

Plant-based Eating Expert Roundtable: Transcript

Krista Scott-Dixon: Welcome back to another expert roundtable. Today we're going to be discussing plant-based eating. I'm Krista Scott-Dixon; I'm the Director of Curriculum at Precision Nutrition, and I've got a kickass panel here today.

I'll let them introduce themselves. I'm going to go one by one and we're going to talk about plant-based eating in practice. So in the coaching trenches. Let me just start with Brian St. Pierre. Can you tell us who you are and what you're bringing to this conversation?

Brian St. Pierre: Yeah, hopefully bringing something to this conversation. I'm the Director of Nutrition at Precision Nutrition. So I'm bringing the nutrition-oriented focus, the food focus, to this table.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Thanks Brian. Ryan.

Ryan Andrews: Yeah, it's good to be here. So I've been doing things on and off with Precision for many years now, a lot of education, and training, and food and food systems, and health. And these days I'm doing a lot of teaching and writing and speaking, and I'm really excited to contribute to this conversation.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Thanks Ryan. Gillian?

Gillian Hagg: Yeah. Hi everybody. I'm Gillian, a plant-based eater for a number of years now, and coach of plant-based eaters and non plant-based eaters. And I don't always share this fact when I'm introducing myself, but for today, because we're talking about making some choices and eating plant-based, I'll just give a little context for some of my responses, and that is that I grew up in a very rural environment on a farm. We raised cattle for beef and cereal crops, as did all my neighbors, friends, networks. So I've kind of seen, like, both sides of the supply chain a little bit in producing plants and producing animals for food. Nowadays I don't live on a farm, and I don't eat animals, but I'm still really in touch with my roots, as I grow a pretty mean backyard garden and I'm super passionate about growing food.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Awesome. Thanks. And finally, Pam.

Pam Ruhland: Hi. Yeah, I'm Pam. I've been with PN as a coach for the women's groups for over six years as a coach, and before that as a mentor, and before that as a client. So I've seen different

versions of different clients coming in who are interested in plant-based eating and it's, you know, there's a bit of a resurgence at this point. So it's been interesting to see different people's takes in recent years. And I've been plant-based for a number of years myself, and always enjoy having the conversation with clients whenever it comes up.

Krista Scott-Dixon: All right, thanks. Well, before we get into the more specific coaching advice, I wanted to set the frame a little bit and ask both Ryan and Brian, like, why this, why now? Why did we make the decision to move forward with the plant-based eating guide? Why does it feel timely and relevant? Maybe Brian, I'll start with you as someone who has been with Precision Nutrition for a long time, and is really thinking about developing curriculum for our coaches, getting certified, like, what felt so urgent, because we could have done lots of topics, right? What felt urgent and important about plant-based eating right now?

Brian St. Pierre: Yeah, I think it's a good question. We talked about it a lot, and I've talked about it with a lot of fitness professionals over the years, but I think just especially recently, I mean, Pam kind of touched on it, but especially recently, plant-based has really entered the mainstream in a way, in the mainstream conversation, that I can't remember it being a part of, the way it has. There were, there've always been plant-based eaters, people who ate vegetarian or who identified as vegans or what have you. But it feels like there's been a fundamental shift in the nutrition landscape, where plant-based has become something people are conscious of and aware of. I think for a whole host of reasons, and Ryan can really talk about this. You talk about climate change and a whole host of ethical reasons.

But even beyond that, just from a health and performance standpoint, it seems to have just really entered the lexicon, much like Paleo and keto did before it. You're seeing a lot of documentaries, *What the Health*, *Forks over Knives*. *Game Changers* has been the most recent and probably really took the conversation to a new level. And even seeing big companies like *Men's Health*, who write about nutrition and the fitness industry and *Women's Health*, writing a lot more about plant-based eating. *Men's Health* is writing a book about plant-based eating. I wrote the foreword for that book.

So there's a huge conversation brewing in the fitness and nutrition field, and the industry itself, about plant-based eating. It just felt really timely and salient, to have this conversation now and really bring, I think, some context and nuance to the conversation that's often missing in, you know, in Twitter or social media conversations that have 180 or 360 characters. We can bring some real depth with all of our knowledge and experience coaching plant-based eating. So that's really why it felt like the time is now.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah, that's great. And Ryan, I'd be curious from you because, I mean, you have a history of, like, you've been, you were plant-based eating before plant-based eating was cool in a

way, but I have the sense that now, like Brian says, it feels like a very timely topic. And what's your take on that?

Ryan Andrews: Yeah, I mean, people seem to be thinking more broadly about their food choices and whether it's their own health, or the future of the planet, or animal welfare, or farm worker welfare, just a more equitable overall food system, and plant-based eating seems to be a common theme among all of those things.

So I think that a lot of people are exploring plant-based eating for a lot of different reasons, which, a lot of those reasons get me really excited. And I think another big reason for doing this guide specifically is when you're scrolling through social media, you'll see people who, you know, say that if you adopt a plant-based diet, you'll sleep like a baby, look like a god or a goddess, and live happily ever after. And I hope we can offer a little bit more of a nuanced, accurate portrayal.

I don't want to shortchange plant-based eating. I think it can be wonderful in a lot of different ways, but just to not say, like, "This is the solution to all of your problems and if you adopt this diet, you'll be fine moving forward." So I hope we can, I hope we covered that all throughout the definitive guide.

Krista Scott-Dixon: I'm really glad you raised that and we'll get into that a little bit later, but I think you've really called it, that either the binary thinking, like, "All plants good, all animals bad", or the magical thinking of, "If I eat this way then it's going to just cure everything that could ever possibly go wrong with me." [laughs]

So I'm glad you laid this down right up front and talk about the complexity and the nuance that is involved in these conversations. And I mean, Ryan, let me just keep going with you. I mean, you've been in this world for a long, long time.

