



WELLBEING AND VEGANISM: A CONCEPT REPORT

2022



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The aim of these reports is to: strengthen and grow our reputation as an evidence-driven organisation, determine knowledge gaps and opportunities for future research, inform campaigns and policy work and spark cross-organisational dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

The Vegan Society's research concept reports are informative publications designed to shed light on upcoming issues related to veganism. These reports are produced by the research team of The Vegan Society (TVS) in collaboration with the Research Advisory Committee (RAC) and the Researcher Network (RN). The reports use evidence and information derived from existing academic literature and original research to better inform professional practice. The aim of these reports is to: strengthen and grow our reputation as an evidence-driven organisation, determine knowledge gaps and opportunities for future research, inform campaigns and policy work and spark cross-organisational dialogue. Ultimately, these reports strive to ensure that TVS continues to be an effective and innovative player in the global vegan movement.

Most vegan research regarding health focuses on the [physical benefits of a plant-based diet](#) (Medawar et al., 2019). There is a large gap in knowledge concerning the relationship between a vegan lifestyle, happiness, and other areas of wellbeing. The aim of this report is to bring together existing research on individual/micro-level wellbeing and veganism. It is beyond the parameters of this report to consider more societal/macro-level factors that will undoubtedly influence our sense of wellbeing – however, this is certainly not to suggest these factors are not important. On the contrary, we recognise that they would need to be addressed through an entirely separate report. This current report, therefore, will focus on the individual, drawing on literature from various fields including psychology, philosophy, spirituality studies, eco-psychology, and health promotion.





Although there is an abundance of resources that focus on our physical wellbeing, diet and nutrition, and veganism, this report aims to delve deeper into the concept of wellbeing and consider the term through a holistic lens.

METHODOLOGY

Our concept reports use [theory synthesis](#) to offer a new or enhanced view of a concept or phenomenon by linking previously unconnected or incompatible pieces in a novel way ([Jaakkola, 2020](#)). This approach may also explore the conceptual underpinnings of an emerging theory or explain conflicting research findings by pulling


disparate pieces of information into a more coherent whole.

Several literature reviews were conducted between 2020 and 2022 to inform this report. In addition, a collection of case studies enabled us to gather primary evidence to supplement the theoretical findings of the literature review.¹

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY WELLBEING?



The field of wellbeing has witnessed the formation of two distinct, yet overlapping, perspectives and paradigms for research. The origins of these two standpoints may be traced back to two different philosophical beginnings: hedonism and eudemonism ([Ryan & Deci, 2001](#)). The first, hedonism, reflects the view that wellbeing consists of pleasure or happiness. The second view is that wellbeing is more than simply 'being happy' and concerns the actualisation of one's potential or true nature. These two philosophical traditions underpin the main models of practice in wellbeing research. As shown below, while hedonism and eudemonism indeed overlap in some areas, they also diverge at critical junctures:

The eudemonic perspective does not value pleasure motivation, rather pleasure is viewed as the result of living a life that is focused on meaning, growth, and positive relationships. As such, research suggests that if a person is living eudemonically then they will likely experience hedonic joy as well ([Nave et al., 2008](#); [Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008](#)). It can be argued, therefore, that the eudemonic approach to wellbeing not only leads to happiness, but also a sense of self-realisation ([Ryff & Singer, 2006](#)). This sense of self-realisation or actualisation has been found to lead to better coping behaviours and decreased stress levels ([Miquelon & Vallerand, 2008](#)), and as such has been associated with improved perceived states of physical and mental health ([Lopez & Snyder, 2009](#)).



Hedonism: subjective feelings of happiness; the experience of pleasure; life satisfaction; positive feelings and emotions; the absence of negative mood.

Eudemonism: Living in accordance with your 'true self'; life activities aligned with values; a sense of meaning and purpose.



When I think of happiness it's not all about hedonistic pleasure and self-indulgence
Case study participant

Although there is an abundance of resources that focus on our physical wellbeing, diet and nutrition, and veganism, this report aims to delve deeper into the concept of wellbeing and consider the term through a holistic lens. Are vegans really

¹ For further information about the methodology for this report please contact research@vegansociety.com.

killjoys? ([Twine, 2014](#)) Do we have to sacrifice hedonism if we want to live a life with more meaning? What role could veganism play in developing our emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing? This report considers these questions by bringing together recent literature on both

wellbeing and veganism, in order to bring about new discussions, ideas and evidence to inform professional practice within and beyond The Vegan Society.

THE HAPPY VEGAN: WE ARE WHAT WE EAT?



I feel my health physically is better so that improves my happiness and emotional wellbeing. Case study participant



Physical wellbeing: The health of your body and its processes, systems, and composition; the absence of disease; the ability to perform physical activities and carry out social roles that are not hindered by physical limitations and experiences of bodily pain; biological health indicators.

The link between vegan physical and mental health is not a new discovery: Back in [1982](#), [Weinstein & de Man](#) found a positive link between veganism (from the perspective of a healthy diet) and subjective (self-perceived) sense of wellbeing. In their 'breakfast experiment,' they discovered that meat-eaters experience more negative emotions than vegetable eaters and that high-protein diets lead to more aggressive emotions. More recently, [Conner et al. \(2017\)](#) found that increased consumption of fruit and vegetables improved subjective wellbeing, vitality and motivation.

Research by our Researcher Network recently found that what we eat certainly can influence our state of mind: Cholecystokinin (CCK) is a digestive hormone released within the small intestine when fats and proteins are ingested and acts as a transmitter in central and intestinal neurons ([Arey et al, 2014](#)). CCK can also be used

experimentally to induce panic and has been shown to increase the levels of circulating stress hormones which can produce panic attacks ([Ströhle et al, 2003](#)). We know that a vegan diet that is rich in plant-based foods is often lower in fat content compared with that of omnivores ([Clarys et al, 2014](#)), and therefore, lower levels of this hormone should be secreted in vegans compared to omnivores. This could support the finding that vegans experience reduced levels of anxiety compared to those consuming a diet with higher levels of processed meats.

Similar findings are reported [elsewhere](#): In their 2012 [study](#), Beezhold & Johnston found that participants who switched to a plant-based diet showed significant improvements in their stress levels in just two weeks. One reason for the dramatic change is thought to be the lowered dietary levels of arachidonic acid (AA). While omega-3 fatty acids are believed to have a positive effect on mental health, the opposite is true of long-chain omega-6 fatty acids such as AA. This long-chain fatty acid is found only in meat, and it is often linked with brain inflammation. This, in turn, could lead to mood swings, depression, anxiety and stress.

Optimistically, it seems that eating a healthy vegan diet may indeed have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing, as well as other aspects of day-to-day functioning. However, the method used to assess this hypothesis can produce a mixed picture ([Grimes, 2021](#)) – as such, the bottom line is that we need further research into the positive mental health benefits of a vegan diet.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

“This report is a reminder that good nutrition supports both physical and mental wellbeing. We work with the British Dietetic Association to show those who choose a vegan diet that well-planned vegan diets can support healthy living in people of all ages. In order to support mental and physical wellbeing, it’s important to look beyond single nutrients – we need to consider the balance and variety of foods consumed on a daily basis. We can make the most of our diets by enjoying plenty of health-promoting plant

foods, such as vegetables, fruit, wholegrains, nuts and legumes like lentils. Practical tips about nutritional planning are available at vegansociety.com/nutrition. Following a vegan diet can have an impact on our health in a holistic way. Multiple factors may influence an individual’s choice to be vegan and it is vital for health care practitioners to recognise this and support vegans to follow a lifestyle that aligns with their values”

Chantal Tomlinson, Dietitian. The Vegan Society’s Nutrition Team.

