

Vegetarianism and Disordered Eating

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Whether vegetarian for health, religion or for ethics, research exists about the benefits of a plant-based diet. Recent research also shows that a growing number of people, especially women in their late teens, are adopting vegetarian and vegan diets in order to lose weight, maintain low body weight, and mask restrictive eating patterns.

A study from the University of Minnesota¹ found teen vegetarians are more likely to have eating disorders than non-vegetarians. In this study, vegetarians were more likely to contemplate and attempt suicide, and vegetarian males were noted as an especially high risk group for unhealthy weight control practices. The research indicated that teens who were already susceptible to emotional difficulties were drawn to vegetarianism as a means to lose weight and fit in, but that vegetarianism itself had no correlation with emotional difficulties. In another study, conducted at California State University-Northridge², researchers found college women who claimed to be vegetarians had a significantly greater risk of developing eating disorders than their meat-eating peers. The overlap between eating disorders and vegetarianism occurs because vegetarianism is a way for men and women to openly control their food choices, without attracting negative attention to their behaviour. Also, many believe that restricting meat from their diet will lead to weight loss, believes Michelle Morand, founder of The CEDRIC Centre, an eating disorder counselling centre in Victoria, B.C.

“Family, friends, clinicians, and vegetarians themselves, need to know that the potential exists for vegetarianism and veganism to mask an eating disorder,” Morand said. This doesn’t mean vegetarianism is the cause of an eating disorder, or that people shouldn’t adopt a vegetarian lifestyle, but it may be a way for the individual who is struggling with food and weight issues to justify her or his restrictive eating behaviours. Carol Tickner, R.D. Nutrition Therapist with the Eating Disorders Program in the Capital Region, cites two possibilities for the increase in popularity of vegetarianism. “Vegetarianism has been promoted as a healthy way of managing weight. With weight being such a focus in our society, it makes sense to some as a way of managing weight, and health, at the same time,” she says. “For those teenagers who have disordered eating tendencies, becoming vegetarian can be a way of trying to respond to a changing body, (weight gain due to puberty), in a healthy way, vs. dieting like their friends.” However, this is just dieting for weight-loss in another form.

In many ways, beliefs about animal protein in diets versus plant-only diets are similar to the messages we hear about physical appearance in North American culture. In both cases, we are given conflicting messages. In one breath we’re admonished *not to judge a*

book by its cover, and in the next, *we can never be too rich or too thin*. In a similar vein, we say one thing about the humane treatment of animals, and treat our pets as mini-humans, but frequently farm animals for food under dreadful conditions. This cultural hypocrisy is increasingly in the media with stories of unsanitary conditions and contamination of foods. And, at this stage in their lives, young adults are acutely aware of societal doubletalk.

“Teenagers are searching for meaning and a way of being in the world that expresses their individuality. This is exactly what they are meant to do at this stage in development.” says Morand. “They’re in the process of individuation, separating from their parents, developing and testing their own value systems, and learning about who they are. By choosing a plant-based diet, they’re choosing to exist on the planet in a different way than most of their parents’ generation. For many teenagers, becoming a vegetarian may be the first informed, adult decision they make.”

Why go veggie?

Vegetarian diets can reduce risk from certain cancers by up to 40%, decrease the possibility of heart disease by over 30%, and lower high blood pressure, and cholesterol levels³. A plant-based diet can also be environmentally friendly. By eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, less packaging and processing is needed. On the other hand, as popularity for vegetarian diets increases, more packaged foods are available to supplement and complement the traditional vegetarian diet, which means more waste from packaging.

Some religions advocate a vegetarian lifestyle. Some people choose a vegetarian diet over an omnivorous one out of ethical concerns for animals. Many vegetarians are concerned about the widespread use of factory farming, growth hormones, and abuse of animals designated for human consumption. It is also cheaper to consume a vegetarian diet than to include animal products in one’s shopping basket.

“There is an increased societal awareness about where our food comes from and more people taking an interest in how animals are treated. This was especially brought to the forefront last year with mad cow disease and the Asian flu,” says Tickner. In addition to eschewing meat and animal by-products in their diets, a large number of vegetarians purchase animal friendly cosmetics, and cleaning products that haven’t been tested on animals, as well as alternative sources for leather, silk and wool products.

