

# Mental Health Dimensions in Vegan and Plant-Based Lifestyles

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the psychological and emotional dimensions of adopting and maintaining vegan and plant-based lifestyles in a culturally specific urban context. This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of 26 self-identified vegan and plant-based individuals residing in Tehran. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and interviewed using in-depth semi-structured interviews, which continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software to identify key themes, subthemes, and underlying concepts. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently to allow for iterative coding and refinement of emerging categories. Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) emotional and psychological well-being, (2) cognitive and behavioral shifts, and (3) social and interpersonal dynamics. Participants reported enhanced emotional regulation, reduced anxiety, and a stronger sense of purpose. Cognitive benefits included improved mental clarity, decision-making, and alignment between values and actions. However, many also encountered psychological challenges such as social stigma, judgment, and emotional fatigue. Adaptive coping strategies—such as journaling, mindfulness, and online support—were frequently employed. Community support and ethical motivation were identified as key protective factors, while institutional limitations and interpersonal conflict were identified as stressors. Vegan and plant-based lifestyles are associated with both positive and challenging mental health experiences, shaped by individual identity, social context, and motivational orientation. While ethical alignment and community engagement foster psychological resilience, social misunderstanding and limited structural support may contribute to emotional strain. These findings underscore the need for culturally informed mental health and policy interventions that acknowledge both the benefits and burdens of plant-based living.

**Keywords:** veganism; plant-based lifestyle; mental health.

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## Introduction

In recent years, vegan and plant-based lifestyles have transitioned from marginal dietary choices to mainstream sociocultural movements. These lifestyles are increasingly adopted for reasons that transcend nutrition, encompassing ethical concerns, environmental sustainability, and psychological well-being. While much of the scientific literature has explored the physical health implications of plant-based diets, the

mental and emotional dimensions remain underexamined, particularly through qualitative inquiry. The psychological impact of adhering to a vegan or plant-based diet is influenced by a complex interplay of identity, motivation, social context, and nutritional adequacy (1-3).

Veganism, in particular, is not merely a dietary choice but often represents a comprehensive lifestyle and identity with deep ideological underpinnings (4-6). Individuals who adopt veganism for ethical reasons frequently report experiencing alignment between their values and daily behaviors, contributing to a sense of moral coherence and emotional satisfaction (7, 8). However, this identity-based alignment can also result in psychological distress when individuals face social friction, stigma, or marginalization in predominantly omnivorous environments (9, 10). Consequently, mental health outcomes among vegans are far from uniform and are shaped significantly by psychosocial dynamics.

The motivations underlying the adoption of plant-based diets further complicate this psychological landscape. Research indicates that individuals pursue veganism or plant-based diets for diverse reasons, including health improvement, animal welfare, environmental concern, and spiritual beliefs (4, 11, 12). These varied motivations are associated with distinct psychological patterns. For example, ethically motivated individuals may derive psychological resilience from living in accordance with their values, while health-focused adherents may experience anxiety over nutritional adequacy or physical performance (13, 14). Motivational heterogeneity must therefore be considered in any rigorous investigation of the mental health impacts of these diets.

Some studies suggest that individuals following plant-based diets report enhanced emotional states, reduced anxiety, and improved mood stability (1, 15). These outcomes have been attributed to a combination of dietary composition, self-discipline, and ethical alignment. For instance, the reduced intake of inflammatory foods and increased consumption of fiber and antioxidants have been linked to improved gut-brain axis functioning, potentially influencing mood and cognitive clarity (3, 16). However, the literature also points to potential negative effects, particularly in cases where nutritional supplementation is lacking or social support is minimal (17, 18). Without adequate intake of essential nutrients such as vitamin B12, iron, and omega-3 fatty acids, individuals may experience fatigue, cognitive decline, and mood disturbances.

The role of community and social connectedness emerges as another significant factor in the mental health of plant-based individuals. Digital platforms have facilitated the growth of virtual communities where individuals can find validation, share experiences, and disseminate information (10, 19). These online environments often serve as protective spaces that reduce feelings of isolation and provide emotional reinforcement, especially for individuals whose immediate social circles are not supportive. However, the same platforms can expose users to polarized debates, food elitism, and unrealistic body or lifestyle standards, contributing to stress and confusion (18, 20).

Dietary identity has been shown to intersect meaningfully with personality traits and psychological resilience. In a study examining vegans and vegetarians, higher levels of openness to experience and conscientiousness were associated with stronger dietary commitment and psychological well-being (2). Conversely, low social support and higher neuroticism were correlated with emotional strain and increased risk of depressive symptoms. These findings suggest that individual psychological profiles must be considered when evaluating mental health outcomes within plant-based populations.