Thinking about these kinds of questions that plant-based eating raises, I think it'd be useful for folks to know your history a little bit. I mean, you started out as a bodybuilder following a very standard bodybuilding diet, and you were competing at a pretty high level, and then you transitioned to plant-based eating, you were a coach for many years. You've been following the science. So for you, I'd be curious, like, how, what's changed or developed in terms of how you think about plant-based eating?

Ryan Andrews: Ah, yeah, it's evolved quite a bit over the years. So I started off as a competitive bodybuilder, like you said. So I always think of it, like, my perspective was pretty narrow at the time. It was all about, "What can my food choices do for my physique?" Like, how can I eat in a way that maximizes my muscle mass, minimizes my body fat, and allows me to win my next contest?

And over the coming years, different things led me to widen my perspective. Over the next couple of years, I learned more about animal welfare. And so I started to think, “Oh, okay, so the food choices I make can influence animals. Oh wow. I never really thought about this.”

And then over the next couple of years I started to learn that, “Oh, my food choices can influence farm workers as well. And there are people, like, growing all these different foods that I'm eating, this seems to be a big deal.”

And then in the next couple of years I started to think, “Oh, and my food choices really influence the entire planet, like, the entire agricultural system, and soil, and water, and air.”

And so over the years, I just think of my perspective widening and widening and widening, and the theme throughout that shift in my perspective was [that] plant-based eating can potentially play a role in helping to solve some of these big problems, whether it's chronic disease issues, whether it's animal welfare concerns, whether it's how farm workers, what conditions they're working in, environmental markers.

So I was intrigued that plant-based eating was always coming up year after year after year, for all these issues. I will say with all that being said, one thing that has evolved is, I don't think of it as binary anymore, so I don't think like, “Oh you are in, and you're a vegetarian and you care about this stuff, or you're out and you don't.” I think the idea of plant-based eating can welcome in many different people no matter really the foods they like, and they can try to just find their minimal amount of animal products that can contribute to a lot of these other issues that matter in the food system.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah. Something that came up for me as I was listening to you talk, I had memories come up of the work that you've done on farms, but also the time you visited a feed lot. Like, because you were really interested in expanding your perspective. Right? I mean that was, that was a period of very intense exploration, and you were very willing to go see the other side, I recall. I'm making finger quotes. [laughs] You can't see that. But you were willing to go and explore those kinds of spaces, if I'm remembering this right?

Ryan Andrews: Oh yeah. Yeah. For better or for worse, that feedlot article comes up a lot in my life. [laughs] It's hard to escape. But it was a good experience and I've always been a big believer in expanding the conversation around these things, and not just saying like, “Here's one tribe and we are, we stand for this and we're the people who are moving in the right direction. And then there's the bad tribe not moving in the right direction.”

Like we all, I don't think you can find a group of people who's like, “I don't care about the planet. I don't care about animals and farmers.” Like, these are issues that most people care about on some

level. So let's try to figure out what they can do, maybe with their diet, to help improve some of these things.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah. And just to kind of pick up on another thread there, what we're kind of circling around is this idea that plant-based eating, unlike many other dietary forms or patterns, brings up a lot of stuff for people. People are very passionate about it.

It ties into other value systems and philosophies and behaviors that we feel, a lot of us, very strongly about. And so I'd be interested in, I'd be curious, Brian and Ryan, as you thought about developing this guide, like, what were some of the difficult questions you grappled with in terms of creating this guide as an educational product, where you wanted people to have a thoughtful conversation about it? Maybe Brian, let me go back to you, and what were some of the more difficult questions that you grappled with as we developed this?

Brian St. Pierre: It's actually in some ways a difficult question to answer. And I think there's a lot. I mean, I think Ryan touched on a lot of them even from his own evolution.

You know, you talked about how he is, he had a little more binary thinking at some point in the previous years, and has grown to have a different perspective. And I think what we tried to really do was make it more inclusive and not exclusive, in the sense that it's not about, it's about what you *are* eating, not what you're *not* eating, or it's about looking at how you can progress on that continuum of, you know, from less plant-based to more plant-based.

We worked really hard to, I think, try to find some common ground where, even if you're someone who's never even considered it, you know, who has always thought of eating meat as like a “man's diet”, and, you know, “eating lots of vegetables is for rabbits”. You know, we tried to find a common ground where we could kind of make a conversation, a story with everybody that you could find a hook, you could find something that you relate to, from your perspective, no matter where your diet started from.

Krista Scott-Dixon: I like this idea of including everyone in the story, because that's definitely something we tried to emphasize. When you look in the guide, you'll see that we talk a lot about continuums or spectrums, or locating yourself in various places along a gradient. Because I mean, it's very clear that most people right now will not go to the far end of the spectrum of plant-based eating. They will not eat and live 100% plant-based.

And so as coaches, we're always kind of playing in the real world, right? That's our sandbox. So we have to think a lot about how do we gather in, or invite in, or welcome in, all those other people who are situated in different places. So I'm really glad you said it that way. Ryan, same question for you. What were some of the more difficult, like, sticky, icky questions that you struggled with?

Ryan Andrews: Probably first is how can we present this in a way where we're not gonna make anybody really frustrated or upset, because, I mean, some people feel really, really strongly about certain dietary patterns, and I wouldn't want them to read through the guide and be turned off by anything we're saying. So I want to keep that in mind the entire time.

And then more of a trivial one is just, like, how do we define this? What words can we use to define plant-based eating? And kind of the different categories of it.

Because oftentimes I find myself when I'm just, like, talking to people in real life, my definitions of plant-based eating are kind of blah. People will look at me like, what are you talking about? How, what do you actually eat? So just figuring out a way we can define it that's useful and helpful for coaches and clients alike.

