

How to start a zero waste lifestyle

BY NICOLE GALLUCCI

APR 27, 2018

Have you thought about going zero waste, actively attempting to reduce your carbon footprint in the world? It involves more than just storing food in trendy mason jars, buying fresh produce at farmers' markets, and making products from scratch. It's a lifestyle dedicated to cultivating meaningful experiences and prioritizing environmental sustainability.

Perhaps you've considered it. But without knowing the basics and getting some guidance, abandoning your dependency on plastic and the usual ways of shopping, cleaning, and eating can be pretty intimidating.

Before you embark on your own zero-waste journey, it's important to get an understanding of the lifestyle from people living it on a daily basis. We turned to some of the most popular zero-waste bloggers and Instagram influencers for their advice.

From tips in the kitchen to the most essential products, here's some wisdom from six zero-waste experts. They also address common misconceptions associated with the lifestyle. Get ready to be less wasteful ...

What is zero waste?

Chances are you've heard the words before, but you might not know the whole deal. A zero-waste lifestyle isn't simply about eating clean and purging your plastic belongings — it involves adopting a more thoughtful, minimalistic approach to living.

"Zero waste aims at eliminating as much trash from the household as possible," Bea Johnson, blogger and author of the bestselling book, *Zero Waste Home*, said. "What it ultimately does is translate into a simple, richer life based on experience instead of things."

Labeled the "Priestess of Waste-Free Living" by *The New York Times*, Johnson and her family have cut their waste output down to one quart-sized jar per year. But as "Zero Waste Nerd" Megean Weldon explained, zero-waste living is so much more than trying to fit a year's worth of trash into a jar.

A study published in the *Science Advances* peer-reviewed journal in 2017 found a whopping 91 percent of the plastic in the world doesn't get recycled, and around 79 percent makes its way to landfills or other parts of the environment. If those recycling and consumption rates continue, around 12,000 metric tons of plastic waste will crowd landfills by 2050, researchers estimate. Any way you can cut down will ultimately help.

"It's about changing our perspective. Changing how we feel about consumption and how we value the things we bring into our lives," said Weldon, who was inspired to reduce her waste after a neighborhood trash cleanup in 2015.

How to get started

Coming to terms with the amount of harmful waste you produce on a daily basis can be seriously overwhelming, so the key is to start small and work toward achieving your larger sustainability goals.

As several zero-waste veterans stressed to me, "no one goes zero waste overnight." But there are steps you can take to ease into the lifestyle.

1. Keep "The 5Rs" in mind

Over the years, Johnson has compiled [a list of 100 tips](#) to help people reduce their household waste. But "The 5Rs," as she calls them, are the five rules she thinks anyone looking to start a zero waste lifestyle should start with. "Refuse what you do not need. Reduce what you do need. Reuse what you consume. Recycle what you cannot refuse, reduce, or reuse. And rot (compost) the rest," she explained.

Johnson started her zero-waste journey in 2006 after a move from the suburbs to the city forced her family to put the majority of their possessions in storage and live with only the necessities. "When we did find the right house, we got everything out of storage and found that 80 percent of the belongings we put in there we hadn't even missed," she said.

2. Learn to say no to the little things

Whether it's a business card at a meeting, a straw at a restaurant, a plastic bag at the store, or a disposable pen from a conference, Johnson said recognizing and denying waste — no matter how small — is crucial. "Next time someone hands you something, think. Do you really need it?" she said.

3. Start eating real food

When it comes to the kitchen, [Anne Marie Bonneau](#) — who runs a zero-waste cooking blog called [The Zero-Waste Chef](#) — advises people to cut back on processed foods and reach for the natural stuff. "Start to eat real foods like fruits, vegetables, and anything that doesn't come in packaging," she said.

Bonneau, who adopted a zero waste lifestyle in 2011 after learning about the heartbreaking amount of plastic that winds up polluting oceans and killing animals, said she eats a lot healthier since cutting out packaged goods. While she still indulges in occasional cookies and crackers, making them herself means she eats them far less frequently.

4. Try using less of everything

"I use very little dish soap, laundry detergent, body soap, and toothpaste," [Jonathan Levy](#), a zero-waste project manager in Los Angeles, California, explained.

