

Ten Life Lessons from Longtime Vegans

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A couple of weeks ago, I posted a question to my Facebook friends and got far more responses than I expected. Usually when a thread has more than 250 comments, it means that people are fussin' and feudin' with each other (why did I suddenly turn into Yosemite Sam? I have no idea...) but it wasn't like that this time. People just had a lot of thoughts to share. Here was the (slightly edited) question I posed:

"I'm curious: for those who have been vegan for more than five years, what factors do you attribute to your longevity as a vegan? There are many things that tempt people away from veganism, from a desire to fit in better to simply missing some things you used to eat, and we know that the rate of defection from veganism is quite high. What have you done or what have you plugged into to make veganism work for you? In other words, what do you attribute to your success as a long-term vegan? Thank you!"

Even though this is far from a scientifically rigorous survey and a fairly small sample, I think the resulting responses offered a fascinating lens into what makes a successful long-term vegan. I am used to being pretty blown away by the depth and insight of my Facebook friends but this time, I was almost overwhelmed by both the deluge of responses as well of the generosity of spirit reflected in them. From this simple question, I got a rich supply of answers about the qualities that are both common and unique to long-term vegans. Curious about what may be part of the successful long-term vegans composite? I have collated my most frequent responses in order of how common the answer was below.

Fascinating stuff. Here's how it broke down...

1. Compassion for Animals

Far and away, this was the most commonly cited reason for staying vegan: once one's eyes were open to animal suffering, it was impossible to go back to not knowing and when one wavered, remembering the core ethical basis was key for sticking with it. As Kathleen F. said, "I've been vegan for seven years. I just think of the animals and all the pain and suffering they endure. My pleasure is not worth their suffering."

Lisa H. said something I heard in different iterations throughout the thread: "I could never be vegan for my health. For the environment I couldn't be 100% vegan. Maybe 75-90% at the most. For the animals (farmed and wild), I'm as 100% vegan as it's possible to be." The ethical foundation was what made it a more accessible, solid commitment when the other motivations were too abstract or not deeply felt enough.

Pam W. said, "I've been vegan for 12 years and I fully attribute it to my core value that it is wrong to cause or participate in the infliction of suffering and exploitation. Animal-derived foods are the product of exploitation in which animals necessarily suffer (mamas having their babies taken away, hens bred to lay eggs at an unnaturally accelerated rate leading to osteoporosis and other physical ailments, the stress of slaughter transport, and the terror of the slaughterhouse). I have no desire for food that is made of violence and terror. I don't see it as a sacrifice because the food in question is revolting to me."

I would say that 95% of the responses were a variation on this theme, though many also included some of the other motivations and reasons.

2. Vegan Community

Whether introvert, extrovert, or somewhere in between, the human species hungers for understanding and connection. So many of us do not have vegan partners or extended families but even if we do, a larger supportive community provides a vital sense of belonging and a safe place to land as we navigate this world that is often diametrically opposed to vegan values. A supportive community was mentioned second most often as an essential component of integrating a successful, long-term vegan practice. "I would recommend finding a community in person or online (but choose wisely because some can be very draining and counterproductive)..." said Molly D. Wise words: While seeking community, remember that not all are created alike and they will not all meet your needs or suit you.

"Definitely connecting with people who understand and accept veganism. Vida Vegan Con started within my first few years of being vegan, which made ALL the difference. I made SO many amazing connections and friendships that still persist today. Knowing I'm not alone in caring so deeply about the animals and the environment," said Katie L.

Also remember that community can be in person and online; it can be three people or 1,000 people. Community is what gives you a sense of shared values, acceptance and being among those who understand you. A community that is healthy for you should make you feel inspired, accepted and stronger. If a community drains you, look elsewhere. Remember, too, that while in-person communities are ideal, virtual communities can also contribute a lot to your thriving as a vegan.

3. An Indifference to Fitting in (or Stubbornness)

I have an untested theory that one of the most common denominators among those who are successful long-term vegans is that we tend to be people who care less about fitting in and don't easily succumb to social pressure or feel the need to conform to the status quo. Not surprising to me, this emerged as one of the top three recommendations for successful long-term vegan integration. By the same token, a common refrain I hear from those who have quit is being vegan was hard for them to adapt to socially. Maybe their family made them feel guilty about not participating in certain traditions; perhaps their friends made them feel excluded; maybe they felt self-conscious making dietary requests when ordering meals. To those who are able to successfully navigate the terrain, these pressures are far less important than remaining true to their values.

As Linda R. said, "I have always been the odd person out, and that has often left me struggling to find a way in until I became vegan. Now I don't want a way in because a conventional life of using animals and turning my back on their suffering isn't something I can abide." As another friend commented, "Stubbornness: I'll be damned if I let someone say 'I told you so' (this is the smallest part, but it did help me in the beginning)." Said Ashley D., "Dealing with people (and struggling to fit in) is probably the biggest challenge of going vegan. Luckily, I'm immune to social pressure. Being diplomatic toward those who are participating in harming animals has been the hardest part. I'm very logical, and ethics come first."

4. The Expanding Variety and Increased Access to Quality Vegan Food

As the world around us has begun to meet the expanding demands for plant-based food and improved offerings are available to consumers, it's made it easier to be vegan in the world. This was the fourth most common factor attributed to one's success as a long-term vegan. As one friend wrote, "The surge in awareness has been so much more tangible in the last 10 years alone, and the varieties of cheeses, drinks, egg-type foods, protein foods creativity just make it - I'd say - impossible to go back to not being a vegan...." There are fewer valid excuses for falling off the path when those flavor profiles and textures are not only accessible to us but getting more delicious all the time.

