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# Living Sustainably: It's Your Choice

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Economic

Social

Environmental



## What this guide is all about

### Our goals are to:

- Introduce the concept of sustainable living
- Identify three barriers to living sustainably in the United States and suggest ways to overcome them
- Help you begin to identify your personal values
- Show you how to use the triple win sustainability triangle in your lifestyle choices
- Help you decide how to incorporate sustainable behaviors into your everyday life

This booklet doesn't start where you might think a typical guide should. We won't ask how many lamps you have in your house, or what kind of vehicle you drive, or whether you use paper, plastic, or cloth bags at the grocery store. All that—and more—comes later in the series. We start first by helping you identify what's important to YOU—as an individual and as a member of a family and a community.

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This guide focuses on making choices to improve quality of life and reduce negative impact on the environment. You'll find information and activities to help you be more thoughtful about lifestyle choices and determine what's really important to you and your family. We've included space to jot down your ideas, or you might want to keep a journal as you go through the guide.

The decision to live sustainably is intensely personal. Some people make changes to save money; others make changes to protect the environment; still others make changes to allow more time to pursue other things in life. It really doesn't matter why we choose to adopt a sustainable behavior because the end result—a more sustainable life, community, and planet—is the same. Each and every reason is valid and contributes to the individuality of this process.



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## What is sustainable living?

Our definition is "A life that is deeply satisfying, fulfilling, and appealing because it is socially, environmentally, and economically responsible."

It's about making changes and informed choices, even small ones, that improve the quality of our lives and of the planet for future generations. However, there can be misconceptions about what a sustainable lifestyle looks like.

Can I drive the kind of vehicle I want and still be living sustainably?

Can I have credit cards, shop at a mall, or go to the movies?

**Yes!** Sustainable living is an ongoing learning process based on our individual definitions of quality of life. It's about making decisions that make sense to us, given our needs and values. It's about living with intention. It's about being fully aware of the consequences of our decisions, both positive and negative. What's important to you may not be important to the person next to you. And that's okay. That is the beauty of sustainable living.

Are you thinking that to live sustainably, you'll have to give up the things you love most? It's not that at all. It does, however, require being **more deliberate in making choices**. Too often we operate on autopilot. We don't take the time to really think about our strongest values, our deepest beliefs, and the consequences of our actions and to act accordingly. Instead, we buy things, and then wonder why we are in debt. We cram more and more obligations into our schedules, and wonder why we're stressed. We go about our daily lives and are startled that the community park has become a parking lot.



## What really matters to you?

Take a moment to answer these questions:

1. Name three things you love to do.
2. Name three things you used to love to do.
3. Name three fun things you have never done but would like to try.
4. Name three reasons you don't do the nine things you just named.



How does this happen? As Americans, we face multiple barriers to living sustainably, to focusing on what is most important to us, but often three major reasons emerge that explain why we do what we do:

- The time crunch
- Too much "stuff"
- Our disconnection from nature and spirituality

## The time crunch

"There's not enough time!" is our universal cry. What we really mean is, "I'm trying to jam too many things into the time I have!" The consequences of "time poverty" are serious: loss of family time, obesity, anxiety, stress, and even depression.

No matter who we are, how much money we make, or where we live, we have the same amount of time as everyone else on this planet: 60 minutes in each hour, 24 hours in each day, 365 days in each year, with a bonus day for leap year! It's how we choose to spend that time that makes the difference because our choices contribute to—or take away from—our quality of life.

### Consider this:

- Americans work an average of 47.5 hours per week at their paying jobs. That's approximately 13 hours more per year than in 1969.
- Vacations in the U.S. are vanishing. In 2006, 25 percent of American workers had no paid vacation at all, while 43 percent didn't take a full week off.
- Forty percent of American workers report that their jobs are very or extremely stressful.
- Americans spend an average of 7 hours per week in their cars, primarily commuting and doing errands.



*In 1985, 61 percent of Americans said they were satisfied with their jobs.  
Now fewer than half say they are satisfied.*

## How do you spend your time?

Do you often feel that time is slipping away? Did you list "not enough time" as a reason you don't do the things you love to do? Let's start by taking a look at how you spend your time, by charting your "typical" week. Make sure you chart no more than 168 hours! In addition to the activities listed, include things like chores, volunteer work, hobbies, TV, and exercise.

### Hours

60									
55									
50									
45									
40									
35									
30									
25									
20									
15									
10									
5									
	Sleep	Work	Travel	Meals					

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Now think about how you would prefer to spend your time. Remember that you can add more columns, but there are still only 168 hours in a week!

Hours

60														
55														
50														
45														
40														
35														
30														
25														
20														
15														
10														
5														
	Sleep	Work	Travel	Meals										

Last, but most importantly, what is the first thing you'll do, starting today, to move closer to living your perfect week?

*Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for in order to get to the job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car, and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it. ~ Ellen Goodman*



## Too much "stuff"

When we feel the time crunch, we tend to compensate in other ways. We purchase items to make us feel better or buy gifts for loved ones to make up for the lack of time spent together. Marketers have figured this out and use it to their advantage! We also buy things because we are encouraged to do so by



commercials. (The average American is bombarded by approximately 3,000 per day, in one form or another, all urging us to buy.) We receive the strong message that to be happy, respected among our friends, and considered successful we must acquire certain things or live a certain way.