“

I noticed a huge improvement in my health which made me feel happier Case study participant



THE HAPPY VEGAN: EMOTIONAL WELLBEING



Emotional wellbeing: our mental health; our moods, thoughts, and feelings; subjective feelings of happiness; ability to cope with life events.



Without doubt I am happier and have improved wellbeing Case study participant

Being vegan, however, is not only about what we eat, and wellbeing is much more than physical health. Emotional wellbeing may be defined as concerning one's thoughts and feelings and reflects the degree to which individuals feel positive and enthusiastic about themselves and about life.



The more I learned about veganism the more committed and confident I became and the more satisfied I was with the decision. Case study participant

THE HAPPY VEGAN: EVIDENCE

Several studies suggest that vegans experience higher levels of emotional wellbeing when compared to other food and lifestyle identities: For example, in their 2015 [study](#), Beezhold et al. found that people who ate a vegan diet were less likely to suffer the effects of anxiety. A total of 620 participants – a mix of vegans, vegetarians and omnivores – completed a survey about their mood, and the results were positive for those following a vegan diet, with both male and female vegans reporting lower anxiety scores and stress levels than the non-vegans who were questioned.



I've noticed a massive change in my happiness and emotional wellbeing

Case study participant

In a 2019 [study](#) designed to qualitatively explore the role that veganism plays in young women's wellbeing and relationship to food, it was found that young women who "*passionately engage[d] in a vegan lifestyle, as opposed to just a vegan diet, ...appeared to have a number of positive effects such as a healthier lifestyle, a stronger sense of control and agency, more meaningful social relationships, and a sense of connection to a vegan sub-culture.*" The authors concluded that: "*... the healing potential of veganism is derived from this passionate investment of the self that redefines young women's ways of being in the world. The healing benefits of engaging in a vegan lifestyle may have clinical significance for working with young women who are socially disengaged or who are at risk of disordered eating.*" [Costa et al. \(2019\)](#)

Similarly, the authors from an Australian 2021 [study](#) concluded that their "*findings align with the direction of evidence for an association between high quality vegan and vegetarian diets and decreased depressive symptoms.*" ([Lee et al. 2021](#)).

Elsewhere, in a [study](#) comparing the psychological characteristics of people consuming different dietary patterns, [Norwood et al. \(2018\)](#) concluded that "*people adhering to different dietary patterns showed stark differences in their psychological characteristics. Indeed, some restrictive dietary patterns (paleo and vegan) were associated with more positive psychological characteristics than seen in an unrestricted comparison group.*"



I would estimate most of my positive changes in happiness and wellbeing come from living a vegan life and all that has brought me. It has really shaped my life and my choices. I would say 90% of the positive shift in my emotional state has been due to veganism, and 10 % to wider factors that are beyond my control.

Case study participant

Although it is important to underline that macro-level, societal factors will often play a significant role in how people experience subjective feelings of happiness, the above findings are interesting and worth noting, nevertheless. The authors of the above studies all conclude that veganism may be a protective factor against several facets of emotional ill-health, although much further research is needed. Of particular interest is the idea of ‘alternative hedonism’ (Sopar, 2008), which suggests that hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing do not need to be separate phenomena, and instead are arguably interrelated. Bertella (2020) also recognised this interrelationship and looked at the impact veganism and food choices had on both hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing. Twine (2014; 2017) and Bertella (ibid) have both explored the meanings that vegans tend to associate with their eating practices in terms of pleasure, sensuous gratification and joy from consumption (hedonism) as well as a sense of integrity, meaningfulness, self-development, personal identity construction and harmony from living in accordance with one’s vegan values (eudemonia).

“Vegans tend to describe food experiences by referring to food’s sensuous appeal. This provides an opportunity to re-think the dichotomy between self-oriented pleasure and ethical behaviour and consider the possibility that ethical choices that support eudemonic

experiences do not necessarily compromise hedonic experiences.” Bertella (2020)

THE UNHAPPY VEGAN: EVIDENCE



In some ways veganism has opened my eyes to things that are going on all around me and that I often feel powerless to change

Case study participant



I feel I am on the wrong planet because of how people can treat each other and how they abuse and murder animals

Case study participant

There is much debate in the literature as to the relationship between emotional wellbeing and veganism. Despite the positive findings noted above, other researchers have found negative correlations between vegan identity and emotional wellbeing (Michalak, Zhang & Jacobi, 2012; Forestell & Nezlek, 2018; Lavallee et al., 2019). Where some physical health parameters can benefit from a vegan lifestyle, the impact on mental health appears to be mixed.



Being too empathetic is a curse in many ways.

Case study participant

Michalak et al. (2012) examined the one-month, twelve-month and lifetime prevalence rates of mental disorders in vegan, vegetarian and non-vegetarian groups and matched samples. The twelve-month and lifetime prevalence of depressive illness in vegans was nearly 15% higher compared to the non-vegetarian group. Furthermore, the vegan and vegetarian groups

demonstrated a statistically significant increase in the rates of anxiety disorders across all three timespans examined. In another study, 21–22% of vegans reported depressive symptoms compared to only 15% of non-vegetarians ([Baines et al, 2007](#)). Low iron levels and dysfunctional menstrual symptoms were also commonly reported in the vegetarian and vegan groups which may have a reciprocal impact on emotional health ([Baines et al, 2007](#)). While such findings may be concerning, it's important to note that vegans only made up 3% of this particular study and as such, while this research is important, it isn't representative of all vegans². Studies such as this underline the need for further research with a larger and more representative sample.

More recently, [Dobersek et al.](#) (2020) analysed the findings of 18 studies with a total of 160,257 participants to consider the impact of diet and lifestyle on emotional health. In total, the review looked at 149,559 meat-consumers and 8,584 meat-abstainers (including vegetarians and vegans). The authors found that 11 of the 18 studies showed that meat-abstention was associated with poorer psychological health (when measured as depression, anxiety, mood, self-harm behaviours, life satisfaction, or stress.) Four of the studies were equivocal, and three showed that meat-abstainers had better outcomes. The authors said that the 'most rigorous' of the studies examined demonstrated that the risk of depression/anxiety was significantly more prevalent in meat-abstainers. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this report to consider macro-level factors, it is certainly worth bearing in mind that such factors may also have an impact on psychological health. Similarly, it is also worth acknowledging how the reaction, behaviour and influence of others can indeed have a negative impact on the self-perceived happiness of vegans. As Twine ([2014](#)) notes:

"Veganism constitutes a direct challenge to the dominant affective community that celebrates the pleasure of consuming animals. It questions the assumption of shared happiness around such consumption raising the prospect of a cruel commensality. This implicit or explicit questioning shapes much of the troubled interaction between vegans and omnivores. To have this happiness reunited with its inherent violence through the killjoy discourse or mere presence of the vegan invites a troubled self-conception for the omnivore. It is unsurprising that omnivores indulge in defensive discursive practices with the aim of consolidating the normative meanings of animal consumption, human/animal hierarchy and the hegemony of their affective community."