Krista Scott-Dixon: It's funny you bring that up because I noticed in a lot of the research around plant-based eating, there was, it seemed like there was a lot of effort put into definitions, right? Like, okay, we have to come up with this clinical categorization of vegetarian, and then there's lacto-ovo, and there's pescatarian and there's this and there's that, and it seemed like a lot of effort to put people into categories that didn't necessarily reflect what actual people do in their regular lives.

Like, maybe you're going to have this meal this way and that meal that way. Or you're going to go to a family dinner and decide based on various priorities or criteria to make this choice rather than that choice. Maybe you're going to prioritize family harmony over, you know, your own personal philosophy, or maybe the other way around. So I think a lot of these definitions are not super helpful for showing us how real people actually eat in their daily lives from meal to meal, day to day.

Just to kind of follow that up about challenges with clinical definitions, let's talk about evidence, because we do emphasize at Precision Nutrition being evidence-based in coaching and using outcome-based decision making. And now, I mean with, Brian, you mentioned Netflix documentaries, with all the Netflix documentaries and epic amounts of conflicting information online, what is the challenge of offering scientifically valid perspectives that nevertheless really reflect some of the ambiguities and either the evidence itself or in coaching practice?

And Ryan, let me start with you, because I know that this is something, like, the question of sustainability is one that's really tricky. It's hard in some ways and easy in other ways, and what is the challenge of speaking from a place of evidence for you?

Ryan Andrews: I'll start with a Wendell Berry quote: "The trick is not to find certainty but to act thoughtfully with partial knowledge." I come back to that quote a lot when I'm thinking about nutrition, science, and evidence. I mean, are we ever going to have 100% the full story demonstrated with research and labs? No. But, as a coach, somebody who is reading the latest

research, it's kind of a fun challenge, because it's almost like putting together a puzzle or like making sense of a really complicated story. You're trying to find these common themes and these patterns and you're taking all these different experiences you have in your life, whether it's reading a journal article, or you go to a conference, or you take a class, or you listen to a podcast, you talk to a colleague.

You're taking all of these different things and putting them into your data in your head and creating a story, and creating recommendations for clients. So it is challenging and it's a lot, especially the further you get into this field. But it's a fun challenge and you can start to think of it almost like a puzzle, or putting together a story, and look for these things that come up over and over and over again, that make sense to either recommend on a public health level or individually to your clients.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah, and I like that distinction into a public health population-level versus individual clients. Brian, same question for you. I mean, what's the tricky challenge of using evidence?

Brian St. Pierre: Yeah. Well, I think there's quite a few tricky elements, right? I think one is a lot of other, we talked about documentaries. Documentaries are infotainment, right? They might cite a lot of research, but they're not intended as, like, it's not a research paper. It's not a medical journal that's peer-reviewed.

It's using data and evidence that oftentimes is chosen to fit its preconceived narrative. So I think if you go into it knowing that, you can realize that they're telling you the side of the story that they want to tell. And sometimes they can give you really insightful information, but it's also not necessarily the entire story. And I think that's always an important piece to keep in mind.

Something that we try and do really consistently at PN is to share the full understanding, whatever it might be right now. And it's not complete, to Ryan's point. You know, nutrition science is a relatively young science. Like, there's lots of things we don't know for sure. And a lot of times it's because people respond differently.

And Ryan alluded to this too, with, with the public health piece versus individual piece, there are some things we know, we're pretty confident that apply to most people most of the time. But when you're working with individuals, individual responses vary, right? Research often reports statistical averages. Oh it's, you know, "Eating broccoli decreased risk of this thing by 30%".

When you look at the actual paper, that was true on average, but when you look at all the people they tested, their individual responses fall on some kind of bell curve, right? Some people felt worse from the broccoli, some people had way better results. Most people landed in that 30% but there are going to be plenty of people who had no benefit from it.

I think it's always important to keep in mind that the research is critically important. It's a huge piece of the evidence-based puzzle. But it is not the only piece. Your individual experience and preferences matter. You need to take that research and apply it to your everyday life. Does this make sense for me? When I try this thing, what did I experience? How did it work? Did I feel better? Did I feel worse?

It's not about what you quote, unquote, should do what the research says should work. I mean, public health information or even statistical averages and research, are just that, they're a good starting point. They're a great starting point. They're an accumulation of what we currently know right now. It works for most people under most circumstances, but that's not going to apply to every single person under all circumstances at all times.

So I think [that's] an important piece to keep in mind whenever someone asks like, "Oh, is this evidence based?" or "Is this the best thing?" I often get asked that at a family birthday party or a large gathering. "So Brian, what's the best diet or what are the best vegetables?" And you know, inside you're kind of rolling your eyes because you know there is no best or any of those things. It's for whom? For under what circumstances. For what goal?

So always keeping in mind that context, the answer is context-dependent. Even in research, even when trying to be evidence-based, the best we can do is to give broad recommendations that you then help a person experiment [with] and explore to see how those apply in their own life.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah. And as you're talking, I'm listening, thinking, "Yes, but what if I hate broccoli", right? Like maybe it cures cancer or whatever. But if I'm someone who absolutely loathes broccoli, that study may or may not be super relevant. And I think this is particularly salient in plant-based eating because there does seem to be such a range of responses to it, and we can get into that because there's lots of different dimensions to it.

But there's always that person who has tried it and it's terrific. Like they just feel amazing. They love it. We have in one of our case studies is done with one of our CEOs, Mark Zions at PN. He's a high-level competitive athlete. He loves plant-based eating. He feels amazing on it. He recovers quickly. He performs well.

Okay. So there's those people and then there's someone else who tries plant-based eating and either has digestive issues, or has trouble with meal planning, or difficulty articulating it to their family. And we get into a lot of these reasons in the Definitive Guide, and some troubleshooting around it, but it's really difficult to navigate a dietary pattern when there is such a range of responses.

And of course we all want to find that diet that feels tremendous for us, but it's not always a sure thing. So I appreciate you calling out that individual variation.

