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9 Steps to Be Kind to Earth: A Guide to A Greener Lifestyle

Ever since I was 10 years old, I have been aware of the constant landfill waste around me. I always tried to find ways that I could improve the way that I live. I have composed these lifestyle improvements into an easy-to-follow guide. Do you have what it takes to step up and make the change to live an eco-friendly lifestyle?

In 2005, I was in the 5th grade, and my science class at Mosheim Elementary School in Mosheim, Tennessee had a visitor that came to our class to talk about living in a greener way. She pointed out that we should be taking small steps, such as, turning the water off while you are brushing your teeth, taking shorter showers, and not leaving unnecessary lights on to help save water and electricity. While those are things that each person should be doing anyway, the points of her presentation that has stuck with me since were about the amount of time that trash lives in landfills. The World Wide Fund for Nature informs us that plastic straws take 200 years to degrade, plastic bottles take 450 years to degrade, and plastic toothbrushes take 500 years to degrade (WWF 2018). Most of our landfill waste will live far longer than we ever will. Unless we take on the responsibility of living a green life, plastic will overrun our planet. Even as

a ten-year-old child, it was bone chilling to hear the horrendous destructions that humans have done to the planet. I remember going home and begging my mom to never use any more plastic bottles and plastic bags.

This revelation that came to me even before middle school has followed me into adulthood. I research and strive to find ways that I can constantly live a more sustainable lifestyle. I hope to inspire you with nine easy steps that I do to be kinder to our home, planet Earth.

STEP 1: Say NO to Plastic Bottles

Switching from plastic bottles to a reusable water bottle is the easiest change to make. Planting Peace warns us that plastic is not environmentally friendly: “Petroleum-based plastics like PET do not decompose in the same manner that organic material does. Unlike wood, grass, and food scraps, these plastics are unrecognizable to the organisms that normally break matter down and thus do not biodegrade” (Planting Peace, 2020).

It was simple for me to find an eco-friendly water filter (Apex Countertop Drinking Water Filter) and buy a reusable water bottle that was not plastic. If you already have a plastic reusable water bottle, then you should use that because you should use what you have instead of buying new products all of the time. We only have one planet that we can live on, so we should not harm our home by polluting it with single-use bottles.

STEP 2: Stop purchasing plastic food storage

Pause for a moment and reflect on how many plastic sandwich bags, plastic food containers, and plastic wrap you have used in your home this year. It is a lot, is it not? Luckily, it is uncomplicated to switch to reusable products!

- Instead of plastic sandwich bags, use:
 - Silicone Bags
 - I use bags from [stasher](#), which are reusable silicone storage bags that will change the way you store your sandwiches, snacks, and leftovers.
 - Mason Jars
 - I keep most of the jars that I buy at the store that hold sauce, pickles, etc. I use jars to store homemade oat milk and leftover soups.
- Instead of plastic food containers, use:
 - Glass Storage Bowls
 - You can find glass storage bowls almost anywhere. I use [Pyrex Ultimate](#) glass storage, which have a glass lid that seals with silicone.
 - Stainless Steel Storage Bowls
 - If you are wary about glass storage, you can easily find stainless steel bowls to store your food. Stainless steel bowls can be paired with silicone bowl covers to create a spill proof seal.
- Instead of plastic wrap, use:
 - Silicone Bowl Covers
 - I use [Siliwrap](#) to cover bowls and plates that I need a tight seal on.
 - Beeswax/Vegan Wax Wraps

- I use vegan wax wraps from [No Trace](#) to store vegetables/snacks in my bag and to cover bowls or plates that I need to quickly store in the refrigerator.

These options may seem overwhelming, but it is important to take small steps and research items before you buy them!

Step 3: No more single-use shopping bags (seriously, just stop)

Do you have a plastic grocery bag filled with other plastic grocery bags? I thought so. This step is also an easy step to take to living a greener life. You can find reusable shopping bags at nearly any store, probably even your preferred grocery store! In my personal experience, I had a stash of those free reusable shopping bags that companies like to give out. Plastic shopping bags have become a destruction that we have become numb to because they are free to have at stores. Switching to reusable shopping bags and encouraging others to make the change as well can help make you feel better about what you are doing for our home!

If grocery stores do not allow you to use reusable shopping bags, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, then you can choose to bring your items out in your shopping cart without bags. When you arrive to your vehicle, simply place your unbagged items into reusable bags stored in your vehicle. If you are uncomfortable bagging your groceries at your car, it is important to reuse and recycle the plastic bags that you take.