Indeed, Twine's (ibid) findings suggest that new vegans may often be met with noticeably negative reactions from friends and family and may therefore suffer from a consequent lack of social support. This in turn may lead to increased feelings of unhappiness and a decrease in self-perceived resilience, confidence and self-esteem. Although some new vegans may begin their vegan journey with friends/peer support, resulting in a more supported transition, it is likely that many people who take their first steps to veganism alone will receive, to differing degrees, a negative social response, and associated lack of support (Twine, ibid). It is likely, therefore, that this may well have negative implications for their mental health and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, this may be particularly noticeable when 'support' may be, arguably, gift-wrapped as expressions of care and concern, masking protective responses from the omnivorous norm:

"...there is a possible tension [within some of the study responses] that express concern over the healthiness of veganism. It is worth reflecting

² This finding highlights the importance of nutritional planning to ensure a healthy balanced vegan diet. Individuals with concerns around nutrient deficiencies should consult their local healthcare team for a potential referral to a dietitian.

upon whether these can be seen as genuine expressions of care or whether they might be better seen as protective responses for the pre-existing happiness order and omnivorous normativity.” [Twine \(2014\)](#)

“Going against the status quo means standing up alone a lot of the time and finding yourself disliked.” [Caroline Gorden \(2021\)](#)

Whilst it would be reassuring to focus on the research that emphasises the positive impact veganism may have on emotional wellbeing, it is important to ask why those other studies have come to a different conclusion. What is it about being, or becoming vegan, that may negatively affect emotional wellbeing? One explanation is that vegans and vegetarians often define themselves more negatively by emphasising what they ‘do not do’ and consequently they place a focus on how they are dissimilar compared to their peers within the general population ([Back et al. 1981](#)). As noted by Researcher Network member [Laura Grimes \(2021\)](#), many vegans emphasise the fact that ethical decision-making motivates their lifestyle, specifically in terms of concerns for animals ([Fox et al. 2008](#)). Research Advisory Committee member, [Dr. Caroline Gorden](#), supports this theory:

“When individuals ‘go against the grain’ they can easily become the scapegoat – constructed and used by the opposition to enable them to think their beliefs are healthier than they are, so it’s a difficult battle to win. The social psychology

literature supports this, with research telling us how important our social connections are to our self-esteem and our desire to maintain these relationships is incredibly powerful and universal. It is understandable that anything that threatens these connections – even being vegan – may be detrimental to our emotional health.”

The wider literature tends to reflect these findings ([Roe & Hurley, 2018](#); [McDonald 2000](#)) with emphasis on how vegans, aspiring vegans and vegetarians all may experience social disillusionment, low mood and anxiety from unwanted attention. As the [Human Research Council \(2014\)](#) found in their study of over 11,000 current and former vegetarians/vegans, 63% of former and 41% of current vegetarians/vegans dislike(d) that their diet made them ‘stick out from the crowd’.

As well as feeling different from a non-vegan majority, vegans may suffer from feelings of burnout or compassion fatigue. This is particularly the case for those who follow an ethical vegan lifestyle for concerns about animals. These individuals often feel a high degree of empathy and connection with all sentient beings and may suffer intense emotional distress when contemplating the suffering so many animals experience globally. As noted in the wider literature on compassion fatigue and the animal care profession:

“...the harm to animals can be overwhelming in quantity and vehemence.” [Fournier & Mustful \(2019\)](#)



As [Figley & Roop \(2006\)](#) note, consistent empathy and compassion for traumatised others can mean taking on the trauma oneself. As such, individuals who are vegan 'for the animals' and who repeatedly see or hear of animals being harmed, injured or killed, can begin to identify with the animal's trauma and experience consequences from it. It can be argued, therefore, that ethical vegans may be at particular risk of low levels of emotional wellbeing due to compassion fatigue and the overwhelming feelings of hopelessness when faced with the enormity of animal suffering.

“ I remain disgusted about how humans are treating animals and frustrated by the endless psychological barriers non vegans erect against vegans. Our culture is in denial about its own cruelty and hypocrisy. I will never make my peace with this. *Case study participant*

Nevertheless, the literature does offer ways to avoid or at least minimise this potential negative impact on emotional health. There are several strategies for treatment and prevention of compassion fatigue, developed initially for those caring for humans with trauma, but which have latterly been applied to those caring for or involved with the rights of animals (see *"implications for professional" practice* to the right).

“ I didn't feel happier at first. If anything, I was noticing more and more injustice, and felt some guilt for participating in that for so long. I was happy buying and making vegan food – this gave me pleasure. There was a sense of doing that right thing

now and that did bring happiness. So, in a way I was in some ways happier but in some ways sad at seeing things through this new lens (or with the lens removed). *Case study participant*

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY:

"It would be highly reductionist to state that a dietary choice alone can lead to an improvement or decline in mental health outcomes."

Laura Grimes, RN

It is worthwhile noting that many studies link veganism and vegetarianism as one and the same, focusing solely on meat eaters and non-meat eaters ([Appleby and Key, 2015](#); [Iguacel, Huybrechts, Moreno and Michels, 2020](#)), and this approach neglects to consider veganism as a very different lifestyle to vegetarianism ([Kessler et al., 2016](#); [Nezlek and Forestell, 2020](#)). Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that a plant-based diet, a vegan diet and ethical veganism can all mean different things to different people – and it isn't clear in many studies which of these categories the vegan participants fall into – which may well influence the findings. As RN member, [Laura Grimes](#), underlines, it's also worth noting that vegetarians and vegans differ to their non-vegetarian counterparts in several psychological and socio-demographic characteristics which may impact their risk of adverse mental health outcomes. Most vegetarians and vegans are female ([Larsson et al. 2002](#)) and they are more likely to live in urban areas and be single ([Baines et al. 2007](#)) – all of which are factors associated with the prevalence of poor mental health ([Jacobi et al. 2004](#)).


Although it is important to consider the (possibly initial) risks to emotional wellbeing and mental health, the literature does indeed suggest that there are indicators relating to veganism, positive mood, and emotions ([Beezhold et al., 2010](#);

[Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine , 2020](#)). Recent research shows that vegetarian diets improve mood ([Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine , 2020](#)) which suggests that more research specifically into veganism

and wellbeing would certainly be useful. As underlined above, however, the methodology used to assess this can produce a mixed picture, which may leave any future research that is not methodologically rigorous open to interpretation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

- **Emotional support:** although our shared goal is a vegan world, the current reality is that most of the general population are not vegan and do not necessarily share the vegan viewpoint. Being different from most people in this regard may prove difficult for some vegans. It is therefore imperative that vegans, particularly newly transitioned vegans, have access to emotional wellbeing support to feel comfortable and secure with their ethical decision. This may be in the form of new mental health resources, signposting to appropriate organisations, or peer-to-peer support through existing vegan networks.

 *As one of TVS's strategic objectives (1.1) is helping people to become and remain vegan, this particular implication is of paramount importance for professional practice. Further research is needed, therefore, to understand what elements cause the greatest adverse effects for vegan emotional wellbeing and how to mitigate them. By understanding these issues further, TVS would be able to target specific interventions for specific areas of the vegan population.* Claire Ogley. Head of Campaigns, Policy & Research at TVS.

- **Recognising and taking steps to minimise the risk of compassion fatigue** ([Fournier & Mustful, ibid](#)): supporting vegans by helping to:

- (1) reframe negative experiences: challenges to our vegan identity or difficult situations should be reframed as a learning experience

rather than a personal attack on one's ability.