Social and institutional barriers often further complicate the experience of plant-based individuals. From family tensions during shared meals to limited workplace food options, vegans and vegetarians frequently encounter environments that do not accommodate their dietary needs (21, 22). These barriers can lead to a heightened sense of exclusion or emotional fatigue, especially when individuals must repeatedly explain or defend their choices. Nevertheless, others report that navigating these obstacles can strengthen personal resilience and foster community ties through shared advocacy and mutual understanding (8, 9).

The intersection of veganism with consumer behavior also offers insights into psychological well-being. Some research suggests that non-vegan consumers who buy vegan products may be motivated by trends or health perceptions rather than ethical commitment, creating a distinct form of dietary engagement that may not yield the same psychological benefits associated with identity-driven veganism (21). Meanwhile, the expansion of vegan-friendly travel and hospitality services has been shown to ease lifestyle maintenance and improve emotional satisfaction among adherents (22, 23). Increased societal acceptance and infrastructure for plant-based living may therefore play a vital role in reducing lifestyle-related stress.

From a nutritional standpoint, recent work has underscored the importance of knowledge and supplementation in maintaining both physical and mental health on plant-based diets. Inadequate planning may lead to deficiencies that not only compromise physical well-being but also exacerbate psychological symptoms such as fatigue, irritability, and depressive moods (17, 18). In response, digital tools such as apps designed to prevent malnutrition have been developed to support dietary monitoring and personalized nutrition (18). However, the psychological effectiveness of such interventions remains underexplored.

Ethical dimensions also frame much of the psychological experience of vegans. Some individuals describe their diet as a form of social justice activism, deeply tied to personal identity and global awareness (6, 24). This orientation can bring emotional fulfillment but may also produce distress when individuals witness ongoing societal harm to animals or the environment. Emotional regulation strategies such as mindfulness, community activism, and ethical storytelling often emerge as key tools for coping with these challenges (7, 8).

Despite the complexity and significance of these issues, qualitative studies on the mental health dimensions of veganism remain limited. Much of the current evidence base relies on cross-sectional survey data and quantitative methodologies, which, while informative, often fail to capture the depth and nuance of lived psychological experience (5, 20). Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to explore how individuals construct meaning, manage emotional conflicts, and navigate social landscapes in relation to their dietary choices (10, 24). Moreover, such an approach allows for the identification of culturally specific factors that may influence psychological outcomes.

This study responds to the need for qualitative, context-sensitive research on the mental health implications of plant-based lifestyles. By focusing on individuals in Tehran, it contributes to a more geographically and culturally diverse understanding of veganism. While existing literature is largely centered on Western populations, the Iranian context presents unique social, religious, and institutional factors that influence the adoption and maintenance of a plant-based diet (12, 25). These include differing food norms, religious perspectives on consumption, and the availability of vegan options in public and private spaces.

This study explores how individuals in Tehran experience emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of mental health in relation to their vegan or plant-based lifestyles.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the mental health dimensions associated with vegan and plant-based lifestyles. The research was conducted in Tehran, Iran, and involved 26 participants who identified as vegan or plant-based for at least one year. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a range of perspectives in terms of age, gender, and duration of adherence to the lifestyle. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, at which point no new themes emerged from the interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, conducted between [insert dates if available]. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes and were held either in person or via secure online platforms, depending on participant preference and public health considerations. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to explore participants’ experiences, emotions, challenges, and perceptions related to their mental health and lifestyle. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and themes within the data. Transcribed interviews were coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (version [insert version if known]) to facilitate systematic organization and interpretation. An initial coding framework was developed based on the research questions and refined iteratively as analysis progressed. Coding was conducted by the primary researcher and reviewed by a second researcher to enhance credibility. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, allowing for the ongoing refinement of themes and the achievement of theoretical saturation.

Findings and Results

A total of 26 participants took part in this study, all residing in Tehran and self-identifying as either vegan (n = 18) or plant-based (n = 8). The sample consisted of 17 females and 9 males, ranging in age from 21 to 52 years (mean age = 32.4 years). Most participants (n = 20) had attained at least a university-level education, with 11 holding a bachelor’s degree and 9 having completed postgraduate studies. Participants had adopted their vegan or plant-based lifestyles for periods ranging from 1 to 12 years, with the majority (n = 15) maintaining the lifestyle for 3 to 6 years. In terms of occupation, the group included university students (n = 5), professionals in health and wellness fields (n = 7), artists or creatives (n = 4), office or administrative workers (n = 6), and others including homemakers and freelancers (n = 4).