The incredible lightness of being vegetarian

Adherents of a vegetarian lifestyle have always touted the health benefits, and in recent years, as coverage of the obesity crisis continues to influence public policy, some

organizations have linked a plant-based diet with slenderness. Given our cultural preference and pressure around thinness, (which is seen as an indication of a person's worthiness in North American culture), it seems inevitable that vegetarianism would be adopted as yet another tool in the quest for weight loss.

In his book, *The Obesity Myth*, author Paul Campos argues that we use body weight as an indication of "moral fitness". Culturally, we idealize people who have managed to sublimate their appetites and become, or remain, slender. In this puritanical atmosphere, fatness isn't just a body type description, but an alleged indication of how a person really is: undisciplined, stupid, and unworthy. Fatness is one of the last socially sanctioned forms of discrimination in our culture, and avoiding fatness is often used as an added allure to becoming vegetarian.

On vegetarian websites, in magazines and books, weight loss is often included as a benefit of switching to a plant-based diet.

PETA, (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), in particular, correlates a vegetarian diet with being thin. Recent advertising campaigns have included "jokes" about fat passengers needing two airline seats as a reason to go vegetarian, and equating letting children eat meat to child abuse.

While PETA is notorious for its overstated style of linking health, body weight, and vegetarianism, most other groups are subtler. But the connection between health and weight continues to thrive in the minds of many people. In fact, for many, health and thinness are synonymous.

The reality is, it's possible to be a healthy, happy person, at any size, vegetarian or not. And creating false categories for health based on body size is one way in which the health and weight loss industry overlap, and reap sizable profits. A person's weight will tend to fall into a certain range that their body is happiest and healthiest at, called our "set point" or "natural" weight, and will tend to want to return to this weight range despite strict calorie restriction or excessive exercise. Many other factors affect a person's weight, not only the type of food they eat, but the quantity of food they eat, the amount of activity they get, and their genetics.

A healthy vegetarian, Carol Tickner explains, is someone who "takes the time to ensure that they are getting all the nutrients their body needs. This person would be eating vegetarian sources of protein at all meals and making sure they find alternate sources of protein, which is required to maintain a healthy metabolism, repair and build new tissue, and boost immunity, calcium, iron, zinc, and Vitamin D & B12 as well as omega-3 fatty acids." Morand adds, "To me, a healthy vegetarian is someone at peace with their decision to avoid animal products, and is committed to enjoying foods that nurture their bodies and spirits. A healthy person is someone who has energy, listens to his or her body, and feeds it accordingly."

Feeding the soul

Morand has worked with many young women over the years who have used vegetarianism to cloak an eating disorder. “Typically, they don’t want to worry people in their lives, and saying they can’t eat something because of their moral commitment to vegetarianism is a safe way to avoid conflict or suspicion, especially since many people aren’t educated on the topic. Some are in denial about their behavior, or if they have just begun down the path of disordered eating, they are still in that period where they believe they are “benefiting” from the behavior. They may be getting positive attention and reinforcement from their family and peers for their commitment and/or weight loss.” In any case, Morand continues, “it’s important to remember that the eating disorder, whether masked by vegetarianism or not, is a coping mechanism, and the person struggling has adopted it to camouflage other, more painful issues in their lives. They aren’t lying or manipulating, they’re just trying to cope in the best way they know how.”

It isn’t necessary to give up vegetarianism in order to recover from an eating disorder. However, an honest exploration of the motivations behind the choice to cut animal products from one’s diet is fundamental to the recovery process. If someone is truly dedicated to a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle for ethical reasons, then he/she has to be true to themselves and honor their decision. But, if the original impetus was weight loss or gaining a sense of control over their relationship with food, the greatest gift that they can give to themselves is to authentically explore what may be currently taking place in their lives, or what may have occurred in the past, to lead them to feel that they lack control to the extent that they are seeking it in their relationship with food. Then they are in a position to solve the real problem, and no longer expend their energy trying to control the symptom.

References

¹ Neumark-Sztainer D., et al. 1997. Adolescent vegetarians: A behavioral profile of a school-based population in Minnesota. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 151(8): 833-838.

² Klop, Sheree, et al. 2003. Self-reported vegetarianism may be a marker for college women at risk for disordered eating. *Archives of Journal of American Dietetic Association*, 103:745-747.

³ www.vegsoc.org/health

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