- (2) increase compassion satisfaction: recall the accomplishments that have been made and the progress that you are contributing to. Also, to take pride in what you are doing and the community you are a part of.

- (3) maintain or return to healthy boundaries: establish clear and healthy boundaries between the work/activism you do and your personal life.

- (4) increase awareness of compassion fatigue risk factors, signs and symptoms.

- (5) practice self-care.

- **Further research:** multiple factors impact mental health and emotional wellbeing. Isolating these factors from one another may prove difficult and we should be careful not to mistake correlation with causation. We need to better understand both the positive and negative impact veganism may have on mental health and emotional wellbeing to better understand how organisations like The Vegan Society can support people on their vegan journey.

"It may be that vegan diets themselves don't result in worse mental health, but that the individuals opting for these lifestyles may benefit from public health interventions to improve their mental health. We may want to consider further research, a campaign or more focused outreach work regarding the emotional wellbeing of vegans and consider how we can support people wanting to become vegan, since evidence suggests it may initially be overwhelming when faced with the facts about animal agriculture." Laura Grimes, RN

A HOLISTIC LENS

It is important, therefore, to underline that a vegan lifestyle, at least at the very beginning of the vegan journey, may have a negative impact on emotional wellbeing. Timing, however, may well be a crucial factor: the vegan journey may begin with a decreased feeling of happiness and wellbeing due to overwhelming feelings associated with the realisation of animal suffering and the actions of humans towards other animals and the planet. As the subsequent sections in this report will detail however, in the long-term, individuals following a vegan lifestyle may experience a deeper, more sustainable sense of wellbeing due to arriving to a way of living in accordance with their values.

From a happiness perspective, the relationship between veganism and emotional wellbeing is not clear-cut. As we have seen, recent studies provide contradictory evidence ([Rosenfeld, 2018](#)), and we are unlikely to see a clear resolution to this debate unless we view wellbeing and happiness from a much more holistic, all-encompassing viewpoint. As Researcher Network member, [Jana Krizanova](#) suggests, we need to look more holistically, so that veganism can become not only a sustainable human diet, but also the pathway towards increased levels of wellbeing for all sentient

beings and the planet we all call home.

Through this holistic lens, wellbeing isn't just about happiness and the hedonic aspects of what makes us feel good. The wider literature is increasingly pointing towards understanding what makes us feel well at a deeper, more sustainable level, and how this may enable us to not only feel fleeting moments of pleasure, but to be able to flourish ([VanderWeele, 2017](#); [Keyes and Haidt, 2010](#)):

"Flourishing itself might be understood as a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good. We might also refer to such a state as complete human well-being, which is again arguably a broader concept than psychological well-being... [flourishing] require[s] doing or being well in the following five broad domains of human life: (i) happiness and life satisfaction; (ii) health, both mental and physical; (iii) meaning and purpose; (iv) character and virtue; and (v) close social relationships." VanderWeele, 2017: 8149

It is only perhaps then, as flourishing individuals, that we can enable the communities and societies around us to develop a sustainable, flourishing sense of wellbeing too and, importantly, a pathway to veganism.

THE HAPPY VEGAN: SOCIAL WELLBEING



Social wellbeing: Our relationships with others and our environment; our sense of connectedness to all other beings.



Being able to connect with fellow vegans and like-minded people was like coming in from the cold.

Case study participant

Feeling well is much more than our physical health and being vegan is, arguably, more than what we decide to eat. As the previous section has highlighted, our sense of emotional wellbeing and our mental health is key to our personal happiness, and there is a growing body of research that considers this within the context of veganism. Nevertheless, wellbeing is more than our physical and mental health. We are, after all, social animals, and our sense of personal happiness is arguably linked to our connectedness to one another and the other

beings we share this planet with. As such, social wellbeing may be defined as concerning interdependence with others and the pursuit of a harmonious relationship between self and other ([Lomas, 2021](#)). An individual's perceived sense of social wellbeing may also concern their ability to connect not only with the human-made environment but also the natural physical environment ([Hill & Paragament, 2003](#)) and relationships with other species and nature ([Underwood & Teresi, 2002](#)), drawing upon theories from eco-psychology ([Kamitsis & Francis, 2013](#)).

“ Since going vegan I try to live in harmony with all beings. I consider all animals and nature from the smallest to the largest. Each life is precious to the one living it. Since going vegan I feel much more connected to all life.

Case study participant

WE ARE ALL CONNECTED

Previous research suggests there is a positive link between a sense of connectedness to others and an increased perceived sense of happiness ([Amati, et al., 2018](#); [Clark et al., 2017](#)). For many of us, our relationships with our companion animals are the most intimate connections we have with other species and evidence suggests that forming a close bond with our companion animals has a positive effect on our wellbeing. Studies of various populations, including the elderly and those living with hearing loss and dementia, have found that living with companion animals may reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and reduce feelings of loneliness ([Wells, 2019](#)). Furthermore, evidence suggests that simply looking at a familiar non-human animal may decrease blood pressure ([Binfet & Passmore, 2016](#)).

“ I love to be in nature. This is definitely my happy place, where I feel peace and joy and more connected to everything.

Case study participant

Connecting with nature has also been found to increase our perceived sense of joy and wellbeing ([Krizanova & Guardiola, 2020](#); [Pritchard et al, 2020](#)), and these connections to nature have been found to activate the same positive emotions as the social connections and relationships we have with other people ([Petersen et al., 2019](#)). [Waldhorn \(2019\)](#) argues that since nature includes non-human animals, free-living animals should be included within the concept of nature, however there is very little research available that solely focuses on connectedness with other animals, beside the aforementioned companion animal studies on wellbeing ([Dickson et al., 2019](#); [Dotson and Hyatt, 2008](#)). Nevertheless, from the research that does exist, it can be argued that being in nature and observing other animals in their natural habitat, such as bird watching, triggers our sense of fascination and grounds us in the moment. This process of observing non-human animals and connecting with nature has been shown to refresh and reinvigorate our mental state, enhance our sense of connectedness to the world around us, and may even produce feelings of euphoria ([Kaplan, 1995](#); [Curtin, 2009](#)).

“ I'm vegan and I also like to spend time in nature. I feel it improves my overall wellbeing as these times do not just stay with me, but kind of become part of me. I feel more connected to the wider world.

Case study participant

“ As a vegan I have an awareness of nature’s cycles – the different seasons. Spending time in nature gives me an inner peace away from humankind. A sense of a co-dependent relationship with nature and being vegan is very much part of this. Case study participant

There is a lack of research generally on the link between veganism and connections with nature. However, the findings from the case study conducted for this report add rich qualitative data to evidence the need for further understanding of this relationship. Similarly, a 2020 published [study](#) by Researcher Network member Jana Krizanova, and colleagues, combined the ideas of vegan happiness and nature connectedness, and found that vegans experience “greater life satisfaction, and are happier, while highly connected to nature”. Importantly, for this study, the concept of ‘nature’ included other animals and living organisms.³

“ I try to be aware of the distinctions society would have us make between companion or farmed animals, and wild animals and nature as a whole. I feel sad when I see speciesism. I’d probably have learned faster if I had [had] more exposure to nature and animals in general and I think non-vegans would too. Case study participant

Further research into social wellbeing, veganism and connectedness may consider the development of measurement scales: for

example, [Amiot et al.’s \(2016\)](#) *Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale* has been used to assess human and companion animal relationships and may prove useful in assessing relationships with other animals and the impact this has on our sense of wellbeing. Similarly, [Martin & Czellar \(2015\)](#) produced *The Extended Inclusion of Nature in Self Scale* with repeated results suggesting that a strong connection to the natural environment leads to a heightened sense of wellbeing, defined by self-reported happiness. Other similar scales of nature connectivity also follow a similar pattern ([Kals et al., 1999](#); [Nisbet et al., 2009](#); [Mayer & Frantz, 2004](#)) however there appears to be a gap in knowledge concerning measuring our sense of connectedness to all sentient beings. As such, a vegan-specific ‘connectedness to all beings’ scale is something that remains undeveloped, despite its potential utility for considering the impact a vegan lifestyle may have on our sense of wellbeing and happiness.

