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# Vystopia: can leading a vegan lifestyle make you depressed?

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Should vegans just 'lighten up'? CREDIT: GETTY

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**W**hen people say to me: "It must be hard being vegan," my first instinct is to say, "Actually no, it's not."

After all, thanks to growing range of alternatives I don't miss any foods since I gave up eating animal products three years ago.

But as people have signed up to be vegan at a rate of up to one every six seconds this month, for "Veganuary", is it time to talk about the some of the more challenging aspects of

being vegan in a world conditioned to eat meat?

And as a mother, should I be investigating further, given that my two daughters Lily, 16, and Clio, 13, decided to go vegan before shortly before I did?

For example, one University of Bristol study (2017) found that men who were vegan or vegetarian were almost twice as likely to suffer depression as meat-eaters, which the researchers put down to a possible lack of B12 or omega-3 fats, which have been linked to low mood.

But hold on. Just like every vegan I know, my daughters and I already take vitamin supplements, just to check all our bases are covered, just as million of meat-eaters do, because their diet is also rarely complete either.

Plus, as veganism gets more popular, an ever-increasing number of the alternatives we eat and drink, such as plant-milks and vegan cheeses, are fortified with nutrients, just as dairy milks, bread and cereals are already.

Yet despite making sure that any of my family's nutritional deficiencies are plugged, why doesn't a day go by when I feel some sort of despair?



Vegan men are said to be twice as likely to suffer from depression CREDIT: PA

Apparently, I'm not alone. It turns out that such feelings

among vegans are so widespread they even have their own name: vystopia.

The word was coined by psychologist Clare Mann after she started seeing more vegans come to her for counselling, and expressing feelings of ‘depression, anxiety, grief, PTSD (after seeing what happens in slaughterhouses) , hopelessness and alienation’.

Mann's diagnosis hit a nerve.

In a recent poll, 83 per cent of vegans say they have experienced vystopia (a play on the word dystopia, a world in which everything has gone bad, with a v for vegan).

Mann says that vystopia is the ‘normal response of any human being distressed by animal cruelty’ and who, having seen it, can’t understand how others continue to go along with it – or why they become so aggressive when confronted with the idea that eating animals unnecessarily is wrong.

It is also the confusion that, at a time when raising livestock for food is generating 14.5 per cent of global greenhouse gases (more than all transport put together), and using 70 per cent of agricultural land, causing deforestation, animal extinction and water pollution, people are still worried about missing out on their bacon sandwiches.

Casual discrimination against vegans – like the type we saw recently from former Waitrose magazine editor William Sitwell (now Telegraph restaurant critic), who quickly apologised – also seems to be a factor.

Such discrimination is almost condoned. Another example is TV presenter Piers Morgan worked himself up into frothing rage because high-street bakery Greggs added a vegan sausage roll to its range.

Closer to home, I repeatedly hear the views of relatives and friends offended by my family's choices. If I respond when

they bring the matter up, I'm told that I'm 'preaching' - an accusation often raised against vegans for explaining their decision by citing some inconvenient truths about the meat industry.

In fact, according to a new survey by global health app Lifesum, 81 per cent of vegan users said they have experienced prejudice, mostly from friends and families or in their workplace.

This is despite the fact that if you replace the word 'vegan' with any religious, racial or sexual group, such behaviour would be completely unacceptable.



Vegan ingredients: spices, nuts, grains and pulses CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

Psychologist and vegan Dr Melanie Joy, author of *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*, has also analysed the emotional rollercoaster that vegans go through.

Dr Joy believes vegans can be left feeling isolated because so often it's their closest family and friends, who are the most hostile towards their choices.

A decision by one member to go vegan, she says, can upset the family value system, its sense of tradition and pose questions that friends and relatives would rather ignore.

Like many people trying to effect social change, another

psychologist, Hilda Burke, says vegans can also feel overwhelmed by the scale of the task ahead of them.

"It's not just vegans who feel that way," Burke says, "it's anyone who feels they're swimming against a tide.

"Whether it's recycling or taking your own cup to the coffee shop so you don't use a plastic one, at times you may feel like what you are doing is just a drop in the ocean."

Burke also points out that people who become vegan for ethical reasons may often feel misunderstood.

"I think many [non-vegans] equate veganism with difficult eating behaviour. So they bundle vegans together with people they perceive as being 'picky' or 'fussy' around eating.

"Rather than treating veganism as a set of moral principles, they may see it as just being difficult, or different for the sake of it.

"Also on a more basic level, many people just don't know how to cater for a vegan. They quite simply don't know what's OK and what's not OK. So perhaps some of the intolerance stems from not have the cooking knowledge or skills."

All of which inevitably puts added emotional pressure on vegans. But could it also be that vegans are naturally more hard-wired to be upset by animal cruelty in the first place, and that is the reason they don't want to eat animal products – as the authors of a paper linking the two have already suggested.

One study published in the journal PLOS One by a group of Italian neuroscientists found that the areas of the brain associated with empathy - such as the anterior cingulate cortex and the left inferior frontal gyrus - were more activated in vegetarians and vegans compared to people who ate meat, when shown pictures of human or animal suffering.

Psychologist Clare Mann has observed this in her own practice. She believes that in personality tests, vegans are more likely to be 'feelers' rather than 'thinkers'.

"Feelers prefer to perceive the world and make decisions based on values, unlike the thinkers, who tend to do so by reason and logic."

Over time, she says, this may have an effect on mood.

"People still see it as funny to mock vegans, saying they're too serious and should lighten up.

"However, vegans who make this choice based on ethics, rather than dietary reasons, can't 'lighten up' about the burden of knowing about animal cruelty."

Indeed, I will readily admit to a sense of humour failure – one of the accusations most often rolled out against vegans – when I see depressing images of cows lowing for their calves, taken so we can drink their milk, or pigs shaking in terror as they wait their turn at the abattoir, or male chicks being crushed in grinding machines because they are of no use to the egg industry.

But does that mean I've succumbed to vystopia. Not at all. In fact, what *does* make me cheerful is the growing number of studies – and advice from the World Health Organisation – which show I am considerably less likely to die early from cancer, heart disease and diabetes compared to meat-eaters.

And as well as saving animals, the latest research is finding that in the long-term a plant-based diet creates a gut biome which is better for mental health.

I am glad that Lily and Clio, who are young enough to be optimists, have either bypassed vystopia altogether or believe there is still time to turn their own generation

around to their way of thinking.

As Clare Mann says, when vegans work through the dark feelings, they often emerge stronger and more positive for it.

"When you become vegan, you begin to feel lighter because your footprint on the earth is less. You become aware that that there's a better way to treat yourself, other people, animals - and the planet."

That's why despite any depressing moments I experience as a vegan, my choice will always still be worth it. For me and the planet.