



By Eve Menezes Cunningham

Veganuary

A vegan is someone who avoids any kind of animal product in food or clothing or anything else. This includes dairy, eggs, honey, wool, silk and of course meat, fish and leather.

I first went vegetarian aged 11 or 12 and then back and forth until I went vegan in July 2018. My timing was almost perfect with the explosion of vegan deliciousness so freely available.

A lot of loved ones feel sorry for me, but I don't feel deprived at all. I feel as if my values are aligned with my behaviour. While I miss certain foods (Wotsits! Chicken! Honey!), it feels freeing. Being vegan not only helps me feel less guilty about animal exploitation but is better for the planet and my health.

Even if I didn't live so rurally, I'd be making it clear that my choice is exactly that. *My choice.* Just as I don't like anyone attempting to bulldoze me with their opinion that I 'should' be eating meat, dairy or, as one alleged vegan recently attempted, honey 'for the bees', I have little patience for vegans attempting to impose their choices on others.

While I'm involved in climate change actions, I recoil from vegan activism. My farmer neighbours are simply trying to keep food on their tables and roofs over their heads. I go with positive

reinforcement, expressing gratitude where vegan options are available and delicious.

I also appreciate what vegan activists do as it breaks my heart to think about the reality. With that in mind, I spoke to Gemma Harley, an animal rights advocate, NLP master practitioner, hypnotherapist and mBIT coach.

Vegan since December 2018, Gemma's been vegetarian for 25 years. 'For me, it is living by the principle of kindness to all living beings, regardless of species. This means aiming to make lifestyle choices that cause the least amount of harm possible.

'I am using my consumer power to take back some of the control of what I want to see in the world. I use my money as a vote and try to cast my vote towards as many things as possible that are aligned with my ethics, values and beliefs. If I don't do anything, then who will?

'Research into the psychology of eating meat, and knowing that I cannot end the suffering endured by these incredible beings alone, shifted me from being neutral to raising awareness and advocating for social change. My stance is that we are conditioned to partake in cruelty without our



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awareness and therefore it isn't a free choice. Awareness means others can make an informed choice.

'It really is just widening our circle of compassion to include all life. The vegans I've spoken to didn't stop eating meat, cheese, eggs etc. because they didn't like the taste. They connected with the victims behind the products and learnt about the suffering endured behind the smoke screen. They connected with the similarities, not the differences, between us and animals.

'I love how incredibly freeing it feels to align my actions with my beliefs of being an animal lover and being against animal cruelty. Before I just hadn't considered that any of my actions contributed towards the very things I was against. I love that it has helped me look beyond myself and I am now far more curious about the processes behind what I choose to buy and consume. I am also clear that perfection doesn't exist and that being vegan is in no way the totality of non-violence but rather a step towards it.

'When the opportunity presents itself, I drop in some of the facts I've learnt to dispel some myths, I use stories and engage in conversation using open questions to better understand what stops others from going vegan.

'My biggest success has been firstly my family, as some of them are gradually transitioning towards a vegan lifestyle. I have also had several Facebook connections message me to tell me they are transitioning to veganism because of what they've discovered.

'I have found that many people, whilst initially curious, often don't want to connect to the reality that what they're eating was in fact a living, breathing being. I have previously had some people say, "Please stop, you will turn me vegan!"

'I saw their visible discomfort when comprehending the truth of the food they consume. I am always learning from every interaction and I have changed my approach to encourage people to do their own research.

'Understanding the communication model and the role of beliefs, values and filters has really helped me to understand how we are in the place we are when it comes to the way we view certain animals. I use NLP and mBIT tools and techniques to help better understand others and provide an alternative perspective.

'I've also found it interesting that much like the way NLP is

viewed by those who don't understand, so is veganism – until you experience it, it's much more challenging to see its worth.

'I've been vegetarian since the age of 10 and cheese was a staple. I ate cheese at every opportunity. I met a vegan and found myself automatically trying to justify why I wasn't a vegan and that was that I loved the taste of cheese and couldn't imagine my life without it.

'Due to my NLP training I easily notice non-verbal communication and the look on this person's face (although not intentional) was one of disgust. I went away curious as to why someone would have such an extreme reaction to me saying that I liked the taste of cheese. I did my own research and realised I could no longer contribute towards this.

'So I went vegan, I ditched dairy and eggs straight away and then gradually began to change the products I use. I was already against racing, riding, zoos etc. so I didn't need to change anything there.

'What was extremely interesting is when I realised that I already had knowledge of some of the information about these industries. I had simply chosen to bury it (you know delete and distort!) so that I could continue enjoying cheese, guilt free.

'I have no regrets and I am just grateful that I was eventually able to connect with my own cognitive dissonance.'

While Gemma and I still disagree about actual vegan advocacy, I love her evolving approach of encouraging people to do their own research.

At the time of writing, I have loved ones staying with me. We all hear the distressed cow sounds as the calves are taken for weaning and I'm doing my best not to talk about how sad they sound. My loved ones eat meat, honey, eggs and dairy (so I have a lot of temptation around me at the moment) but I think my approach of acceptance has allowed *them* to start asking questions of the farmers. Younger me would have been quite emotional about it but even though I love being vegan, I am aware that anyone who had attempted to convert me before I was ready to make that decision myself would have irritated me a lot. I want people to accept my choices, so I do my best to understand and accept theirs. ■

Eve Menezes Cunningham is the author of *365 Ways to Feel Better*. She runs Feel Better Every Day offering self-care coaching, therapy, supervision, NLP, EFT, yoga and more. See selfcarecoaching.net.