“ I could write a book about how spending time in nature is the key to a happy, vegan life. Case study participant

IT’S GOOD TO BE GOOD

Studies that have linked veganism with positive shifts in wellbeing report that through ethical veganism (lifestyle and world outlook, rather than solely diet), people can develop more meaningful relationships and a stronger sense of empathy and connection with the world around them ([Costa et al, 2019](#); [Muelrath, 2017](#)). Specifically, research has shown that altruism and practicing compassion and kindness can indeed increase one’s sense of personal happiness ([Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013](#); [Mongrain et al, 2011](#)). In their 2020 analysis, [Hui et al.](#) found that people who were kind tended to be higher in eudemonic wellbeing (a sense

³ Using the 14-item Connected14-item Connectedness to Nature scale (Mayer & Fratz, 2004)

of meaning and purpose in life), suggesting that living kindly and compassionately may make people feel better about themselves and their abilities, which could in turn provide a sense of meaning.

"Altruism results in deeper and more positive social integration, distraction from personal problems and the anxiety of self-preoccupation, enhanced meaning and purpose as related to wellbeing...and the presence of positive emotions such as kindness that displace harmful negative emotional states. It is entirely plausible, then, to assert that altruism enhances mental and physical health." Post (2005)

If the evidence points to a link between positive wellbeing and kind and compassionate behaviours, then perhaps it does not seem too far removed to suggest that a vegan lifestyle, which is arguably a compassionate and kind one, could lead to the same result. Nevertheless, there are clear gaps in the literature that specifically

address the relationship between a vegan lifestyle and social wellbeing, particularly in terms of connectedness with non-human animals and the natural world and the effect compassionate lifestyle choices may have on our sense of wellbeing and happiness.

"The pursuit of human happiness has always been the protagonist of personal and scientific endeavours of our times. This enriching perspective guides us through multiple connections of human wellbeing helping us to arrive at a higher comprehension of how our food choices mirror our values, moral horizons and relationships with other human and nonhuman beings. Therefore, what we eat not only conditions our physical and emotional sense of wellbeing but also leads us to get closer to the eudaimonic harbour of life purpose, to live in accordance with our inner values, nature, and more importantly, to dare to flourish while living in a 'different' way." Jana Krizanova, RN

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

- **Research:** in partnership with academia, The Vegan Society may consider developing an innovative scale for connectivity and wellbeing in relation to all other animals and the natural world. The aim of this scale would be to determine how different levels of connectedness may 'nudge' people towards a vegan lifestyle.
- **Research:** further research is needed to enable TVS to claim that a vegan lifestyle is positively correlated with a sense of wellbeing and happiness. It would be incredibly useful for TVS to be able to state this, and the qualitative evidence in this report certainly

suggests this. More research is needed, however, and on a larger scale, while controlling for external, macro-level factors.

- **Campaigns:** considering how we feel about companion animals as compared to all other animals is a key part of The Vegan Society's Be Animal Kind campaign (formerly Future Normal). The findings from the literature support the drivers for this campaign, and prompt us to examine further, in conjunction with research, if there is a positive relationship between connectedness with other animals in their natural habitats, nature more generally and becoming/being vegan.

Findings raise the possibility that, by increasing our sense of spiritual wellbeing, experiencing awe and wonder whilst in nature may lead to more kind and altruistic behaviours – and perhaps veganism.



THE HAPPY VEGAN: SPIRITUAL WELLBEING



Spiritual wellbeing: sense of meaning and purpose in life; aligning lifestyle with values; living mindfully; appreciation of life, nature and natural forces; connectedness to an unknown power or energy.

Spiritual wellbeing has been defined as concerning an individual's perceived sense of meaning and purpose in human existence ([Bacik, 1996](#)). Spirituality is said to foster a sense of spiritual wellbeing, which in turn may increase an individual's appreciation of life and of natural forces that exist in the universe ([Sellers and Haag 1998](#); [Swatzky and Pesut 2005](#); [Rankin & DeLashmutt, 2006](#)). Spiritual wellbeing defies a clear definition, which may in part be due to the nebulous nature of the word 'spirituality'. Some authors automatically equate this with religious faith ([Koenig, 2012](#)), whilst others take a broader approach and define it as connectedness to an 'unknown' higher power or a god (transpersonal), or to a 'known' energy source through nature and the physical environment (interpersonal) ([Fisher, 2011](#)). A sense of spiritual wellbeing may therefore be intrapersonal (an individual's own sense of meaning, purpose, and values in life), interpersonal (connecting with nature or other animals – and therefore linked to a sense of social wellbeing) or transpersonal (connectedness to a higher, unknown power or energy) ([Swinton, 2009](#)). The literature also underlines the importance of spiritual wellbeing for eudemonia and flourishing, as noted by [Haybron \(2000\)](#) and [Nussbaum \(2005\)](#). Similarly, [Bussing and Koenig \(2010\)](#) and [Andre, Foglio, and Brody \(2001\)](#) suggest that by providing meaning in life, spiritual wellbeing can lead to personal growth and a habit of reflection, which is of particular importance for this report, as it may facilitate reflection on lifestyle choices and the alignment of behaviour with personal values and ethics.

FROM EGO TO ECO

There is some noticeable overlap between the concept of social wellbeing as investigated above and what makes us feel well spiritually. This is not entirely surprising or concerning, given the holistic nature of wellbeing and what the literature suggests is a reciprocal relationship between its different elements. The literature suggests that social and spiritual wellbeing overlap in terms of connectedness, however, whilst social wellbeing tends to consider how we connect with each other, nature and other sentient beings (*interpersonal* connectedness) the research on spiritual wellbeing tends to focus more on how we feel connected on a less tangible level (*transpersonal* connectedness). This may be experienced through moments of awe, wonder or meditation and bring about a sense of shedding the ego and being part of something bigger than ourselves ([Marquès-Brocksopp, 2014](#)).

Research suggests that experiences of awe and wonder, particularly in the context of nature, are positively related to self-perceived levels of contentment ([Büssing et al., 2021](#)), prosocial/ altruistic behaviours ([Piff et al., 2015](#)) and mindful awareness of the connection between nature, others and self ([Büssing et al., ibid](#)). These findings raise the possibility that, by increasing our sense of spiritual wellbeing, experiencing awe and wonder whilst in nature may lead to more kind and altruistic behaviours – and perhaps veganism. Although further research is needed, we suggest that veganism may be a natural consequence of such awe-inspiring experiences, with individuals naturally beginning to feel an increasing connection to the natural world and other sentient beings after spending time experiencing awe and wonder whilst in nature.