And then since we're talking about individual variation, let's move into some individual stories and I'm going to start, go back to coaches, Gillian and Pam, you're coaches who self-identify as plant-based eaters, as is Ryan. But we've heard a little bit of Ryan's story. I'd be curious, what does it mean to you, just for yourself personally? Like why was that something you explored, and how does that look in your daily life? Maybe Gillian, I'll start with you. I mean, just, like, tell us your story briefly of how you got into plant-based eating.

Gillian Hagg: Mm hm. So for me, it definitely wasn't something that I just woke up and decided to do one day. It was really a matter of being in the right place at the right time, and getting the right prompt. It's converging to nudge me in that direction. So a matter of my partner waking up and deciding he wanted to do it one day for ethical reasons, and at the same time I was in nutrition school and learning all this cool stuff about food and cooking and eating. And the more I explored plant-based eating, the more I found reasons to keep doing it. Like Brian said, when I tried this thing I felt good, like, I wanted to continue. So that was the evidence that I needed.

In my daily life, what it looks like is more vegetables in my house, to be honest. A lot more whole foods and more cooking and prepping than before. And it's kind of funny because overall it is less food — that's air quotes — available to me. When you think about all the food. Yet I feel like I'm able to do more within that set of constraints.

It's kind of like the paradox of choice idea, where greater choice doesn't equal greater good, or the idea that, you know, infinite choice is exhausting or even paralyzing for humans. I really felt that. So now I have like a smaller pool of choices that are available to me on a plant-based diet. But I do feel kind of unlimited in the choices and combinations and methods of prep that I can do with it.

Krista Scott-Dixon: That's so interesting. And let me just ask a follow up question. I mean you are, I mean all of us on this call are active people, right? And you're someone who's done, you know, triathlons and that sort of thing. How did that, how did your activity factor into your plant-based eating?

Gillian Hagg: To be honest, I didn't really notice any difference when I was doing it. I was thinking about this before the call. I can't remember if I did my Ironman before I was plant-based or after, I think it was right kind of when things were changing for me. So I haven't really had anything concrete to pull from that, on if I perform differently, if I recover differently on plant-based or not. For me it's just mostly been how I feel, my energy throughout the day.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Nice. Well we'll have to run a study and test it, maybe. [laughs] Coach Pam, same question. I mean, what was your own personal journey into plant-based eating?

Pam Ruhland: Definitely over a long period of time. Back in, my gosh, the late eighties, I decided that I would never eat red meat again. And you know, that came and went and anyway, I won't go

into the whole long, belabored story, but it was like Gillian, it was not overnight, I had been vegetarian on and off for a long time. Off because of different challenges that had come up, but on, because I felt better that way.

And then several years ago, I guess I just got old enough that I realized I want to do what's right for me, not necessarily what might be inconvenient for other people being my main reason. So I stopped eating animal products altogether, feeling better and definitely feeling that ethical piece for me.

It started off as a health decision, but the ethical piece became more and more predominant for me. I wasn't comfortable petting my dog and then eating a pig. It just was not something that was comfortable and for me. So that was a big part of it. And then now, you know, the environmental piece is really pivotal. It just feels right, and all kind of converges.

Krista Scott-Dixon: One thing I'm definitely taking away from the three of you who are plant-based eaters is that reasons evolve and kind of layer one on the other. Like at first it was this, and then it was this, and then it was this, and there starts to be a very, like, complex perspective that you have around what you're doing and why you're doing it, which I think is really interesting.

Now, I mean, it sounds like for the three of you, it's been a fairly positive experience. Like, you know, today if you were to say, am I a happy plant-based eater, you would say yes. At the same time, we know that there are sometimes challenges, whether that's practical, nutritional, whatever, that emerge for people as things they struggle with.

Were there things that you struggled with? Ryan, let me go back to you. When you first started out, were there things that you struggled with as a plant-based eater?

Ryan Andrews: The first several years were actually pretty uneventful. I wouldn't say there were many struggles.

Once I hit maybe, the, around the 10 year mark, that's when I started to notice some struggles that were kind of bigger picture. Like, "Oh, I'm about to get married, I'm living with this person. How am I going to juggle meal choices with this person and not drive her crazy?"

And then there were more, like, day-to-day day practical things like, "Oh, I notice myself getting colds more often. Maybe I should look into if I'm falling short in these certain nutrients that influence my immune system." And taking a coaching, troubleshooting approach to things.

So yes, definitely struggles, some bigger-picture, juggling some life things. And then some more kind of practical day to day, "How can I figure out these nutrients and make sure I get these and stay healthy?"

Krista Scott-Dixon: Mm hm. Gillian, same question.

Gillian Hagg: Mm hm. So my struggle is, and has been, sharing my reasons for being plant-based with people who aren't plant-based. It's not a comfortable conversation for me usually, especially with people who make their living and count on people not being plant-based, which is many people in my family and a lot of people in the close community that I'm from.

It's not because I'm embarrassed or ashamed of my choice. I'm actually really proud of my choice. It's just that human dynamic where I note, you know, the gap in beliefs between myself and the person I'm talking to, and I'm really not sure how to bridge that without virtue entering the conversation in some way. So current struggle, could always be a struggle for me. So that's one.

And then the other one is breakfast while traveling. Sometimes it's really hard to get, like, a solid plant-based protein for breakfast when you're on the road and traveling. So that can be an issue.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Both philosophical and logistical. And you bring up such an important point, which is, which we get into in the Guide a little bit, which is that it's harder or easier to be a plant-based eater depending on where you are, depending on who's around you, how supportive they are, how much they get it or don't. The community that you live in, the kind of ethno-socio-cultural demographics that you spend your life in, whether that's a cultural norm or not.

So it starts to really make the issue kind of complicated, right? Like again, it's an individual choice, but we all exist in a social network and so there's kind of navigation of that. So I'm really glad you brought that up. Coach Pam, what did you struggle with?

