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September 7, 2010

Eating Disorders: The Dark Side of Vegetarianism

Harold Herzog, *Animal Studies Repository*



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Hal Herzog Ph.D., Animals and Us

Eating Disorders: The Dark Side of Vegetarianism

Is the Skinny Bitch Diet dangerous?

Posted Sep 07, 2010

I don't know if Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin are bitches, but judging by the cover photo on their book, they are skinny. Rory (a former model) and Kim (a modeling agent) are the authors of *Skinny Bitch* -- "a no-nonsense tough-love guide for savvy girls who want to stop eating crap and start looking fabulous!" Rule number one: quit eating meat.

Going veg is sensible advice. In my view, the case against eating animals is strong on moral, environmental, and health grounds. But a woman named Staci Giani made me wonder whether there is sometimes a dark side to giving up meat. Staci is a thirty-something ex-vegetarian who lives in an eco-community an hour south of Asheville. I interviewed her for the chapter on the human-meat relationship in my book new book, *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It Is So Hard To Think Straight About Animals*.

Things were going fine until I asked Staci why she quit eating meat in the first place. She said that she became a vegetarian when she was a teenager. Then she dropped the bombshell: "My vegetarianism was tied up with my eating disorder."

She went on: "Being a vegetarian was a way for me to have more control over my body by taking the fat out of my diet. Fat was the big evil. Emotionally I was in a tough position in my life at seventeen. Vegetarianism gave me something to hold onto."

Looking back on her own experience, Stacy thinks that for some women, giving up meat is not so much a matter of ethics but a politically acceptable form of extreme weight control. What she said made my head spin. I know a lot of long-term vegetarians, and while I eat meat, I have always thought their life-style was admirable.

What the Research Says About Vegetarianism and Disordered Eating

As soon as I returned home from our interview, I pulled up Google Scholar on my computer and typed "vegetarianism" and "eating disorders" into the search bar. In a millisecond, a slew of scientific studies popped up. I have listed many of them at the end of this blog. But to save you the trouble of digging them up, here is brief summary of what they reported:

- Female college vegetarians are more likely than meat eaters to feel guilty after they eat, be more preoccupied with being thin, and are more likely to use laxatives, extreme exercise, and vomiting to lose weight.
- Teenage and adult vegetarians are four times as likely as omnivores to engage in binge eating.
- Vegetarian adolescents in both Turkey and Australia show greater concern over their appearance and engage in more extreme eating behaviors than meat-eaters.
- Finnish vegetarian women have higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem than non-vegetarians.

-College students who avoid meat are more obsessed with their weight and diet more often than meat eaters. They are also more inclined to agree with the statement, "If given the opportunity to eliminate all my nutritional needs safely and cheaply by taking a pill, I would."

I was stunned. The next day, I mentioned my discovery to my colleague Candice Boan-Lenzo, a psychologist who has not eaten meat for fifteen years. Did she know that vegetarians are at higher risk for developing eating disorders?

"Oh yes," she says. "I tell my graduate students about it every semester."

"What do they say?" I ask.

"They don't believe me," she says.

Is The Skinny Bitch Diet Harmful To Women?

According to the Humane Research Council, there are twice as many female than male vegetarians. Several years ago, I reviewed the scientific literature on sex differences in the treatment of animals. You will not be surprised to find that, as a rule, women are more concerned about animal suffering than men. I am sure most female vegetarians give up meat out of concern for animals and the environment, not from a pathological desire to lose weight. However, there is no denying that meat-avoidance can be associated with eating problems, especially in women. (Rory and Kim even allude to the dangers of the Skinny Bitch diet, telling readers, "*Don't be a fat pig anymore...But don't go anorexic on us, either.*") The fact is that women are much more susceptible to eating disorders than men. Indeed, one recent study reported a female to male ratio of 9 to 1 for anorexia nervosa and 30 to 1 for bulimia nervosa.

The *Skinny Bitch* diet book asks readers, "Are you sick and tired of being fat?" If the answer is yes -- which it often is among teenage girls and young women -- they have the answer: **Stop Eating Animals!** For some women (we don't know how many) this is bad advice. Eating disorders are serious. Anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating affect eight million Americans a year. And, with a fatality rate of between five and ten percent, anorexia is among the most dangerous of psychiatric disorders.

More research is needed on the relationship between eating disorders and vegetarianism. I am still convinced that for most people, a plant-based diet is good alternative to eating animals. But it is also clear to me that that the *Skinny Bitch* admonition that **Vegetarianism = Healthy = Skinny** is, at best, simplistic and is sometimes – dead wrong.