"Nature often induces awe, wonder, and reverence, all emotions known to have a variety

of benefits, promoting everything from wellbeing and altruism to humility to health."

Green & Keltner (2017)



I feel I can attain a state of mindfulness particularly in nature, and this helps reinforce my sense of vegan identity.

Case study participant

VEGAN VALUES



I am more in tune with my beliefs and myself when I'm vegan.

Case study participant

Research suggests that knowing what is important to us and, living our life according to our own guiding principles, may provide us with a sense of stability and may increase our self-esteem and self-confidence. These moral guidelines can induce individuals to act in a way that has no obvious instrumental use or no direct value for them, for instance, when they show empathy, fairness or altruism toward others ([Finkelstein-Fox, 2020](#)). The literature suggests that when we live in harmony with these core guiding values, we feel more authentic, develop a strong sense of meaning and purpose ([Finkelstein-Fox, 2020](#); [Plumb et al., 2009](#)) and, in doing so, feel happier. Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that emphasising value-based, intrinsic goals over extrinsic, short-lived aims is linked to increased wellbeing because of the positive consequences of fulfilling these values ([Stone et al., 2009](#)). Despite this, there is a lack of research which

specifically considers the relationship between this sense of spiritual wellbeing, happiness, and a vegan lifestyle. This is despite evidence suggesting that a strong sense of spiritual wellbeing could act as a 'buffer' or protective factor against a diverse range of adverse situations ([Marquès-Brocksopp, 2014](#)).



This life choice and being able to get up in the morning with purpose and knowing that you are changing the world a tiny bit for the better has always made me feel well.

Case study participant

RESOLVING VALUE CONFLICT

Furthermore, if we move from a focus on values to the very closely related concept of authenticity, then it has been suggested that individuals who feel inauthentic report lower levels of self-esteem ([Davis et al., 2014](#)). Existing research often looks at values in terms of social or cultural groups, or two people holding differing values, rather than an individual's values versus that same individual's actions ([Kouzakova et al., 2012](#); [Tsirogianni et al., 2013](#)). What happens if an individual's actions and behaviour do not match the values they deem as important? Does it affect their sense of wellbeing? The wider research suggests it does, however there is a lack of studies that specifically consider this hypothesis within the context of veganism. A clear knowledge gap therefore exists, as does an opportunity to consider the relationship between veganism, authenticity and long-term wellbeing.



"To live inauthentically puts you at risk of another kind of disconnect – a worse one – a disconnect from yourself. So, you must stand there even if it's alone because there are victories to be had from standing there long enough. But the biggest victory is the one you have with yourself – gaining the courage to be disliked."

Dr Caroline Gorden, RAC

"Achieving wellbeing involves fulfilling the values that we have, resolving conflicts between our values, and adopting new values... Total value fulfilment, the goal of a life as rich in value fulfilment as it could be, gives us reason not only to pursue wellbeing via the pursuit of value fulfilment, but to maximise our overall wellbeing via the pursuit of a life that contains as much value fulfilment as possible." [Mitchell \(2019\)](#)

“ *Since going vegan my lifestyle is much more aligned with my values. I still have some way to go in ironing out any unconscious bias and judgment, but I am definitely working towards aligning my actions with my inner values.*

Case study participant

MINDFULNESS AND SPIRITUAL WELLBEING

“ *When I practice mindfulness and try to reflect and connect with more than myself...I feel I'm driven less by my ego and more by compassion for others.* *Case study participant*

With its roots in Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness has been deemed a form of practice and support that involves intentionally paying attention

to present-moment experiences (physical sensations, perceptions, affective states, thoughts and imagery) in a non-judgmental way, which is said to cultivate a stable and nonreactive awareness ([Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995](#)). By learning to be 'mindful' in everyday situations which may provoke a stressful response, individuals can learn to re-evaluate their reactions to such situations. As such, although mindfulness is a practice which is based on experiencing the present, it may simultaneously be a tool for helping to shape the way individuals manage events and situations in the future. In this way, mindfulness may be perceived as encouraging personal development ([Shapiro, Carlson, Austin, & Freedman, 2006](#)), which may lead to a fundamental shift in perspective regarding an individual's personal values, ethics, and purpose in life ([Marquès-Brocksopp, 2014](#)). The goals of mindfulness are to foster acceptance of unwanted thoughts and feelings ([Hayes, 2005](#)) and discourage 'experiential avoidance', which is the unwillingness to experience negatively evaluated feelings, physical sensations and thoughts ([Hayes, 2004](#)). As such, the foundations of mindfulness are more in line with the philosophy of eudemonia: rather than trying to avoid or change all negative thoughts in a constant striving for happiness, mindfulness highlights the need for a conceptual change which permits a greater acceptance of difficult emotions ([Kabat-Zinn, 2003](#)). Mindfulness research in the West has predominantly occurred in the fields of psychology and neuroscience. This has given rise to different types of mindfulness-based 'interventions,' which contain varying degrees of meditation practice, and which are evaluated on outcomes based on cause and effect ([Rothwell, 2006](#)). It has been argued, however, that such 'secular' approaches to mindfulness run the risk of losing any links to their spiritual origins and have been criticised in the literature for being 'psychologised' and driven by the 'ego' as opposed to the 'eco.' This was noted too by some of the case study participants::

“ Mindfulness is often too ‘psychologised’ and too often focuses just on the self and doesn’t reach out much further. I think it can be too introspective, in some ways a little selfish and indulgent. It can be a very human-centric activity. If used for the greater good, however, like for helping people feel more connected to other animals and nature then I think it could be a marvellous tool.

“ I think the problem with some forms of mindfulness is that it really is just a generic way of nurturing self-acceptance. Is it right to encourage acceptance of cognitive dissonance and hypocrisy? This is harsh but I do think it. Mindfulness and veganism need to be linked by compassion and connection with others, not just focusing on the self.

A TOOL FOR THE GREATER GOOD?

Conversely, there are more holistic approaches to mindfulness which appreciate the spiritual roots and meditative elements of mindfulness, which are often combined with other practices such as yoga. The focus of research from this standpoint is less on specific, ‘measurable’ outcomes and more on understanding and developing our knowledge about how mindfulness may engender a sense of spiritual wellbeing in individuals, and importantly, how this sense of spiritual wellbeing is holistically linked to our physical, emotional and

social health and, a reformulation of life priorities, our values, the lifestyle choices we make and how this impacts on the ‘greater good’.

A SUPPORTIVE RESOURCE?

Mindfulness may lead not only to improved spiritual wellbeing, but emotional health too in terms of confidence, self-esteem and self-control. [Wong \(2010\)](#), [Keyes and Lopez \(2002\)](#) and [Coyle \(2002\)](#) have all noted how the sense of meaning that spiritual wellbeing provides enables effective coping styles, reduces stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms, provides self-control in the face of difficult or testing situations and builds resilience. Although there is a lack of research specifically considering the implications for veganism, mindfulness may well be a resource used by vegans – especially in the early stages in their vegan journey – as a way to cope with the negative impact on their emotional health as noted above. Although further research is needed, mindfulness could arguably help both current and lapsed vegans and those considering veganism to feel empowered and more in control of their eating and lifestyle choices. Furthermore, it may serve as a coping resource for those suffering from compassion fatigue and other negative feelings as noted in the previous section on emotional wellbeing.