Step 4: Recycle, Upcycle, and DIY

Once you know how to sort your trash, it becomes a habit to separate recyclables and landfill items. Check all plastic items in your house and see if they are compliant with your area's waste management program. Simply give those empty plastic containers a rinse, let them dry, and put them in a container that you use for recyclables only. Once you see how many shampoo bottles, detergent bottles, and food packages that you are recycling, it may inspire you to go even further and change to a plastic free option!

Recycling plastic items often does harm. Sharon Lerner warns that recycling has fooled us: "Much of the recycled plastic scrap that the U.S. sent to China appears to have been burned or buried instead of being refashioned into new products" (Lerner 2019). To make sure that plastic does not land in the wrong hands, it is better to make household items that always come in plastic containers or find an eco-friendly replacement. I make my own laundry detergent, use shampoo bars instead of bottled shampoo, and use a deodorant bar. I use products from [HiBAR](#) and [Ethique](#) to keep plastic bottles out of my shower.

Step 5: Use digital books and music, when secondhand is not available

Purchasing digital music and digital books still gives artists support and sales. If you are a person that cannot read digital materials, then you should try to find used books! Michael Carpenter writes: "In 2008 alone, the publishing industry was responsible for the harvest of nearly 125 million trees" (Carpenter 2016). However, e-readers cause CO2 emissions when they are produced, so you should make an educated decision when deciding on how you will read. Digital copies of music are easily available to us through our smart phones, laptops, and

electronic music players. Again, if you do not enjoy digital soundtracks, then you should try to find secondhand hardcopies, since CD containers are made of plastic.

Refraining from buying brand new books has been the hardest adaptation for me. I have relied on finding books that are used but sometimes allow myself to buy a brand-new book if it was just released.

Step 6: Say NO to plastics that are not recyclable

Plastic cutlery, plastic straws, and plastic plates are all examples of stuff that we use mindlessly. Most of these products do not have a recycling symbol on them. It is a small but impactful step to take to pledge to discontinue your use of plastic dinnerware. When purchasing new household items, you should also aim to buy products that are plastic free. Storage containers, toothbrushes, and hairbrushes are all products that we buy but do not realize that they are made of plastic. These products can easily be bought without plastic. Scan a room in your house for items that are plastic. You may notice that your vacuum, broom, and maybe even furniture is plastic. Plastic has become such an important component to our everyday items that we forget how harmful plastic is for our environment. When it is time to replace items in your house, be mindful with how these items are manufactured.

STEP 7: Purchase sustainable clothing or secondhand clothing

I get it; sales are extremely tempting, but cheap clothing is usually made out of polyester, nylon, or other synthetic fibers. It is crucial that you check the tag of the clothing item that you want. Plastic clothing is still very harmful for our planet. If you need to buy new

clothing, then try to buy secondhand or from a company that tells you exactly how its clothing is made. This step can be expensive because eco-friendly clothing tends to be pricier because of the materials used. However, there are a lot of companies out there now that make clothing that you are able to feel comfortable purchasing, such as, clothing made from organic cotton, recycled water bottles, and hemp. Fast fashion is killing our environment, but you can help reduce giving in to those cheap plastic shirts!

Step 8: Make your own food and drinks

This step is not always reasonable or attainable, but it is important that you try to reduce your consumption of fast food/to-go food and to-go drinks. Convenience meals create a lot of waste that ends up in our landfills and oceans for many years. You could start by reducing your takeout meals by one less a week and work your way up to learning new recipes and meal planning. I always buy grains and legumes in bulk and buy organic unprocessed vegetables, and I cook a majority of my weekly food at the beginning of the week to save time during the week. At times, we have to rush to catch a meal, so it is important that you know that it is okay to have a takeout meal or to-go coffee occasionally!

Step 9: Choose environmentally friendly foods

This step all depends on how you are eating on a normal day. If you are eating meat for every meal, then you could eat meatless meals a few times throughout the week since factory farming is harmful to our environment. Planting an organic summer vegetable garden can help you have fresh vegetables and give you a hobby that makes you feel proud! Purchasing farm-

fresh eggs from a local farmer is another way to get foods in an environmentally friendly manner. If you can get motivated to find a way to buy or grow food that is good for our planet, then you can feel pleased with your steps to a more sustainable life.

Changes do not happen overnight, so it is important to not get discouraged on your journey to a greener lifestyle. You could also encourage your friends and family to make small changes in their daily life to benefit our home planet. It will take every person on earth to comprehend that our planet needs us to take care of it. Since we live in a society that does not prioritize sustainability, it is important for us to do everything we can do to make sure we lessen the load of our personal waste and demand our government to take a stand on climate change. I hope my guide for taking small steps to living green inspires you to eventually take steps that are even bigger so that we can save our home!

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