Levy, who used to work in supply chain management at a retailer warehouse, sought out a zero-waste lifestyle after seeing massive amounts of waste produced in the warehouse daily. "Most consumer products are designed to dispense or encourage you to use way more than you actually need," he said.

5. Join zero waste communities for support

To stay motivated and open to learning helpful tips from others, seek out zero waste communities for support — whether online or in person.

"I follow a lot of zero-waste accounts on Instagram and am a part of several groups on Facebook," Monica Rosquillas, who runs the sustainable living blog, Girl For A Clean World, said. "They provide a daily source of inspiration."

Essential products to welcome into your life

Though many items you already own can be reused for zero-waste purposes, you can also cut out disposable products by investing in long-lasting replacements. Here are some essentials.

1. Reusable water bottle

Plastic bottles should be among the first things to go in a zero waste lifestyle. In 2017, *The Guardian* reported that one million plastic bottles are purchased around the world every minute. If consumers don't cut down, that insanely high number could increase another 20 percent by 2021.

2. BYOJ (Bring Your Own Jars)

When storing food, drinks, or a variety of other supplies, try eliminating plastic Tupperware and Ziplock bags and replacing them with glass jars. Bonneau gets a lot of hers for discounted prices at thrift shops, and Rosquillas reuses a lot of containers in her pantry and refrigerator, such as sauce and mayonnaise jars.

3. Cloth bags and totes

Cloth bags are essential for storing, transporting, and buying food in bulk. "I couldn't live without them," Weldon said. You can sew your own using old shirts or sheets. Johnson said one of her favorite cloth bag-making hacks is to sew the bags the same size as containers in your pantry so when you go shopping and fill them, you know you've bought the perfect amount. Reusable tote bags also cut out plastic and paper bags when grocery shopping.

4. Reusable straws and utensils

Eliminating single-use plastic straws is a must, says Kellogg. "If you like straws and drink a lot of smoothies, they make all sorts of reusable straws from bamboo, stainless steel, glass, and silicone," she said. Same goes for utensils like forks and spoons.

Common zero waste misconceptions (and the truth)

If adopting a zero-waste lifestyle has the power to save the environment, you'd think everyone would be inspired to give it a try. But according to our six zero-waste role models, some harmful misconceptions about the lifestyle easily discourage people from taking the first step.

\$\$\$ and time

One of the most common misperceptions about zero waste is that it costs more than normal living, which Johnson says couldn't be further from the truth. "We found that the zero-waste lifestyle actually saves us 40 percent on our overall budget," she said. "We consume way less than before, and when we buy something it's only to replace."

While zero waste will be different for everyone, the influencers I spoke with each said the lifestyle significantly improved their financial situations, noting that buying food in bulk, shopping second-hand, and making and reusing bags and containers all save money.

Johnson said she feels many people associate zero waste with making everything from scratch, which isn't the case. "I think it's scaring the crap out of people like families or mothers who work full time," she said, assuring everyone she doesn't spend her days concocting tooth powder, lotion, deodorant, or cleaners.

Self-denial and sacrifices

Other common concerns associated with zero waste are that you need expert culinary skills, or have to constantly deny yourself the pleasure of your favorite foods. "You don't have to cook fancy stuff, and I don't always cook a new meal each night," Bonneau said. If you're craving something that's unattainable due to packaging purposes, odds are there's a recipe for it somewhere out there. "I never feel like I'm denying myself anything," she added.

Levy also stressed that he doesn't feel he's sacrificing anything to live zero waste. "Yes, it took a lot of practice and dedication to get where I am today, but I would say that it takes only 10 percent of my effort to be 90 percent zero waste."

You will produce *some* waste

"Zero-waste living is not easy. It's a challenge — but a good challenge!" Weldon explained, noting that one of the most discouraging realizations people have after adopting the lifestyle is that waste inevitably happens.

Rosquillas reminded us that the words "zero waste" serve as more of an idealistic motivator, and in the end, the overall goal is to simply lessen the amount of waste you produce.

"Remember that it's a journey, so don't beat yourself up when trash happens," she said.

Try doing *one* small thing, like composting at home, bringing your own mug to Starbucks, giving a jar a second life, or trying Kellogg's 31-day zero waste challenge.

"Do the best you can and start small," Kellogg said. "Small actions done by hundreds of people add up to massive impact. Have patience and have fun!"