Pam Ruhland: I alluded to this a little bit in my last response about getting to the point that I made the decision for me and not for the benefit of others. That's always been the challenge for me, that I feel like I might be putting people out, or not dissimilar to Gillian, except it's not because it's family or friends who are farmers, but just, they don't eat the way that I eat. And are they going to be upset if I don't make the turkey at Thanksgiving? That has actually come up.

So things like that are the challenge point. And occasionally eating out, not so much now. I think it's way easier than it used to be. For sure, the biggest one for me is just feeling that you're not necessarily breaking bread with friends or family and eating the same things that they're eating, that you have to feel like you're doing something different that might make other people uncomfortable.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah. That's super interesting. So let's now talk about our clients. You folks have been coaches for many years. You've been coaches of plant-based eaters, not plant-based eaters, you know, at Precision Nutrition there's kind of a very wide swath of humanity that we see, basically age 18 to whatever. I don't even know, maybe our oldest client I think was in their late eighties.

We really do see all kinds of people from quote, unquote, regular people to professional athletes. So from your experience, what are some of the main reasons that people give for wanting to pursue plant-based eating? And in your answer, I'd be curious which ones you think, which reasons you would consider productive and empowering, and which ones may be less so, that potentially send people to not such a great place. Ryan, let me start with you. What are you seeing?

Ryan Andrews: Yeah, I mean health, animals, the planet, more recently, documentaries, those all are reasons that I've heard. In terms of people, why they want to explore plant-based eating. I'm not opposed necessarily to any of those reasons.

I think the really intriguing thing that I've observed is that when people start to make changes to their own nutrition for reasons beyond themselves, whether it's like, "I'm going to improve my health because I'm getting older and I want to be around for my kids", or "I want to do this for the future of the planet", or anything that's kind of a "bigger than self" kind of reason, I feel like that can really lead to some juicy self-transformation.

And I'm just kind of intrigued with that from just observing human behaviors more than anything. But from, specific to dietary change, I think it's kind of nice, because it take some of the pressure off of that. The willpower and the self-discipline we hear a lot about from clients, where it's always very low for people, and when people start to make some of these nutrition changes for reasons beyond themselves, it can make the willpower and the self-discipline a little bit less important to their day to day decisions.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Nice. That's a really thoughtful take on it. Gillian, what have you seen?

Gillian Hagg: Yeah, I really like what Ryan just mentioned there. It's kind of like any time the behavior is aligned with a person's core values, the outcome is usually pretty positive. So I have seen that people choosing to be plant-based for many of the reasons I already mentioned today is gaining steam, getting more mainstream these days, and people are curious about it. There's those ethical reasons as well.

And kind of the only thing that I think is, would be a disempowering reason for somebody to choose a plant-based diet, is if they're just trying to fix themselves in some way. Like if they're doing it for purely a weight loss strategy, or if they're trying to rid themselves of some unwanted behavior like addiction to bacon or something like that.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah. Interesting. And I'm sure some listeners listening will relate to the addiction to that. [laugh] Pam, what are your thoughts on this?

Pam Ruhland: Gillian just hit the nail on the head with the, my first sort of thought on that, and that would be that the less-productive reason is for weight loss, because that's been mentioned already.

Sometimes people can see becoming plant-based as a panacea. Like it's a fix-all and that's not really a realistic way to look at things. Of course. So if somebody says, "I'm going to be plant-based because then I'll lose the weight I need to lose", that would be my less appreciated answer. I would be, I would question a client on that.

But if they want to lose it for any of the reasons already mentioned, Ryan covered them off really well. Absolutely. Let's have a conversation. Let's look at why you're feeling so strongly about this, and let's look a little bit deeper, and dig a bit, and find out: If you do X, what will the outcome be? If you do Y, what will the outcome be? And have them start to build their Owner's Manual and find out what works well for them.

Krista Scott-Dixon: One of the interesting cultural moments that we're in now, in, at least in North America, is that, I mean, we've always had very gendered expectations about diets and how people related to diets. I mean there's all kinds of social factors in this. I mean, gender is just one, right? Ethnicity, geography, whether you grew up on a farm or not. Like there's all kinds of other pieces to it.

But this is a very unique cultural moment in North America where, you know, Brian, you alluded to this earlier, like there used to be this very, like, "Real men eat such and such" idea and now with many male athletes coming out saying, "Hey, you know, I've gone plant-based", and it starting to be kind of a thing that guys do, I'd be very curious to know, how do you see those dynamics shifting, and for men who want to go plant-based, what are some of the things for them to think about? Brian, I want to go back to you because I think you've seen this transition in some of the athletes that you work with. So, I mean, what are your thoughts on that, Brian?

Brian St. Pierre: Yeah, I mean it's been, it's been an interesting, and I'd say actually rather quick evolution even, you know, Ryan and PN had been talking about plant-based eating for probably a decade, but I would say in the athletic world or the sports organizations I work with, it's just been the past couple of years.

I'd say even the past year or so, it's really become much more commonplace. You know, you see athletes like Kyrie Irving, or Prince Fielder, or many others who talk about eating plant-based or— they don't often use the term vegan. I mean sometimes you see that, but often they're just talking about more of their diet. And it's not even always 100% plant-based, but for a lot of them it's just about becoming much more conscious of their nutritional choices.

In a lot of my work with athletes, youth athletes, pro athletes, most of them just eat whatever's available. "Ah, I stop at Chick-Fil-A on my way home from practice. I play some video games. We do, we repeat."

So a lot for a lot of athletes, they've become much more conscious of their diets, which has led to an increase in, or curiosity of, plant-based diets. And you look at someone like Tom Brady, even if he doesn't call it a plant-based diet, it is plant predominant, right? He talks about eating like 80% plants. He might still include some animal foods, but they're few and far between, relatively, compared to what's, like, the standard American diet.