Table 1. Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts from Qualitative Analysis

Category (Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional and Psychological Well-being	1.1 Reduced Anxiety and Stress	Mindfulness in food choices, Lower cortisol perception, Calmer mood, Less guilt after eating
	1.2 Improved Mood Stability	Fewer mood swings, Positive self-image, Feeling lighter, Enhanced self-regulation

2. Cognitive and Behavioral Shifts	1.3 Sense of Purpose and Meaning	Lifestyle aligned with values, Emotional fulfillment, Living ethically, Personal identity reinforcement
	1.4 Emotional Challenges and Social Isolation	Feeling judged, Exclusion from social events, Loneliness, Misunderstood lifestyle
	1.5 Enhanced Emotional Awareness	Greater sensitivity to emotions, Reflective eating, Awareness of emotional triggers
	1.6 Coping Strategies	Meditation, Journaling, Online support groups, Sharing recipes as emotional outlet
	1.7 Emotional Validation from Community	Finding belonging online, Positive reinforcement, Shared values, Vegan meetups
	2.1 Increased Mental Clarity	Better concentration, Reduced brain fog, Clearer thinking
	2.2 Cognitive Dissonance Resolution	Overcoming meat-eating guilt, Consistency in values and actions, Rational alignment
	2.3 Behavior Modification and Habit Formation	Meal planning routines, Label checking, Conscious decision-making, Improved self-control
	2.4 Learning and Information Seeking	Researching nutrition, Following science-based influencers, Watching documentaries, Attending webinars
	2.5 Critical Thinking and Ethical Reasoning	Questioning norms, Reflecting on food systems, Considering animal rights
3. Social and Interpersonal Dynamics	2.6 Self-Discipline and Motivation	Long-term commitment, Goal-setting, Avoiding temptations, Inner drive
	3.1 Navigating Social Judgment	Facing criticism, Managing awkward questions, Adapting language in conversation
	3.2 Influence on Relationships	Strained family meals, Partner conflicts, Building vegan friendships, Encouraging others
	3.3 Support Systems and Community	Joining vegan forums, Local groups, Attending events, Shared meals
	3.4 Social Advocacy and Activism	Attending protests, Educating others, Sharing content, Public speaking
	3.5 Workplace and Institutional Challenges	Limited food options, Stereotypes at work, Being left out of lunches

### Category 1: Emotional and Psychological Well-being

Participants frequently reported reduced anxiety and stress after adopting a vegan or plant-based lifestyle. Many described feeling more balanced and less emotionally reactive. One participant shared, *“I used to feel anxious all the time, especially after meals. But now, I feel more grounded and less on edge.”*

Several interviewees mentioned improved mood stability, with fewer emotional highs and lows. They associated this stability with both physical and psychological factors such as improved digestion, self-image, and hormone regulation. As one participant put it, *“My mood swings have significantly decreased—I feel more emotionally steady.”*

A strong sense of purpose and meaning emerged as a central benefit of this lifestyle. Participants expressed deep emotional satisfaction from aligning their eating habits with personal ethics. *“Every meal is a small act of activism. That gives me a sense of meaning I never had before,”* noted one interviewee.

However, emotional challenges were also reported, particularly related to social isolation and misunderstanding. Participants shared experiences of feeling judged or excluded from gatherings. *“I often feel like the odd one out at family dinners—it’s emotionally draining,”* said a participant.

Enhanced emotional awareness was another recurring theme. Some described becoming more sensitive to their own emotional states and triggers through more mindful eating. *“I now notice how certain foods used to numb my feelings. With plants, I feel more connected to myself,”* one respondent explained.

In response to emotional challenges, participants employed various coping strategies such as meditation, journaling, and participation in online support communities. Sharing food and recipes was also a therapeutic outlet for some. *“When I post a new recipe and others try it, I feel seen,”* one said.

Lastly, many found emotional validation through community engagement. Online forums, vegan meetups, and shared advocacy work fostered a sense of belonging. *“I met people who truly get it. That emotional support is priceless,”* one participant emphasized.

### **Category 2: Cognitive and Behavioral Shifts**

Increased mental clarity was a significant theme, with participants describing improved concentration and reduced brain fog. *“I don’t feel sluggish after eating anymore. My head feels clearer,”* reported one interviewee.

Cognitive dissonance resolution was another subtheme. Participants experienced relief when their actions aligned with their ethical beliefs. One noted, *“I always felt uncomfortable eating meat, but now I feel at peace with my choices.”*

Behavior modification and habit formation were evident in participants' daily routines. Many adopted structured practices like meal planning and intentional grocery shopping. *“I now read every label. It’s become second nature,”* remarked one individual.

