

GOING VEGAN, ONE STEP AT A TIME

Want to help someone go vegan?
Here's how to make yourself into
a useful coach



Positive change coach Mia Forbes Pirie has met a lot of people who want to go vegan. 'When I go out to dinner, the topic comes up a lot. Someone at the table will look at what I'm eating and say that they'd like to make a change or eat less meat, but it just doesn't suit their lifestyle. It's too hard. Sometimes they look quite sad about it. One woman seemed particularly upset about her decision to raise her children eating meat, to "keep their options open". It helps to be a good listener, and to try to understand why they're bringing this to the table before you jump in.

I'm a health coach, and I enjoy working with people to create intelligent change (*FoodForTheJourney.com*). The first question my clients often ask is, 'How?' Yet my first question for them is, 'Why?' I'm not asking that question to slow them down or take the wind out of their sails, but I want them to succeed. To do that, their motivation and values must be lined up. If not, there may be a brief shift, but long-term they'll likely fail. The 'why?' informs everything else. It leads to the 'what?' and the 'how?'

Finding the 'why'

To succeed in transitioning to veganism – or any lifestyle choice for that matter – you need to be aligned with your commitment. That's why I'm careful what I commit to, and I ask my clients to be too. When we continually make and break our own promises, we stop trusting ourselves. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as we repeatedly try and repeatedly fail. Our self-esteem suffers. Goals need to be achievable and meaningful. Small successes, consistently won, build self-esteem, trust and create real change.

Finding your true motivation means digging deeper and asking 'why?' a few more times. Keep asking until you strike gold. For example, people sometimes say they want to lose weight. When asked why, the first reason may be aesthetic or a health goal – or a combination of both. If you ask why a few more times, you get to the real reason: 'I want to feel free and comfortable in my body', 'I want to see my children grow up'. Or as a client recently told me, 'I decided to choose life'.

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Taking steps

There are as many 'hows' as there are people and lifestyles. The question is, what can your friend realistically achieve and fit into his or her lifestyle and life circumstances? Get them to think carefully about what's workable.

I've identified four broad categories of 'how' based on personality type and motivation:

- **The deep diver.** Deep divers are passionate, enthusiastic and

clear that this is a big priority in their life. They want to jump in at the deep end, and are willing to go all out. *Your advice:* Clear out your kitchen cupboards, go shopping, just do it – it's time for a change!

- **The toe dipper.** At the other end of the spectrum, the toe dipper is curious about making a change but not ready to commit yet. That's okay. *Your advice:* Introduce little pockets of veganism into your life. Try a vegan meal a day, a vegan day a week, or maybe going vegan for a week using a programme like the Vegan Society's seven-day pledge.
- **The slow burner.** Slow burners know where they want to end up, but are not in any rush. They've seen fads come and go, and the devastating effects of yo-yo dieting. They know that habits take a while to change and integrate into life. *Your advice:* Slow burners genuinely want to make the change – and make it stick. They don't need instant gratification or a badge, so suggest two or three achievable changes a week, for example replacing milk with a non-dairy alternative, and trying a new vegan recipe to replace a staple. They should find that the gradual change happens almost effortlessly and will be fully integrated into their lives.
- **The intrepid explorer** – Intuitive and willing to go in any direction, these people are ready to experiment. Intrepid explorers are used to listening to their own inner voices, and have often learned from experience that doing what doesn't feel right hurts. *Your advice:* Although they appear to be self-motivated and independent, they will often be listening carefully for advice and looking for clues. They'll be open to some life-changing revelations but not necessarily ready to jump when you say jump. They'll move away from animal-based products at their own pace, one step at a time, doing what feels right, learning and exploring as they go. Sharing books, web links and some carefully chosen animal welfare or healthy living films can work wonders.

It's fun to try to work out where your friend fits within these categories – they may have a personality that has aspects of more than one of these broad types. A good way to tackle this is to ask them whether they've successfully made a change in one of these ways in the past.

Changing a habit takes at least three weeks to stick, and whichever method you're using, your friend will benefit from two kinds of support:

Solid facts

It's not too hard to work out what you can and can't eat, as a vegan, but newcomers may be very concerned about getting the right nutrition from non-animal sources. They may not know things you take for granted, like where to buy food, how to cook delicious vegan meals, what to look for when they eat out and the best local eateries to visit. As well as offering your own advice (which may or may not sit well with your friend's chosen lifestyle), it's worth signposting them to some online resources. The Vegan Society has a well thought-out 30-day pledge programme with an email a day covering topics including nutrition, where to find what you need, as well as social and relational aspects. The Vegetarian Society's Cordon Vert Cookery School offers affordable one-day courses tailored to meet the needs of new and aspiring vegans, and loads of free vegan recipes online. And Veganuary has a very active online forum where your friend can learn more about shopping, tasty vegan foods and going the whole way with the vegan lifestyle by ditching cosmetics, toiletries and clothes that contain animal products.

A champion

It could be you, but might be an independent health coach or a local meet-up group. It really helps if the person making the change can ask

questions without fear of being laughed at or told off – which happens all too often on some of the shoutier vegan forums. Their champion doesn't even have to be a vegan as long as they are prepared to accept the choice and support it all the way.

Eating is personal. Changing the way you eat is personal. It's a big deal. Whether you're wanting to make a change yourself or help someone else, the one thing I can't emphasise enough is: be kind. Be forgiving, and be healthy. It also helps to be open, curious and to make it fun! Good luck with spreading the vegan message!

Vegans sometimes get a bad reputation for pushing their views on others, so here are Mia's tips to help you understand different motivations for making the change, so that you can make valuable contributions (without being pushy!).

- 1 Make it about them, not you. Don't push your views on them. Help them to find out what they want. You can't force someone else to change, no matter how right you may think you are.
- 2 Don't give unsolicited advice. It can be tempting, I know. Most of us love telling other people what to do, but let's be honest, we hate being told what to do ourselves. Wait to be asked.
- 3 Ask. If you have advice to give, but you're not sure whether it's welcome, ask. For example: 'If you say you're interested in eating less meat, I have a few thoughts that could help. Would you like to hear them?' Be willing to take no for an answer.
- 4 Respect their choice. They are competent and capable of making their own decisions – whether or not you agree.
- 5 Be humble. Even if you disagree with their view, you may learn something from them. Take the time to find out. Maybe there's an emotional block or a misapprehension that you can work through together.
- 6 Take their concerns seriously. You may not share their concerns or reservations but take them seriously and be respectful. Poking fun or being scathing will get both of you nowhere.
- 7 Be willing to talk about you. Be willing to share your own experience if asked, but be aware that just because something worked for you, it doesn't mean it will work for them.
- 8 Keep it light. Unless it's really clear that someone wants a deep conversation about veganism, lighten up.
- 9 Play to your strengths. If you're vegan, chances are you have quite a bit of compassion, empathy and sensitivity. Put those qualities to good use and add a dollop of patience.
- 10 Be inspiring. As Gandhi said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world'. Live your values and show people how it can be done through your actions. Actions really do speak louder than words.