

I think I'll have to get new friends

By Vegan Naturopath Robyn Chuter.

That's what one of my clients, whom I'll call Helen, said to me recently, only half-jokingly. We had been discussing the dietary changes that she needs to make in order to overcome an aggressive autoimmune disease. One of the major barriers to change that Helen keeps bumping up against is that her social life revolves around various forms of not-so-healthy eating – meeting up with friends at a restaurant, going out for a pub meal with her husband and so on.

Can you relate? I sure can. When I first decided to become vegetarian, at the age of 15, I suddenly realised how many food-centric activities that I'd previously enjoyed with my friends were now off the menu – quite literally. No more McDonald's after the movies. No hot dogs at the roller skating rink (yep, I'm that old ;-)). Even sausage sizzles at school resulted in me feeling uncomfortably excluded from the social rituals which function as the glue that binds groups of unrelated humans together, providing us with a feeling of community that's essential to both our psychological and physical well-being.

Most of my clients who've adopted vegetarian or vegan diets report the same kinds of experiences: work functions in which their dietary preferences aren't catered for, despite having given a 'heads-up' to management; friends who choose restaurants for get-togethers that have absolutely nothing on the menu that's suitable for non-carnivores; and of course, the dreaded family Christmas dinner, in which 'tradition' dictates that there's a dead representative of virtually every species of animal on the table, like some dystopian version of Noah's Ark.

The social isolation that many people experience when they decide to eat in a non-typical way – whether that’s becoming an ethical vegan, or a health-conscious plant-based eater – can be so intense and demoralising that they end up reverting to their old way of eating. In fact, a [survey of over 11 000 Americans](#) found that a startling 84% of vegetarians and vegans end up abandoning their diet, and that “insufficient interaction with other vegetarians/vegans; not being actively involved in a vegetarian/vegan community” and “disliking that their diet made them ‘stick out from the crowd’” were among the most common reasons for reverting to the dietary norm.

I’ve developed a keen interest in the role that social support plays in helping people stick with a healthy plant-based diet, so much so that I’m writing my Honours thesis on this very topic. I’m in the very earliest stages of my social support research project right now, but what I can share with you at this point is that social support *matters*. A lot. In fact, for Australian men, the number of vegetarian friends that they had was found to be the [strongest predictor of how much meat they themselves eat](#).

Importantly, online communities such as Facebook groups are [just as helpful at providing social support](#) as more traditional in-person social groups. (Hint: my research project involves a closed Facebook group which was set up to provide support for people who want to eat a plant-based diet.)

So neither Helen nor anyone else needs to dump their old friends in order to stick to a healthy diet. She (and you) just need *extra* friends who share your commitment, whom you can connect with online, in person, or both.

By the way, that’s the reason I include a Facebook group (whose privacy setting is Secret, so none of your other FB friends can see you’re in it – a concern expressed by many of my clients, who get ‘stalked’ on social media by family

members or friends who disapprove of their dietary choices; I kid you not, this actually happens!!!!) in my health and nutrition education program, **EmpowerEd**. It's just so incredibly helpful to be part of a supportive community of people who share your perspective on diet and health, empathise with your struggles and celebrate your successes with you.