

Food Talk:

How to talk with people about plant-based eating



Many of us enjoy eating plant-based—whether for one meal a day, or as a way of life —not only because it’s delicious and makes us feel good, but also because it reflects our values. Plant-based eating connects with so many things, from health and community, to social justice, the environment, and animal welfare. Regardless of the “why,” eating is rarely a solo activity. We share food with family, friends, co-workers and even strangers. **Food is often a big part of our relationships.** That also means we talk about it.

And when we talk with people about food choices and reasons for eating plant-based, things can become charged and personal, like a discussion about politics or religion. Why is this? Is it possible to share the reasons behind our choices about plant-based eating without it becoming a conversation stopper or showdown?

We believe we can have better conversations about food — and that opening channels of communication is incredibly important. Here are some tips for kinder, more open and productive conversations about plant-based eating, whether it’s with friends, family, or the person sitting next to you on the bus.



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Check your attitude

If we're honest with ourselves, we may believe deep down that our job is to "get people to care," to "see the light" or to "educate." We may feel real urgency. This is totally natural. We want to share our experience and knowledge. However, even if we have good intentions, approaching people with an attitude of convincing, persuading, motivating, pressuring, scolding or shaming can elicit the opposite of the response we want. Understandably, people may become defensive. There's no space for a real exchange. So check your feelings, and if it's mainly frustration or anger, pause and remember that change is hard, and **everyone is doing their best**. Be compassionate and curious about people's stories and values.



Listen, ask questions, and listen some more

There's a practice in public health called "motivational interviewing," created by doctors who discovered that telling people why certain behaviors were healthier was not an effective way to get them to change. Instead, when we lead with questions and listen — really, truly listen — amazing things can happen. In motivational interviewing, this is called "guiding." A great way to apply this is by asking questions, rather than

leading with “telling and selling.” Asking open-ended questions — questions the other person can’t answer with a simple yes or no — sparks a real conversation, one in which you can share information and resources, without pushing it on the other person. To keep that conversation going, reflect back what you hear so the other person knows you’re listening.



Be open, vulnerable, and speak from your own experience

People might fear they are going to be blamed, shamed or guilt-tripped about what they eat. You can reassure them that you’re not interested in judging, even if no one has mentioned it: “I know food choice is so personal, and everyone needs to do what feels right to them. Believe me, I never saw myself eating mostly plant-based.” Drawing on your own personal story and experiences is ultimately a more engaging and disarming way to approach the topic of plant-based eating, because you’re not posing an argument, you’re just sharing what works for you. We do not have to become “cheerleaders” to connect with people.

Want some talking points? On the pages that follow you’ll find a helpful three-step guide to a more productive conversation.

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Step 1: Ask Questions

Be curious. Seek to understand their point of view, as genuinely as possible.

Let the other person know you're not judging, shaming or attacking them, that you really would like to learn where they're coming from. If you tend to always have an agenda, like trying to persuade or get the other person to change (because you care so much!), try to leave that at home and genuinely practice being neutral and curious — even if it's hard.

Sample Script:

What do you think about the new plant-based 'meat' and burger craze? Have you tried them?

My friend once said they felt like they were 'at war' with food. Do you ever feel that you're in a complicated relationship with food?

Do you have an 'eating philosophy,' or foods that you're happiest when eating?

I definitely have comfort food addictions around sugar and salty carbs. What's your go-to vice?

2

Step 2: Acknowledge

Let the other person know you're hearing them and paying attention to the “Three A’s” — **Anxieties, Ambivalence and Aspirations** — about going plant-based or eating healthier.

Sample Script:

Cooking for kids IS hard!

I get it— even when you want to eat healthier, sometimes it's hard to know where to begin.



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Step 3: Empathize

In her [TEDx talk](#), author Marta Zaraska of Meathooked notes that a high percentage of vegans and vegetarians still eat meat, especially after they've been drinking. Zaraska explains that she always opens her talks with this fact, because it helps disarm the audience about the topic. People can relax because they know that she is human and won't be pointing fingers, or being a cheerleader for vegan lifestyles.

Example:

I feel you. Working full-time and getting healthy meals on the table is already a challenge, and sometimes it feels like we working moms are never doing enough. And look at all the amazing things you're already doing. Something I've found really helpful is meal planning, so that I can plan at least a couple of healthy plant-based dinners a week.



PERSONAL STORY FROM TEAM OMD

At a recent family gathering, my brother and sister-in-law had a big spread of cold cuts, cheese galore and fancy meats, or charcuterie. It wasn't until I was standing at the buffet that they realized there were very few veggie options — a few sliced bell peppers and crackers. My brother profusely apologized, but I was able to reassure him that I was okay, and after some investigation, I discovered some fruit and raw veggies stashed in the kitchen.

Noticing my flexibility (and how obviously, this wasn't the first time a situation like this had come up), my brother, for the first time ever, began asking me questions about how I fed my family: How do you always eat so healthy? What do you do when you go out? How do you know how to cook for your kids? How did you learn this? I answered his questions gently, (avoiding my tendency to lecture) and shared that it had been several years in the making — and that now I felt so good and my kids actually craved plant-based meals, that it was impossible to go back.

He shared his struggle with weight and health, and his reliance on fast food. I sympathized with him — two working parents, two young kids, one puppy — and expressed understanding about how hard it was to learn new habits, tastes and ways of cooking and relating to food.

I used the “Three A’s”: by acknowledging the anxiety of getting it wrong, the ambivalence about the desire for convenience, and the aspiration of being healthy. And I left it at that. Fast forward a couple of months, and my brother and sister-in-law regularly ask me questions about plant-based eating, restaurants and cook-books. They have come to see that I am going to be supportive, kind and non-judgmental. In other words, I have become a “guide,” not a “righter” or a “cheerleader.”



Sources:

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