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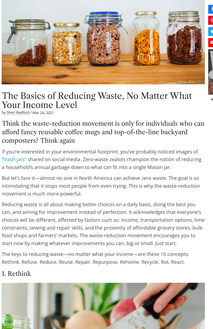

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The Basics of Reducing Waste, No Matter What Your Income Level

Written by Rachel Hall | Mar 24, 2021

Think the waste-reduction movement is only for individuals who can afford fancy reusable coffee mugs and top-of-the-line backyard composters? Think again

If you're interested in your environmental footprint, you've probably noticed images of "trash jars" shared on social media. Zero-waste zealots champion the notion of reducing a household's annual garbage down to what can fit into a single Mason jar.

But let's face it—almost no one in North America can achieve zero waste. The goal is so intimidating that it stops most people from even trying. This is why the waste-reduction movement is much more powerful.

Reducing waste is all about making better choices on a daily basis, doing the best you can, and aiming for improvement instead of perfection. It acknowledges that everyone's choices will be different, affected by factors such as: income, transportation options, time constraints, seeing and equal rights, and the power of corporations and multinational global corporations. Bulk-food shops and farmers' markets. The waste-reduction movement encourages you to start now by making whatever improvements you can, big or small, just start.

The keys to reducing waste—no matter what your income—are these 10 concepts: Rethink. Refuse. Reduce. Reuse. Repair. Repurpose. Rehome. Recycle. Rot. React.

1. Rethink

Photo by Marco Bellucci on Unsplash

Most important is to rethink what's "normal." Previous generations bought items—often wrapped in either paper or nothing—and used what they purchased for as long as possible, in the days before plastic became ubiquitous and the throwaway mindset took over. What was normal back then could become normal again, if enough of us keep making incremental changes.

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Consider how these actions reduce waste and save money at the same time:

- Cook meals at home instead of buying prepackaged ones from the store.
- Use up the food already in your home instead of ordering a restaurant meal in a single-use container.
- Pack a lunch instead of buying fast food in throwaway wrappers.
- Drink tap water instead of pop, juice or energy drinks from plastic bottles.
- Make coffee, tea or hot chocolate at home and bring it with you in a travel mug instead of buying it from a restaurant in a single-use cup.
- Shop at farmers' markets or bulk-food shops instead of grocery stores where everything is wrapped in plastic.
- Use fabric tote bags instead of disposable plastic bags, which many stores now charge for.
- Switch to bar soaps and shampoos instead of liquid soaps and shampoos in plastic containers.

Rethinking also involves forming new habits that reduce waste (and save money):

- Plan ahead by bringing a homemade granola bar, nuts, cut-up veggies or piece of fruit with you to avoid the temptation of pricey unhealthy snacks in wasteful packaging when you're hungry while on the go.
- Rotate the food in your cupboards so that the newest purchases go at the back. This stops older food from getting forgotten and becoming inedible.
- Banish the words "I can't" from your vocabulary. You're never too old to learn new habits or useful skills such as how to cook or how to repair a boot. Start small. Try learning how to prepare a single meal or repair a single item, then tackle more ambitious projects as your confidence grows.

Another important part of rethinking is questioning the advertising messages that bombard us all every day. Will the latest fast fashion that falls apart after a few washes really make you happy? Or will you be happier hunting through a thrift shop for something unique that's well-made, then asking a grandparent to teach you how to alter it to achieve the perfect fit?

2. Refuse

Refuse to accept single-use plastics. Instead, make a to-go kit to leave in your purse or backpack. Fill it with the reusable versions of common disposable items: water bottle or coffee mug, cutlery, chopsticks, drinking straw, cloth napkin, fabric tote bags. All of these can be found cheaply (sometimes even for free) at thrift shops and garage sales, or on Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace. If you have a car, consider leaving a second to-go kit there, and add enough reusable shopping bags to manage a large grocery order.

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You can also refuse to use several types of cleaning products by replacing them with plain white vinegar purchased in the largest container you can find—one big container creates less waste than several small ones. White vinegar is especially good for cleaning windows, and it's a cheap and healthy alternative to commercial fabric softeners.

A few other things you should refuse to allow into your home: anything you don't like or don't need, along with anything poorly made, likely to go out of style quickly or packaged in lots of plastic.

3. Reduce

Some waste is inescapable, but you can minimize waste by consuming less stuff, period. Read reviews to make sure any purchase you do buy will last a long time, if not for the item for its full lifespan. Try to find items used, and never assume that brand names are necessarily better.

Reduce wasteful packaging by avoiding small or individual-serving sizes. Instead, buy in bulk, in the largest size practical for your household. Consider shopping with a friend, to split bulk purchases into more manageable sizes. If you lack a pantry or extra cupboard space, store these purchases in a large flat box that slides under a bed or couch.

Even on a tight budget, and in a cramped apartment, it may be worth investing in a small upright freezer. That way you can reduce waste by freezing some bulk-food purchases and also leftovers. A small magnetic whiteboard is useful for logging the freezer's contents, to make sure nothing gets buried inside and has to be thrown away later. Chest freezers can be cheaper to buy, but an apartment-sized upright freezer is easier to squeeze into a small space, plus it's more convenient to see what's inside at a glance—which ultimately means less wasted food.