So you've seen a huge growth in people, especially athletes, being much more conscious of their food choices, which has led to an outgrowth of being much more conscious, or much more curious about plant-based eating without the stigma of, you know, "Men have to eat meat."

And that seems to be going away. I mean, I remember even just 10 years ago, you'd see like Hungry Man commercials, right? Like they had like a plant-based meal. They'd put the leaf blower at the guy and he'd just blow away. But the guy eating the Hungry Man, you know, he was solid, he was strong. He didn't move.

So it was just this cultural concept that real men had to eat meat that seems to have relatively quickly decreased significantly. Now there's still a push, right? You have the rise of the caveman diet. You know, I still don't necessarily know how popular it truly is. There are plenty of conversations about it. So it would be the antithesis of a plant-based diet. There's obviously still, you know, different perspectives.

But on the whole, you've seen a huge shift or a huge breakdown in that stigma, of, like, "real men have to eat meat", which I think has been great, because there's just a lot more opportunity, exploration, and conversation to happen. And I've seen a lot of athletes have these conversations and have a lot of these conversations with my athletes. So that's been really interesting.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah. Ryan, what's your take on that?

Ryan Andrews: Gosh, Brian nailed so many good points with that. I mean to me, really beyond just giving men the permission to eat and explore more plant foods, plant-based proteins, and not feel awkward and like an outcast. I like that aspect. But I think it's actually led to just some really deep discussions around masculinity, and what that means, and what characteristics that entails. And I think that's worthwhile for people to think about. So I'm glad it's led to some of that stuff.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Mm hm. Yeah, I'm thinking of the documentary *Game Changer*, where they explicitly had this sort of focus on testosterone and testosterone levels, and it was just sort of an interesting piece to include, almost like a, "Hey, we're thinking about this, and we're specifically calling it out." We know from our data at Precision Nutrition that out of the people that identify, self-identify as plant-based eaters, two times more women than men still identify as plant-based eaters. So it's still, like, men are still half of the rates of women who identify as plant-based eaters. So that

seems to be changing. But from our data, it suggests that it's still predominantly female at this point.

Let me shift to coach Gillian and Pam. What are some of the things that you see in women who are plant-based eaters? Maybe some of the challenges, I'd be curious about that from a troubleshooting perspective. We talked about the good things. What are some of the challenges for female plant-based eaters in particular? Gillian, I'll start with you.

Gillian Hagg: Mm hm. I've noticed that keeping optimal levels of iron is a consideration for people, especially if that person, if that woman, exercises intensely. So it's probably something worth keeping an eye on when you're transitioning from an omnivore diet to a more plant-based one.

And plant-based eating, like, it can be so nourishing and so health-promoting and fiber-rich, can a person lose weight and improve performance on this diet? Sure. They could also gain on this diet and reduce their performance. It's all relative to what they're doing prior and, you know, how consistent they were with good quality and variety and quantity.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Mm hm. Pam, do you want to weigh in on this?

Pam Ruhland: Yeah, sure. I agree that iron can be an issue for women, and especially if they're still regularly menstruating, that can be something [that] comes up. And also women who do endurance activities, particularly, it's much more common to see menstrual irregularities if somebody is doing a lot of endurance work, like running marathons, or century rides, triathlons, and so on.

So I think there has to be really careful attention paid to not only the quantity but also the quality of food taken in. I mean, it's the same with somebody who is an omnivore, but of course there's fewer choices when somebody is a plant-based eater.

I just think there has to be real care taken in getting those really essential nutrients into the diet. That would be the biggest concern I would typically have with anybody who wanted to go plant-based, especially if they were somebody who was really, really athletic.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yeah, that's solid advice, and something we definitely cover in the Guide. So let me go in a different direction now. Ryan, you've talked a lot about altruism, compassion, care for others, care for the planet. You used the word equitable, I think, earlier. And this is something that really matters to you. You've talked about how many people who do care about these kinds of things can feel like everything is on them, right? That every personal choice they make will directly affect the planet.

I think you said it's like, it feels like it's all on your shoulders as a plant-based eater. Can you talk about that perspective a bit, and some of the pros and cons to it?

Ryan Andrews: Yeah, I mean, on the one hand it's empowering to know that the choices you make each day can influence the world, and they matter. On the other hand, that this can lead to a lot of bitterness and isolation and resentment.

I mean, I think of, I have, like, this image of myself back in, I don't know 2007 or 2008, this is kind of true but kind of a joke. I remember riding my bike home from a farmers market one day. And I had, like, my reusable bags in my basket. I was checking all the boxes for my planetary choices and kind of, like, cursing some of the people around me, like, in the SUVs, like, in the McDonald's drive through and I had this epiphany moment of, "Is this how I want to really show up in the world? No."

And I also started to think more about all the things that people are juggling when they're making choices, each day, so I didn't, I think many years ago, I probably had a little bit less wiggle room to understand that. But coaching more people, being exposed to more people in groups, you start to understand that people are juggling a lot. They have limited bandwidth, they're probably doing the best they can.

And I would say the last kind of angle to this is, if it feels like crushing pressure to make these changes and support the future of the world, realize that we are going to need a lot of different people and groups making changes.

So yes, eaters, individuals making changes matters. Most definitely. We also need policy and legislation changes, we need food companies and restaurants making changes, schools, hotels, TV shows, the arts, movies, like, all of these groups and organizations need to make changes to make it easier to eat in a more sustainable, healthy, equitable way.

Krista Scott-Dixon: I like that. So broadening the focus up from yourself. And I was really struck by this idea of the way that you think about things in a context, and coach Pam, I'm thinking of you because you're a mom of several and grandmother of several more, and you're very well acquainted with the demands of real life, like balancing family priorities, making meals for everyone. [laughs] Getting every, all the cats herded, and the kids corralled.

