

## Excuses for Eating Meat

More than half of Americans report that they have great or some concern for animal welfare. These concerns range from the welfare of animals used for research (67%), to animals in zoos (57%) and for animals raised for human food (54%). Yet 97% of Americans eat meat. Researchers call this discrepancy the Meat Paradox, the gap between values and behavior.

Most animal-loving meat eaters, even when faced with the horrors of livestock factory farms, do not change either their behavior or values; they continue to eat meat and continue to say they care for animals. Only 3-5% of Americans have a vegetarian or vegan diet.

People tend to want consistency between their values and actions. When our values do not line up with our action, we experience varying degrees of stress and anxiety, depending on the importance of that value for us. Researchers call this discomfort cognitive dissonance. In the past we called it shame.

Any stimulus that makes someone aware of the discrepancy between their values and actions triggers shame. Researchers have found that the most powerful triggers for the Meat Paradox include thinking about the animals we eat, reminders that eating meat goes against our values, reminders of how the animal we eat suffered, or having dinner with a vegetarian or vegan. The more someone likes eating meat and animals, the more pronounced the distress becomes.

The most direct way to resolve the shame of not acting on our values requires us to either change our values or our behaviors. This restores the congruity between our actions and values.

People feeling shame use excuses to justify their behavior. Justifying their value-behavior gap prompts people to dip into the well-worn bag of irrational thinking to play out defense mechanisms. The top three Meat Paradox defense mechanisms include:

- **Avoiding:** This involves avoiding or ignoring the triggers for shame. A person may not think about the origin of meat, avoid people or situations that remind them of their value-behavior gap, discourage people from talking about the gap, or distracting themselves from having to take responsibility for the gap.
- **Delegitimizing:** This involves undermining evidence of the dissonance. A person may do this by discrediting the person, group, or situation that highlighted the dissonance. For example, they might dispute a report's bias or trustworthiness.
- **Limiting impact:** This involves limiting the discomfort of cognitive dissonance by belittling its importance. A person may do this by claiming that they rarely eat meat or by providing rational arguments to convince themselves or others that they actually do behave morally.

Some of the oft mentioned excuses researcher identified, organized to highlight exceptionalism, include:

### Exceptionalism

- Claiming meat animals do not feel pain or other human-like emotions like love or grief.
- Claiming that meat animals do not have the brain capacity to know what happens to them, which renders their meat consumption morally harmless.
- Claiming meat animals lack consciousness.
- Claiming that meat animals have a low status relative to other animals.
- Valuing some animals more than others.
- Denying that eating meat harms the animal.

- Claiming the superiority of people over animals, which justifies eating them as the survival of the fittest and the circle of life work that way.
- Claiming that meat animals serve the greater good of humanity.
- Claiming that other people eat more meat than they.
- Viewing meat animals negatively.
- Claiming that people sit at the top of the food chain, which makes it natural to eat meat.
- Claiming that others attack their rights as an individual.
- Claiming that a meat-free diet restricts their dietary freedom.
- Prioritizing the pleasure of eating meat.
- Claiming that individual change does not have the power to reduce the harms of consuming meat. It would require everyone not eating meat, a system change.

### **Blaming**

- Distancing themselves from the harms caused to animals from eating them by claiming that they themselves did not inflict the pain upon the animals.
- Displacing their moral discomfort upon vegetarians/vegans by a biased negative representation of them.
- Claiming plant based diets also have climate impacts.

### **Ignoring (Avoiding)**

- Not believing information about animal intelligence or capacity for feelings.
- Not thinking about animal suffering.
- Using euphemisms, like the word bacon rather than pig.
- Underestimating or misrepresenting the amount of meat they consume.
- Believing that future technologies will reduce meat's climate footprint

### **Others**

- **Necessity:** Needing to eat meat for health and survival.
- **Fearing other people's reactions:** Asserting that their culture or religious practices make it normal to eat meat.
- **Lying:** 27% of vegetarians admit that they eat red meat.
- **Weakness:** Self-perceived lack of willpower. While the decision not to eat meat removes the discomfort of shame, researchers find that the resolve to reduce or end meat consumption weakens over time, and many return to eating meat and to their shame.

### **Resources:**

Ann Christiano and Annie Neimod, "The science of what makes people care", *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2010.

Sarah Gradidge, et al., "A Structured literature review of the meat paradox", *Social Psychological Bulletin* (9-28-2021).

Marta Zaraska, "Meet the Meat Paradox", *Scientific American* (July 1, 2016).