4. Reuse

Photo by Kristina Flour on Unsplash

Whenever possible, choose reusable items over disposable:

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- Replace facial tissues with handkerchiefs. Using nutritionally sewing skills, you can turn one old sheet or tablecloth into dozens of handkerchiefs.
- Replace cotton balls or disposable cotton rounds with ones made from fabric.
- Replace paper towels with rags repurposed from old towels or clothing.
- Replace disposable diapers with cloth.
- Replace disposable menstrual products with cloth pads or a menstrual cup.
- When eating in a restaurant, instead of taking leftovers home in a single-use plastic container, use your own container or jar.

Switching from disposables might seem expensive, but often these items can be made at home or purchased used or on sale. Even when bought at full price, they quickly pay for themselves in savings when compared to the ongoing costs of their disposable counterparts.

Glass food jars are the holy grail of reusing because it's so easy to get them (containing everything from peanut butter to pasta sauce), they can store whatever you want, and they're sex-through, making it easy to tell what's inside. Less mystery food equals less wasted food. Many grocery stores and bulk-food shops now allow you to bring your own jars to use instead of plastic produce bags or deli containers. At a farmers' market, jars are especially useful for transporting fragile purchases such as fresh berries. To find larger jars, ask local restaurants for their extras.

5. Repair

In our modern throwaway culture, many of us weren't taught how to repair things, but it's never too late to learn. Once you know how to sew, for example, you can mend ripped clothing, sew on patches and fix holes. To learn how to repair an item, watch a video on YouTube, take a class, borrow a library book, ask an acquaintance for help or find a group on Facebook or Reddit that welcomes questions from newbies.

Related to repair is taking good care of what you own to extend the life of each item for as long as possible. Clean and store clothing properly to eliminate stains and avoid damage such as fun fading or stretched-out shoulders and necklines. Make a pair of shoes look like new again with shoe polish, a shoe shine kit and perhaps new soles. Eventually, when clothes and shoes become too worn, they may still be fine to wear while doing messy household chores.

Local girls' and boys' groups are especially skilled at re-purposing everything from egg cartons to magazines to cardboard boxes in crafts projects.

7. Rehome

Remember the old adage: "One person's trash is another person's treasure." What you consider waste could be useful to someone else, in rehome it. Before getting rid of something, ask if anyone in your local Buy Nothing group on Facebook can use it.

You've probably heard of a clothing swap. Why not try a similar swap to rehome toys, games, puzzles, books, DVDs or non-perishable food items? Getting together to donate due to conflicting schedules (or ongoing health rules and restrictions), a variation is the round-robin bag. The first recipient takes out what they want, adds new items, and gives the bag to the next person on the list. A bag can make endless trips around a group this way, as the contents keep changing.

8. Recycle

Different items can be recycled depending on the regulations in your region. However, try to get all the use possible out of any item before recycling it. The sad truth is that much of what goes into recycle bins in North America actually ends up in landfill.

Glass is the best thing to recycle because it never degrades in quality, even after being melted down repeatedly. Plastics, on the other hand, are quite difficult to recycle.

9. Rot

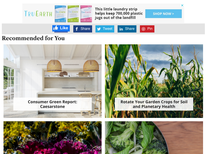

Photo by Kristina Flour on Unsplash

After trying your best not to waste any food—soups, stews, casseroles and pizzas are especially useful for using up assorted odds and ends—you can send scraps to the compost bin with a clear conscience. You can also compost many natural products such as wood, bamboo and the paper that food products such as flour and sugar come in.

Even without a garden, you can use this compost to fertilize your houseplants or share it with a friend who does garden. If you live in an apartment building, ask the landlord or building manager about starting a composting program for the entire building. Also check for community composting programs in your area.

10. React

When you notice a business that is doing a good job of reducing waste, praise them publicly. Recommend them to your friends, and post positive reviews online.

Alternatively, when you notice room for improvement, make suggestions about what should change. Write letters of complaint to big companies that use excessive packaging.

To help bring about change on an even larger scale, contact the politicians for your city, state or province, or country with your requests.

A final note

Everything we do in life is all about choices. Perhaps the store that sells groceries with less plastic packaging is a longer drive away. Which is ultimately assume worse for the planet—more wasteful packaging or more fossil fuels burned while driving? Perhaps if extra time in the car means you don't have enough time to cook a meal from scratch, so you stop for fast food instead? No one can tell you which choice is right.

Life isn't perfect. Sometimes waste creeps in—plastic utensils included with takeout, packaged cookies that your child snuck into the grocery cart, a gift shipped in layers of plastic packaging. And sometimes the reduced-waste option is simply too expensive. Don't beat yourself up over it—do the best you can, and vow to keep improving.

And while you're at it, teach the next generation about reducing waste. The concept can be challenging for children, with their love of plastic gadgets, but have faith that if you instill the basic principles, the message will get through.

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