I mean, talk to us about some of the basic everyday challenges that might be involved in meal planning and a household where at least one person wants to eat plant-based, but also some of the tactics that they can use to kind of balance everyone's needs.

Pam Ruhland: Well, my first rule of thumb for many, many, many years has been that I was never a short order cook. What mom made is what there was. And if you didn't like it, you know, go make a peanut butter sandwich.

So that was, that's part of it. I've oftentimes spoken to clients who, you know, say, "Well, my children don't like what I'm making," and they'll make four different meals for different people in their

household. So I really recommend people don't do that. If you start with, you know, the basics, say, build a bowl or something like that. You can make several different things and everybody can add to their bowl what they want to have. And that way, you kind of placate everybody.

But as far as meal planning goes... Gosh, I'm going to go back probably close to 30 years now and sitting down on a Sunday with my pen and paper and some cookbooks. This was even before I would go online to do this. And write out dinners for a week. And it was just a way that I knew what I was going to buy at the grocery store, what I was going to cook each night for dinner, who might be helping me on that given night, so they had a part of that process, and it just allowed everybody to feel like they had a say, you know, it didn't mean that I would make more than one meal, but everybody kind of got a say in it.

I think it's really important that kids get into the kitchen as much as they possibly can. And it's important that they see that everybody has a say and it might not be what they necessarily want, but then they can, when they're older, start to make their own choices. A little planning goes an awfully long way. I found that for many, many years and trying to guide clients on the same path with that.

Krista Scott-Dixon: That is one of the Precision Nutrition principles. [laughs]

Pam Ruhland: Indeed.

Krista Scott-Dixon: One minute, five minutes. It's amazing how that yields benefits. Well, Brian, I just want to finish up with a question for you. You are the one that led the development of our PN Professional Calculator and food spectrums.

And we get these questions a lot, right? "Are beans a carb or a protein?" Or "What's the right portion sizing?" Can you talk about some of the things you thought about in those calculations or recommendations, the logic behind how the calculator worked, especially for plant-based eaters.

Brian St. Pierre: Yeah, I thought about a lot of things. [laughs] Probably too many things, but I had a lot of conversations with a lot of trusted people, smart people, and we kind of really grappled with the food spectrums, probably the most, you know, trying to allocate, where things kind of live on the spectrum. And it's, you know, in reality, we're limited by the visual tools available to us. We couldn't show like, some, an incredibly long spectrum when I try to slot things in there. We tried to use a pretty simple framework.

Before the calculator itself, the idea there was, you've seen a rise in people [saying] "If it fits your macros", who are trying to eat to certain macros, and I think that can be a great tool for the right client. But for a lot of clients, that's a way of eating that's not necessarily congruent with their beliefs or their values, or even necessarily their goals. I mean, it can still get you to your goals, but that's a

precision tool that's not necessarily needed for, you know, if you just want to eat move and live a little bit better. If your goal is to step on stage in your underwear, then it's by all means, that's a fantastic tool.

We tried to turn our calculator into something that would give you useful information, personalized guidance, but give you a lot of flexibility within that, so you didn't have to hit some really specific, you know, gram or macronutrient number. You could just use your hands to gauge your portion sizes. So, you know, palms for protein, fists for vegetables, cupped handfuls for carbohydrates, and thumbs for fats, and then you could just aim for a certain number of those at each meal, or if you preferred, a daily total. That would give you a good approximation of those macronutrients, but without having to get deep into tracking high-level numbers or really specifically tracking meals.

You could just use your hand as a frame of reference for your portion sizes at each meal. Eat it slowly until satisfied, or eat it quickly until full, depending on your goal and then you can just roll from there. And so we tried to really make it practical, useful, and applicable for most people without getting too far down the math rabbit holes.

There's a lot of math in the background. I can tell you that, with a lot of certainty, you know, but we tried to really make it a practical applicable tool for anybody to use, whether you're a high-level athlete or you're a stay-at-home mom, you're a teacher, you own a paint store, what have you. It doesn't matter.

It's meant to be a useful tool for most people to help them reach their goals, whether it's changing their body composition, improving their health, becoming more plant-based, it can help you do all of those things.

And that kind of leads into the food spectrums. The idea was, you know, at PN we talk a lot about helping people get away from all-or-nothing thinking, or "good" or "bad" foods. Because in reality, all foods can fit. It's about your overall dietary pattern, your plethora of food choices that you make over a period of time that really matters about your health, and your body composition, and your performance, and your energy.

So we try to get people to think a little bit differently, think more on a continuum from worse to better and how can you be just a little bit better today. We tried to show foods on that continuum as well, in a really visual way.

And we can do that in a plant-based setting, whether it's vegetarian or fully plant-based, or even an omnivorous setting where someone's eating a lot more plants. I think that's a key piece of this conversation today, is, you know, I don't eat, like, a fully plant-based diet, but I think of myself as a relatively plant-based eater. I eat animal products. But I eat, you look at my plate, it's probably three-quarters plants at any given meal.

So I think that's a key piece, is that being a plant-based eater doesn't necessarily have to mean immediately becoming 100% plant-based. So we try to give a lot of options on the calculator, even in the food spectrums, where you could be progressing towards that. I mean, we talk about being “plant curious”. Let me just try adding some more plants, or maybe eating fewer animal products, right, so there you might just choose the vegetarian option.

You could have some fish, or not have some fish, and you can put a label on it, right? There are pescatarian, and they're lacto-ovo vegetarian. There's a million options. We tried to make it flexible and inclusive to lots of different eating styles.

We really just tried to give an idea of, okay, these are the kind of foods that are generally shown to be more health-promoting, they give you the nutrients you're looking for, whether that's macronutrients like protein, carbs, fats, or micronutrients like vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients.

So we really tried to balance all of these things into determining where foods kind of slotted on the “eat less” to “eat some” to “eat more” spectrum. We had a lot of back and forth. And I think a lot of really productive conversations, but we're always taking feedback from users and from other experts to try to refine and even improve our spectrums.