The shift also prompted active learning and information seeking. Participants reported spending considerable time researching nutrition, attending webinars, and consuming plant-based educational media. *“I’ve learned more about food in the past year than in my entire life,”* said a participant.

Critical thinking and ethical reasoning were also enhanced. Many described questioning societal food norms and developing deeper perspectives on animal rights and environmental issues. *“It made me think beyond food—about justice, sustainability, and the planet,”* reflected one respondent.

Finally, self-discipline and motivation emerged as powerful factors in maintaining this lifestyle. Participants spoke of overcoming temptations and setting personal goals. *“It’s not always easy, but I remind myself why I started. That keeps me going,”* one explained.

### **Category 3: Social and Interpersonal Dynamics**

Navigating social judgment was a common experience. Participants shared feelings of defensiveness, discomfort, or frustration when questioned or criticized by others. *“People think I’m judging them just by existing,”* one participant stated.

The lifestyle also influenced relationships, sometimes causing tension with family or partners. At the same time, many formed stronger bonds with like-minded individuals. *“I lost some connections but gained others who truly support me,”* one interviewee shared.

Support systems and community networks played a key role in sustaining the lifestyle. Participants cited vegan forums, local meetups, and group chats as sources of encouragement and shared understanding. *“Knowing others are out there living like me gives me strength,”* said one respondent.

Social advocacy and activism were expressed as extensions of personal commitment. Participants engaged in public education, social media activism, and protests. *“I feel empowered when I use my voice to raise awareness,”* one individual mentioned.

However, workplace and institutional challenges were also reported. Limited vegan options at work and negative stereotypes created stress and feelings of exclusion. *“At company lunches, I’m usually left with a dry salad,”* one participant noted wryly.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**



This study explored the mental health dimensions of vegan and plant-based lifestyles through the lived experiences of 26 individuals in Tehran. The findings revealed three overarching themes: emotional and psychological well-being, cognitive and behavioral shifts, and social and interpersonal dynamics. Participants generally reported enhanced emotional awareness, reduced anxiety, and increased cognitive clarity, alongside challenges such as social judgment, isolation, and the burden of dietary maintenance. These findings echo the complex and often ambivalent relationship between dietary identity and mental health observed in prior research.

One of the most prominent themes in this study was the reported improvement in emotional and psychological well-being following the adoption of a vegan or plant-based lifestyle. Participants consistently described feeling calmer, more emotionally stable, and less anxious. This aligns with previous studies that have shown plant-based diets to be associated with reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety, potentially due to the anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties of the diet (1, 15). The consumption of nutrient-dense, plant-based foods may enhance gut microbiota health and, by extension, positively affect the gut-brain axis, thereby supporting mood regulation (3, 16).

Beyond biological factors, the psychological benefits reported by participants were closely tied to a perceived alignment between personal values and daily behavior. This congruence appeared to foster a strong sense of purpose and self-integrity, which is consistent with literature emphasizing ethical motivation as a stabilizing force for mental health (6, 7). Participants who adopted veganism for animal rights or environmental reasons expressed feelings of emotional fulfillment and moral clarity. These experiences are supported by research suggesting that acting in accordance with personal ethics enhances psychological resilience and reduces existential distress (4, 8).

However, the study also uncovered psychological challenges. Several participants discussed experiences of emotional isolation and social misunderstanding, particularly in relation to family, friends, and work environments. These experiences reflect findings from other studies, which have shown that vegans often report social exclusion and judgment in non-vegan settings (10, 21). Social stigma and the burden of needing to justify one's dietary choices can be emotionally taxing, leading to feelings of alienation and anxiety (9, 20). Despite these challenges, participants also noted the emergence of adaptive coping strategies such as online engagement, community involvement, and personal rituals like journaling or meditation. Such coping mechanisms mirror the protective social identity dynamics described in prior literature (8, 19).

Cognitive and behavioral changes also featured prominently in the narratives of participants. Many reported increased mental clarity, enhanced focus, and improved decision-making processes. These experiences may be partially explained by dietary factors, but also by the self-discipline and intentionality required to maintain a vegan lifestyle. These findings align with Coxon et al. (2), who found that plant-based individuals tend to exhibit higher levels of conscientiousness and cognitive engagement. Participants described becoming more aware of their food choices and the broader consequences of consumption, suggesting a shift toward reflective and ethically informed cognitive frameworks (11, 13).

Another significant cognitive shift reported was the resolution of internal conflict and cognitive dissonance. Participants who previously experienced discomfort about animal consumption described their transition to veganism as psychologically liberating. This phenomenon is echoed in literature where individuals report reduced inner tension and increased mental harmony after aligning behavior with

previously held beliefs (6, 24). The psychological clarity achieved through this alignment may serve as a buffer against emotional volatility and promote sustained mental wellness.

