **mutual respect would be appreciated**. You may be on different sides of the issue of meat consumption, but you're still family.

If your clan represents an "average" meat-eating family -- in which beef, chicken, or fish have been at the center of any food ritual get-together -- there's bound to be tension in incorporating this oddity (a.k.a., you) into the family way. I'd hedge my bets that the majority of your family members will come to respect your decision. Those who don't have made their own decision. *You* can still be respectful and simply avoid engaging in discussions that will drag you both into a lose-lose pit of aggravation.

Just the Facts, Ma'am

Ignorance of veganism by family members is not bliss. Prepare yourself mentally for the hundreds of questions that will flow to you from all sides of the *familia*. Parents, brothers and sisters, in-laws, cousins, nephews and nieces, aunts and uncles, grand folks, and other relatives you didn't even know you had will come forth as if attracted by the sweet sounds of the Pied Piper.

Some will wonder if it isn't just a phase you're going through. Others may be utterly skeptical of your motives. You may suddenly find yourself flailing in 101 questions that span the gamut of health, ethical, environmental, social, and human-centric views.

Oh, and did I mention the possibility of repetition? Yup, at times you might feel as the lead antagonist in a play that has you rehearsing the same lines *ad nauseum*, sometimes with the same cast of characters, other times with understudies or new actors.

Then there's the problem of sympathizers. Many will simply defend you against an unruly mob that hasn't come around to accepting your decision. It's nice to have folks pulling for you. A word of caution, however.

Amongst your allies, there will be those who will

actually gaze upon you as though you were a would-be deity. They'll marvel at your determination and proceed to ooze with praises and utterances that border on adoration. This may be followed by self-degrading commentary on the state of their weaknesses. And at times they may be inclined to throw themselves upon your mercy like sinners desperately seeking to confess their meaty transgressions. Needless to say, this predicament can be equally, if not perhaps intensely more uncomfortable than exchanging views with Bubba the T-bone king.

To protect yourself against this rampaging emotionalism, you'll want to be well educated on all aspects of veganism. You'll discover that the **"START"** 16 week educational and interactive program and meetings will offer you the extra perk of keeping the questions manageable and the curious with something substantial to chew on.

If nothing else invite them to attend and introductory meeting and let your area coordinator assist you.

You'll also want to make sure you have a good understanding of myths and misconceptions. Among my favorite in the bottomless repertoire are the following:

"Vegans couldn't possibly get sufficient protein in their diets!"

"Sure you can have this dish, hon. There's just a tiny bit of chicken broth."

"Dairy isn't an animal by-product."

Responses to statements like these and to hundreds more await in ***Diet for a New America***, by John Robbins. In my opinion, it's a video and book that no vegan should be without. Robbins, former heir-to-be of the Baskin-Robbins ice cream empire, decided early in his life that he couldn't take over the reins of his papa's ice cream dominion in good conscience. He declined every penny from his inheritance and turned instead to a peaceful path of veganism through research, writing, and speaking about the things he learned and uncovered. Earth Save (www.earthsave.org),

Robbins' brainchild, offers excellent and up-to-date information on numerous veggie issues.

When family asks you questions, openly share the facts as you know them. At the same time, don't be surprised if the most intrigued relative asks you to halt on the spot. I've been asked many times to share my insight about the U.S. chicken husbandry industry, and four out of five times I've been asked to stop after revealing a few details about the housing conditions of hens and the fates of male baby chicks.

In my experience, the best policy when dealing with skeptics is to offer them facts that they can verify in a number of places. What they do with this information is as personal as what you do with yours.

Tips of the Trade

So can little old you keep the masses in check? Sure you can -- by taking one day at a time. It may sound facile, but in helping your family adjust to the new you, it makes good sense.

For example, when you go over to Aunt Bertha's for the obligatory annual picnic, do yourself a big favor. **BYOV** (that's bring-your-own-veggie-dish). Whip out a simple vegan treat, bring it with you (be sure to scoop out a little, as an example to others), and watch it disappear. If your dish goes over, consider presenting an interested relative with **"START's"** vegan cookbook. The offense factor of such a gift is nearly zilch.

If you're the main cook in the family, announce cheerfully to your loved ones that you'll happily continue performing the duties of chef extraordinaire...sans meat. You'll be surprised just how welcome your new concoctions will be -- after a few moans and a couple of forkfuls. But if someone else wants to bring a meat-based dish, let them. Remember: you are setting an example of mutual respect.

If your family gives you the opportunity to share your views, they'll soon see that, for you, embracing veganism isn't about popularity or fad. It's about who you've become and what feels

right. Family may not agree with your choice, but most will respect it eventually. If they don't, well, it's not worth haggling over personal decisions that are just that -- personal.

You might consider be well-stocked with humor, respect, education, and patience, as well as healthy, organic munchies. And never forget to do as that wise bumper sticker counsels us: **"Eat dessert first. Life's uncertain."**

This article was originally written by Ana Arias Terry and slightly modified to fit the "START" Program.

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