5. Learning How to Cook

For many people, learning how to cook - perhaps for the first time in their lives, perhaps just a few meals - is a necessary component of integrating veganism successfully. When you learn the basics of cooking for yourself, not only will you save money, you can develop the skills for recreating the meals you once enjoyed. "Viewing *Earthlings* was the game-changer, but learning how to cook for myself

made it stick. Ten years ago I was a broke grad student and the few veg-friendly restaurants in town made eating out impractical," said one friend. For another, "A lot of cooking, especially baking. Knowing now where to buy ready made items makes it easier too," was what made all the difference.

6. Health Benefits

People who come into veganism through the door of health may have a stronger foundation when they learn the compelling ethical reasons but the health benefits can be motivating by themselves. Plant-based diets are not a magic bullet but there can be real health boons and it is a foot-in-the-door for those seeking their physical advantages. As Tina L. said, "Well...my health has improved dramatically for one thing. Going back to eating animals or their byproduct in the form of dairy would also bring back my chronic sinus infections, headaches, nasal mucus overload, indigestion, and high cholesterol. On a more serious level, I'd probably have full blown Type 2 diabetes like my father by now."

Another friend wrote, "I will be 36 next week and I already know five or six high school classmates who dropped dead due to heart issues. I have one high school classmate who nearly died of a heart attack a couple years ago and another one who was literally told by his doctor to go vegan because he is a ticking time bomb based on his cholesterol numbers. Maybe my motivation is pretty self-centered but it does the trick."

7. Connecting their Veganism to a Bigger Picture

Another frequently cited reason for sticking with veganism among the people I asked is that their vegan practice is connected to a larger worldview that is meaningful to them. Said one, "I mean yes, of course having the ability to empathize with animals is a huge contributing factor, but I also think that keeping oneself informed about what goes on in animal use industries and how that also connects to impacts on humanity is a big reason in my staying vegan."

As Audrey M. succinctly put it, "It's easy when you make it about something bigger than yourself. Trust me, I have no willpower for anything." Yet another friend took a broader view: "My commitment to veganism has deepened as my awareness of [intersectionality](#) (originally developed by Kimberle Crenshaw) has grown. At first, I was vegan for the animals, then the environment. Then my compassion grew to include the people who suffer under our industrialized, power-over food system. I learn a lot from vegans of color about this, and I'm seeing how anti-racist work and animal rights work are often enmeshed."

8. A Radical Shift in Perception: Animals Are Not Seen as Food, Clothing, Etc. Anymore

I heard this one a lot and it's not surprising. There is a shift in perception that occurs when you go vegan and if you've been vegan long enough, it seems to change one's perspective unalterably. I remember talking to another friend about raising our vegan-from-birth children. She remarked that her son never had a tantrum when he wasn't allowed non-vegan samples at the grocery store. It was the same with my son. We speculated that perhaps even as toddlers, when it was explained that these samples had animals or animal products in them, they were no longer perceived as "food." They would as soon eat the rocks.

This perspective shift was reflected in quite a few comments. "I don't think of animals as food anymore and that keeps me from going back to eating them," said Grace K. Another friend said, "When I see meat or other animal products, I don't see food. I see the carcass or secretions of a tortured animal. The same goes for entertainment, clothing, etc. I don't see just clothes, or just cute animals behind bars. I see miserable animals who never should have been exploited or killed. As the one saying goes, it's easy to be vegan when you focus on the victims instead of yourself." As Megan D. said, "Vegan 11 years. I see animal products as non-food. The same way I'd look at like, a desk. It's not food. It's not clothing."

9. Connecting with Rescued Animals at Sanctuaries

Some people responded that interacting with animals who live at sanctuaries has helped people to feel a sense of hope and also connect more deeply with their convictions about compassionate living. Said Stephanie H., "I also wanted to add that meeting the animals, especially happy ones at sanctuaries, getting to know them and their personalities - and then contrasting that with seeing the scared, miserable ones in the agriculture industry - that really leaves an impression. Non-vegans should be encouraged to go to sanctuaries and connect with the animals so they can see how amazing they are when they are happy and in a safe place."

10. Find Podcasts, Bloggers and Mentors as Well as Movies that Inspire You

Quite a few respondents said that finding vegan podcasts, bloggers and mentors kept them going during the often awkward and challenging transitional time and an equal amount also have found films to be galvanizing. Said one, "I also had more conviction - I listened to [Vegetarian Food for Thought](#) a lot right as I transitioned so that was helpful since I have a lot of respect for Colleen." Said Scott N., "I originally went vegan for health reasons, and ended up staying vegan for ethical reasons after watching all of the videos, such as *Earthlings*, *Vegucated*, and *Cowspiracy*."

As reflected in the thread, films can be a double-edged sword: some find that films worked to deepen their conviction and others find films, especially the more graphic ones, to be sapping of their strength. "I always felt like I *had* to force myself to be a witness to these things out of respect for the animals. I wound up bringing my resulting feelings to a therapist. There are some images and moments permanently stuck in my head now that in retrospect I didn't need to see in order to live this life with conviction. It has absolutely weakened me. Still grappling with it," said one friend. The bottom line here is that films can be very visceral and potent, especially the ones that are graphic: choose wisely and respect your limits with it.

Ask yourself: "What do you think contributes to one's longevity as a vegan?"