To actually answer your specific question about beans. That's a great one. I think this is a great, I don't remember who said it earlier, it might have been Gill talking about, well, it's all relative. And beans are much the same way. So are beans a protein or carb? Depends on the meal, right? If you're eating a meal where beans are your most protein-rich food, I would treat them as a protein.

But if you're eating them as, say, like, a starchy side, and you have something more protein-rich, whether that's meat, or whether that's tofu or tempeh, or seitan or something along those lines, or anything else that's, you know, eggs, more protein-dense, then that would be your protein, and you would treat beans as a carbohydrate source there, because they are richer in carbohydrates than they are in protein. But beans are a very important protein source, particularly the more plant-based you become, because they contain something called lysine, which is an amino acid that a lot of other plant-based proteins are lacking. So beans are always a tricky one.

And I wouldn't get too tied up on what's the right portion size — a palm, a handful. Put a reasonable portion somewhere between the two on your plate. Eat it slowly until satisfied. And that might mean getting a second portion; that might mean not finishing the portion that's there.

I think people get a little too tied up even in our external portion guidelines, which are meant to just give you a visual representation of what your plate could look like, and what your day could look like. But they are not the be-all, end-all rules.

So no matter what, you know, I think anyone, no matter what company, even us, recommends for external guidelines, they're just meant to be guidelines. They're not rigid rules you *must* follow. They're just meant to be helpful guidance, to give you some guard rails as you develop your own internal satiety and hunger mechanisms.

Krista Scott-Dixon: I think Ryan said this years ago, but something like, "Lentils are not the cause of anyone's body composition issues", right? If you're struggling with overeating, or excess body fat, like, probably lentils, whether you had a cupped handful of lentils, or a little extra, it's probably not the root cause of your suffering. [laughs]

So let me just bring this conversation to a close with a little bit of a lightning round. I'm going to go around and ask each of you what is one nugget that you would give to coaches who are coaching people who are either considering plant-based, or wanting to be more fully plant-based, or troubleshooting it. What's just one nugget of advice that you would give to a coach who was working with clients who are somehow in the plant-based eating space? Let me start with, maybe Gillian, let's start with you.

Gillian Hagg: Sure. So I think I would go with, you probably don't need to view and treat your plant-based eating clients as fundamentally different than your omnivorous clients. There will be different foods, of course, and different strategies that your clients will probably choose, but you don't need to reinvent the wheel or change your whole coaching strategy for these clients. You know, chances are, consistency, time management, planning and prep skills are still going to be the biggest growth opportunities with these clients.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Yup. [laugh] Life skills, all of us need them. Coach Pam, what's your nugget?

Pam Ruhland: I would say if you're an omnivore who's a coach, not to feel that plant-based eaters will be lacking. And the same goes if you're a plant-based coach, not to feel that you can't coach somebody who's an omnivore, not to take things personally if you have a really deep feeling about one way of eating over another, knowing that what the important thing is with coaching is that people learn what *their* best practices are, and they develop those skills to use in their Owner's Manual and so they become the best that they can be. And that's not necessarily what you do.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Brian, what's your advice?

Brian St. Pierre: Yeah, I think Pam and Gill really hit the nail on the head there. I think for me, especially, I see a lot of younger fitness pros, who maybe they're newer to this, where you see a lot of professionals who are pretty zealous in their own beliefs, their dietary style, their preferred dietary style, and I think over time you start to realize that virtually all well thought-out nutrition practices have the same underlying principles.

And so when you start to recognize that they can be applied, whether you're fully plant-based, or you're partly plant-based, or you're keto, or Paleo, or omnivorous, right? Everyone still needs some of the same big rocks. So as a coach, you're focusing on those big rocks and not focusing on all the minutiae. I mean, the minutiae matters, but it only matters when the big rocks are in place: emphasizing mostly whole foods, getting enough quality protein, whether it be from animal sources or plant sources, getting in plenty of vegetables. Right? Eating slowly. Minimizing processed foods.

Like, there are some “big-rock” pieces that everyone needs to work on. And all clients need those skills, much like Gill mentioned, regardless of their really specific dietary choices. There are certainly things to be mindful of with plant-based eaters, or with keto eaters, that are specific to their eating style, so you should be aware of those things.

But on the whole, you're teaching the same skills in slightly different ways. So I think that's an important piece to keep in mind. They're not these fundamentally bizarre humans right, they're just like you and I, who just have slightly different eating preferences.

Krista Scott-Dixon: Plant-based eaters. They walk among us. [laugh]

Ryan, I'm going to give you the last word here, because you are really one of the OGs of plant-based eating at Precision Nutrition. You were kind of into it before it was cool. So I feel like I want to give you the last word here.

Ryan Andrews: Thanks. I feel, it's rough following Gill, Pam, and Brian. I have to give some nugget beyond what they gave. I would say, I would leave coaches with this, I think. I challenge you to widen your perspective around the food system. I think when you can learn more about all the different factors, whether it's the people working in the food system, or how the animals are raised, and treated, or all the different ecological markers we need to consider, that's valuable, not only in your own life, but when you're working with clients and they're interested in making these changes based on their own values and what they care about.

When you're more informed and you can actually talk about, like, “Oh yeah I've thought about that as a coach and I kind of know about some of that stuff”, I think that will be extremely valuable and guiding them into behavior changes.

Krista Scott-Dixon: That's great. Well, thanks to all of you for taking the time to have this conversation. It was such a rich and thoughtful conversation. I know that I took some stuff away from it and I'm hoping that our listeners will too. So I'd like to just take the time to thank you all for coming out and sharing your expertise with us for an hour.

Ryan Andrews: Yeah thank you KSD.

Brian St. Pierre: Yeah thanks for having us, Krista.

Pam Ruhland: Thanks Krista.

Gillian Hagg: It was a great conversation.