“ My stimulus to go vegan – mindfulness meditation and Buddhist values – seem to be correlated with the changes in my happiness and emotional wellbeing. And these also happen to be my motivating factor for being vegan, so I guess they’re all related.

Case study participant

A SENSE OF HOPE

The literature on mindfulness suggests that it can not only help individuals achieve a sense of spiritual wellbeing, but it may in turn foster feelings of optimism and hope as well, which have also been linked to happiness ([Bussing & Koenig, 2010](#); [McSherry, 2006](#)). Hope can be construed as "an energizing mental activity focused on future outcomes important for the individual" ([Fowler, 1997, p. 111](#)), and, importantly for veganism and the adoption of pro-social behaviours, a 'spur to action' ([Fowler, 1997](#)). Similarly, [Piedmont \(2001\)](#) suggests that spiritual wellbeing can take on the role of a 'motivational trait', which in the context of veganism may mean supporting an individual's attempts to discover personal meaning and purpose through their lifestyle choices. Importantly, the literature suggests that this type of 'motivational trait' tends to be stable over time, suggesting that it may lead to sustainable and long-lasting ethical lifestyle choices.

 ***"I think depending on what techniques are being used, mindfulness can make people stop and tune in to their surroundings and reconnect with things around them. It might provide hope by helping lapsed vegans return to veganism again."*** *Case study participant*

In the wider literature, mindfulness has been found to help individuals to envisage positive expectations for the future and counteract feelings of depression, which may otherwise have served as a barrier to progress in different personal situations ([Russinova, 1999](#)). [Seligman \(2011\)](#) notes how a sense of meaning in life can enhance adaptive capabilities, and in turn contributes to both hope and optimism. Therefore, spiritual wellbeing, arguably found

through mindful awareness, may foster the emotional strengths of hope and optimism, and may motivate people to become and indeed remain vegan.

These findings therefore suggest that mindfulness may positively influence both the eudemonic and hedonic dimensions of wellbeing by providing meaning and direction, therefore increasing self-esteem and self-control, as well as provoking feelings of hope and life satisfaction.

MINDFULNESS AND VEGANISM

There is a clear lack of research into veganism and mindfulness ([Beezhold et al., 2010](#)), however [case studies](#) and [anecdotal evidence](#) suggest that the meat paradox and other forms of cognitive dissonance may be addressed by a state of mindfulness, echoing the findings of the first large-scale investigation of how mental health can be impacted by vegan living:

"Striving to eat a more plant-based diet with lower intake of animal fats may be linked to better mental health." [Beezhold et al. \(2014:295\)](#)

In their 2020 [study](#), Mace & McCulloch found that around 30% of UK yoga teachers follow a plant-based diet, which is 25 times the proportion in the general UK population (ibid). This suggests that the yogic focus on peace and non-harm (ahimsa) may lead to a shift in perceptions towards all other beings which may well culminate in the choice of vegan living. These connections are important, as they suggest that as people become more in tune with themselves and their values, their behaviour and lifestyle follow suit. Mace & McCulloch's study also found that 75% of UK yoga teachers desire to follow a plant-based diet, and over two thirds regard plant-based diets as best aligned to their yogic practice, even though their actions may not match.

[Veg News](#) (2020) discusses such misalignment as follows:

“As we continue with mindfulness meditation practice, we become increasingly aware of “the dissonance created when our actions do not align with our ethics (e.g., continuing to use animal products while professing a love for animals). Furthermore, we become aware of the feelings and physical sensations of inner conflict in a more pronounced way...With this conflict, anxiety increases, inner peace is disturbed, and equanimity is sabotaged. Such actions generate a mental and emotional state that is reflected in tight shoulders, a lump in the throat, a knot in the stomach, or tension in your face that reflects conflict or regret in the mind. Mindfulness meditation practice brings these reactions to our attention in a way that inspires us to take different actions so we can live in greater resonance, peace, and happiness.”

The evidence in the literature suggests that practices such as mindfulness encourage and enable individuals to align their behaviours with their values, and through doing so help them to reach a sense of inner peace and eudemonic wellbeing. Although further research is needed, it is suggested that in the long-term, individuals following a vegan lifestyle may have a deeper, more sustainable sense of holistic wellbeing due to finally arriving to a way of living in accordance with their values, bringing meaning and purpose to their day-to-day existence through living in this way. Findings from the present case study support this:

“Changes in relation to wellbeing and happiness have definitely come later and the longer I’ve been vegan.

“At first, I found it incredibly difficult that others couldn’t and wouldn’t open their eyes, I still do, but I have learnt how to cope with it better and feel more at peace.

“My longer-term wellbeing has increased. Of course, I still get down, but overall, I have a strong sense of purpose and feel I live authentically, truthfully, and peacefully.

“Vegan values often align very well with one’s religious ethical beliefs; indeed for many of my participants there was a sense that in being vegan, they were also being better practitioners of their respective religions, both in terms of complying with religious dietary laws and the ethical teachings linked to compassion and peace. Such a strong connection between veganism and religion therefore results in a stronger sense of self and arguably positive wellbeing too.” Ellie Atayee-Bennett, RN



IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

- **Research:** Further research is strongly needed into the following:

Veganism as a natural consequence of awe-inspiring experiences in nature:

do individuals naturally begin to feel an increasing connection to the natural world and other sentient beings after spending time experiencing awe and wonder whilst in nature?

The consequences of living in harmony with our values:

what is the relationship between spiritual wellbeing, happiness and a vegan lifestyle? Does a vegan lifestyle lead to feeling more authentic and developing a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life?

Resolving value conflict: what happens if an individual's actions and behaviour do not match the values they deem as important? What is the relationship between veganism, authenticity and long-term wellbeing?

Mindful veganism: how may mindfulness support both current and lapsed vegans and those considering veganism to feel empowered and more in control of their eating and lifestyle choices?

“The implications for practice outlined here are key for developing our understanding of the holistic nature of wellbeing within a vegan context. It would be extremely helpful to be able to say, with evidence from research, that there is a positive relationship between a vegan lifestyle and a strong sense of meaning, purpose and authenticity. Claire Ogle, Head of Campaigns, Policy & Research, TVS.



This report's focus on multi-dimensional aspects of wellbeing is very important for thinking through the experiences of becoming and being vegan. Although more research is needed, there are already encouraging signs that the largely extrinsic wellbeing challenges of vegan transition can, over time, be superseded by an array of benefits to wellbeing that veganism can offer.

Dr Richard Twine, Chair of the RAC.

- **Campaigns:**

Beyond the vegan sector: related to the above research questions, campaigns may wish to consider innovative ideas concerning nature connectedness, mindful veganism and living in accordance with our values. This may include working with organisations outside of the 'usual' vegan sector (e.g. those who are not connected to veganism but whose values are not directly opposed to our own) and creating mutually beneficial relationships with charities in the wildlife, nature and mental health sector.

- **Holistic support:**

Beyond physical health: can TVS build upon its excellent nutrition support and work towards developing more holistic support for vegans? Could this link up with mental health organisations to ensure TVS is able to support the spiritual wellbeing of vegans? What opportunities are there to be at the forefront of this area and the go-to resource for vegans worldwide?

There is strong evidence for the claim that connecting with non-human animals and nature has a positive effect on our wellbeing.