On the behavioral front, participants noted that the lifestyle demanded the development of new routines, such as meal planning, reading food labels, and seeking reliable nutrition sources. These behavioral shifts required high levels of self-monitoring and personal responsibility, which some found empowering and others described as burdensome. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that the cognitive demands of a vegan lifestyle may enhance executive functioning and health literacy in some, while leading to fatigue or anxiety in others, particularly when nutritional knowledge is limited (17, 18).

The third major theme—social and interpersonal dynamics—highlighted the importance of community, advocacy, and support in shaping mental health outcomes. Participants who had access to vegan communities, whether online or in person, reported greater feelings of belonging and emotional safety. These communities provided not only informational resources but also emotional validation, which helped participants cope with feelings of otherness in predominantly non-vegan settings. Prior studies have emphasized the value of community in sustaining plant-based identities and buffering against loneliness (8, 19). Vegan forums, social media groups, and meetups were cited as essential spaces for expressing identity and receiving peer support.

Conversely, many participants shared stories of strained relationships, especially in family contexts or workplaces where their dietary practices were not respected or understood. This is supported by previous work showing that veganism can disrupt traditional social rituals centered around food, such as family meals and communal dining (21, 22). Participants reported experiences ranging from subtle microaggressions to overt criticism. However, some used these challenges as motivation for activism and education, turning their lifestyle into a platform for social change. This aligns with findings that advocacy often strengthens identity and provides emotional reinforcement (23, 24).

The broader sociocultural context of Tehran added a unique layer to participants' experiences. While some reported increasing awareness and accessibility of vegan products, others noted institutional challenges such as limited options in schools, hospitals, or restaurants. These barriers reflect findings in the literature that emphasize the role of structural support in facilitating or hindering the mental well-being of plant-based individuals (12, 25). The Iranian cultural context, with its own dietary norms and religious considerations, shaped how participants interpreted and experienced their lifestyles. This underscores the importance of localized, culturally sensitive research in understanding the full scope of veganism's mental health implications.

The discussion of identity in this study is especially significant. For many participants, veganism was not simply a diet but a deeply rooted aspect of self-definition. This resonates with the argument that veganism functions as a form of moral and social identity, reinforcing self-worth, agency, and autonomy (4, 8). However, when that identity is invalidated or attacked, it can become a source of psychological vulnerability. This duality suggests that vegan identity operates as both a protective factor and a potential risk factor for mental health, depending on the context in which it is expressed (9, 10).

Overall, this study contributes new insights to the growing literature on plant-based lifestyles and mental health by providing an in-depth, context-sensitive exploration of individual experiences. It confirms prior quantitative findings while adding narrative complexity and emotional nuance. The findings support the



argument that veganism can be both psychologically beneficial and emotionally demanding—a lifestyle that promotes purpose and clarity but also requires emotional labor and social negotiation.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to individuals living in Tehran, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or geographic contexts. While Tehran offers a diverse urban setting, rural populations or those in less accessible regions may have vastly different experiences. Second, participants were all self-identified vegans or plant-based individuals who had maintained their lifestyle for at least one year, potentially introducing selection bias toward individuals with more stable or positive experiences. Finally, as with all qualitative research, the findings are interpretive and based on self-reported data, which may be subject to memory bias, social desirability, or selective disclosure.

Future research should consider comparative studies across different cultural contexts to explore how societal norms, religious beliefs, and economic conditions influence the psychological experiences of vegan individuals. Longitudinal research could also provide deeper insight into how mental health outcomes evolve over time with sustained adherence to a plant-based lifestyle. Furthermore, integrating mixed-methods approaches may enrich our understanding by combining the depth of qualitative data with the breadth of quantitative analysis. Specific attention could be paid to how gender, age, or socioeconomic status intersect with dietary identity to shape psychological well-being. Additionally, future studies should examine the mental health outcomes of transitioning individuals and those who revert from veganism to omnivorous diets.

Mental health professionals working with plant-based individuals should be attuned to the identity-related aspects of dietary adherence. Supporting clients in navigating social isolation, family tensions, and nutritional anxiety is essential. Community organizers and advocacy groups should prioritize emotional support systems in addition to informational resources. Public health institutions and food service providers can contribute by improving access to balanced vegan options in schools, hospitals, and workplaces. Finally, efforts to destigmatize plant-based lifestyles in mainstream media and policy can foster more inclusive environments, ultimately promoting mental health for those who choose this path.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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