CONCLUSION

Veganism is not only good for the animals and the planet, but also an investment in ourselves. The research presented in this report demonstrates that adopting veganism can have a positive effect on our sense of control and agency. We can develop stronger and more meaningful social relations and achieve a higher level of personal fulfilment as a direct result of living in accordance with our values. The research suggests that veganism may be a protective factor against ill physical health and may help us to develop and flourish emotionally, socially and spiritually. Further research is needed, however, to better understand if a vegan *diet* has such positive effects on emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing, or if such benefits are more likely when an individual adopts an ethical vegan lifestyle, which is arguably much broader, deeper and all-encompassing.

Veganism is by no means a catch-all solution for those seeking a complete sense of hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing. In fact, research suggests that the mental health of some vegans may suffer due to the awareness of the suffering endured by non-human animals and the destruction of the natural world on a global scale. Particularly at the beginning of the vegan journey, individuals may feel frustrated and hopeless, and may experience a heightened sense of social disillusionment or even social exclusion, with their sense of injustice giving way to compassion fatigue.

“We must train our minds to focus on what matters, to make conscious choices about how to best respond to the challenges and trials of life, to achieve a better balance of prioritising feeling with functioning well, and to be compassionate to others and ourselves.”
[Keyes & Haidt \(2010\)](#)

Veganism is a moral philosophy fundamentally rooted in compassion for others. It is unsurprising

then, that in a society that views non-human animals as commodities rather than beings, vegans may experience reduced levels of wellbeing. However, these feelings are not absolute, nor are they reasons not to adopt veganism. We believe that these potential negative effects are felt most acutely in those who have recently transitioned to veganism, and that the solution is for vegans to access resources and support, as well as to practice self-care and mindfulness. The next steps are to ensure that those transitioning to veganism have access to these resources, and that more comprehensive research is undertaken into the negative effects of a vegan lifestyle on emotional, social and spiritual health.

Compassion is a powerful thing. The research discussed in this report demonstrates that there are considerable benefits that come from living kindly and empathetically, and by practising altruism in our everyday lives. When we live this way, we are arguably happier:

“We must strive to act in ways that develop our capacity for doing and being good – to contribute to society, to view ourselves and others as fundamentally good, to develop warm and trusting relations with others – so that we come to feel pleasure about living our lives well.”
[Keyes & Haidt \(2010\)](#)

Perhaps to be vegan is to be more closely connected with nature on account of our efforts to reduce our exploitation of non-human animals. These animals, as we have discussed in this report, should also be conceptualised as part of nature. There is strong evidence for the claim that connecting with non-human animals and nature has a positive effect on our wellbeing. Whether that’s being out in the woods, birdwatching or simply observing a non-human animal companion, the research cited in this

report indicates a profound link between nature connectedness and wellbeing. The next step is for researchers to go beyond studies which are limited to the relationship between humans and their non-human animal companions. If we want to develop a deeper understanding of the link between ourselves and nature as a pathway to veganism, then we too should be researching free-living and farmed animals and our connections with them.



I've noticed a definite increase in spiritual wellbeing as I feel part of something bigger than me.

Case study participant

We all have our own understanding of spirituality. For some, spirituality takes a religious form, for others spirituality is about feeling connected with something larger than oneself. This report has demonstrated that spiritual wellbeing, in whatever form it may take, is important to our overall sense of wellbeing. We can only achieve spiritual wellbeing by identifying what is important to us and living our lives according to these values. Veganism may therefore be a pathway towards greater spiritual wellbeing for those whose compassion manifests on a deep, all-encompassing level. The evidence outlined in this report suggests that when we live in accordance with our values and with authenticity, we develop a deeper sense of meaning and purpose, leading to a better sense of self-esteem and emotional wellbeing.

Looking forward, [trends in positive psychology](#) call for the integration of hedonism and eudemonia into a global theory of human wellbeing and stress the need to adopt a cross-cultural perspective on happiness that takes into account a worldwide concept of a life worth living.

At the beginning of this report, we asked what role veganism could play in developing our

emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing: to help shed light on this question, we have synthesised research from a range of academic disciplines. We have built bridges between otherwise disparate research findings on wellbeing and connectedness, to develop a novel perspective on veganism with clear implications for professional practice. We welcome you to join us on the next stage of this learning journey.



"Being connected with animals feeds into being connected with nature and the wider world. For me it improves both happiness and overall wellbeing because of the increased feeling of connection and is a fundamental part of my vegan identity." *Case study participant*

"The Wellbeing Concept Report offers a fascinating insight into how veganism, nature, and wellbeing are inter-related, acknowledging that while individual happiness from aligning ethics with practice in going vegan can be counterbalanced by the hostility and suffering vegans face in society. Recognising that veganism and protecting biodiversity go hand-in-hand is vital evidence for contributing to conversations around nature therapies and wellbeing from a more ethical perspective."
Dr Catherine Oliver, RAC

"This report goes beyond the traditional scope of investigating the physical benefits of veganism, which until now, has been the predominant focus of research in this area. However, there has been much emphasis given to our wellbeing in contemporary society and so it is pleasing to see that veganism is being given the place it deserves in understanding its contribution to these facets of human health. In principle, most of us are wholly against animal cruelty or anything that harms the environment or indeed our health, and

yet our conditioned way of eating draws us way out of alignment with those beliefs. However, as this report highlights, veganism enables us to restore that alignment and live in much better accordance with our core values and beliefs. This in turn can provide great benefits to our emotional wellbeing." Caroline Gorden, RN

"It's brilliant to see a report which objectively examines the holistic impact of veganism on our health and wellbeing, from the individual mental and physical benefits as well as those to our wider society." Laura Grimes RN

"This report examines the positive relationship between veganism and one's health on a multidimensional level. This groundbreaking analysis asserts that a vegan diet can promote

long-term authentic wellbeing. A variety of research abstracts and an insightful narrative make for a compelling report. The challenges of veganism are discussed in a pragmatic manner, and the need for further research in this area is acknowledged.

*The Wellbeing Concept Report addresses how veganism can empower individuals to become more resilient and experience eudemonic happiness. Life will always be filled with challenges, and many of us are suffering from anxiety in this pandemic age. It is a wonderful discovery to learn that veganism can help us better navigate our difficulties, reduce our anxiety, and live a more fulfilling, purposeful life!"
Dyanne Harwood, RN member*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The [Research Advisory Committee](#) (RAC) supports staff and trustees of The Vegan Society by conducting and sharing academic and other research relevant to veganism. Committee members give specialist advice, act as peer reviewers, recommend references and support our research and campaigns activities by ensuring our work is academically robust.

The [Researcher Network](#) (RN) supports The Vegan Society's research projects by sharing their work with the society and contributing to our three research portfolios: (1) Health & Wellbeing (2) Society, Culture & Animal Ethics and (3) Environment & Sustainability. RN members are postgraduate students, PhD candidates, and

professional researchers.

Special thanks to Researcher Network member [Summer Phillips](#), for the literature review and case studies that provided the basis for this report.

This report was produced with the support of the RAC, Researcher Network, The Vegan Society's specialist research volunteers and The Vegan Society staff. The Research Team extends their sincere thanks to all who have been involved in this work.

For further information please contact research@vegansociety.com





**The Vegan Society,
Donald Watson House,
34–35 Ludgate Hill,
Birmingham B3 1EH**

+44 (0)121 523 1730
info@vegansociety.com
vegansociety.com