American consumption far exceeds consumption in any other country. In fact, if everyone in the world lived an American lifestyle, it would require four Earths to sustain that level of consumption. Harvard economist Juliet Schor has written that it's difficult to make an ethical argument that people in the world's richest country need "more" when the disparity of the world's resource use is so vast and when strong evidence exists that we are already consuming beyond the capacity of the earth to provide. Yet, it seems as if there is always some new "status" product and pressure to acquire it, often on credit, whether we truly need it or not. The associated stress, pressure on resources, and absence of real satisfaction make such behavior unsustainable, but it is considered "normal" in our society.

*Every day U.S. consumers purchase 154,000 pounds of Starbucks coffee, 125,000 Barbie dolls, and about 29 million cans of Mountain Dew.*

*Everyone knows the three R's: Reduce, reuse, and recycle. Try adding two more: Repair. Can you fix it? And finally, the most important: Refuse! Refuse to take something you don't need or want. Then you won't have to reduce, reuse, repair, or recycle it!*



## Consider this:

The average American family has 9,918 pounds of belongings, according to the American Moving and Storage Association.

### What belongings are important to you?

Picture your favorite room in your home:

- If there was a fire, what items would you want to save?
- What items would be most helpful in an emergency?
- What items bring you great pleasure or truly make your life easier?
- What about all the other items in the room? Why do you have them?

*In 1990, the average American house size was 983 square feet.*

*In 2005, it was 2,414 square feet.*

*About 43 percent of American families spend more than they earn each year.*

*According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2004, the average American earned after-tax income of about \$22,000 and spent about \$17,000 per person. That means Americans save very little of what they earn and end up paying for much of what they buy on credit.*

## How many hours of my life is it worth?

Let's look at the money we earn in a different way by determining your "real" hourly wage; that is, your wage after you factor in taxes and all other work-related expenses. Here's an example, with space for you to do your own calculation.

	Example	Your turn
<b>Actual hourly wage</b>	<b>\$15.00/hr</b> <b>(\$31,200/yr)</b>	
- Taxes	- \$3.50/hr (\$7,280/yr)	
- Child care (if applicable)	- \$2.50/hr (\$5,200/yr)	
- Food for work (lunches, etc.)	- \$0.50/hr (\$1,040/yr)	
- Work-related clothing	- \$0.20/hr (\$520/yr)	
- Vehicle or commuting expenses	- \$1.25/hr (\$2,600/yr)	
- Other?		
= Real hourly wage or "life hours"	= \$7.00/hr (\$14,560/yr)	

The next time you make a purchase, think of the number of "life hours" you need to exchange to buy that item. Ask yourself: Is it worth it? Do I really need it?

And remember... if you purchase something on credit, you have purchased that item with life hours you haven't yet lived!

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## Reconnecting with nature and spirituality

Because of the time crunch and our consumerism, most of us have only limited contact with the natural world around us. Many adults spend the equivalent of 1 day a week either commuting or watching TV, plus another 40 or more hours at paid work. Electronic devices and games, coupled with a dramatic increase in parental concern over safety, mean that children rarely come in contact with nature. Americans spend almost 90 percent of our time indoors.

**Why is contact with nature important?** We all depend on products and services from the natural world. Our society demands more and more of these products and services from an ever-shrinking natural land base.

We all consume resources but most of us have no direct role in producing or protecting our food, water, air, and other natural resources. In fact, few of us connect our resource consumption—from pumping gas to eating broccoli—to what must be done somewhere on the land to make it possible. And, it's difficult to care about something if we know little about it and don't see the role it plays in our everyday life.

We must reconnect with the natural world if we expect it to continue to provide the benefits and services on which we depend.

- What do you do that brings you in contact with the earth?



- When was the last time you were deeply moved by something you observed in nature?



- When was the last time you touched a tree?

- Do you know what phase the moon is in right now?



For many people, spirituality and contact with the natural world are tightly interwoven. More conscious, direct encounters with nature can develop our sense of the sacred and deeply affect our lifestyle choices. Sustainable living is compatible with spirituality and many cultural and religious traditions.

- What do you do that connects you with your spirituality?

- What does your spiritual belief system say about how the planet is to be treated?

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## Imagine a world holiday

One fun way to look at how we value nature and spirituality is to create a World Holiday for everyone on this planet. Think about this imaginary celebration.

- Who and what would it honor?
- When would it be held?
- What would you do?
- Where would you go?
- What sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings would it include?

Describe your holiday, including as many details as possible.

Highlight words and phrases that are most important to you.



*Over the past three decades, there has been a 33 percent decrease in families who say they regularly have dinner together.*

*Only 38 percent of Americans entertain friends or family at home at least once a year.*

## ●●●●● There is a different way: ●●●●● Striking a balance

Stress results when we act in ways that are contrary to our values—when the time crunch, too much “stuff,” and a disconnection from nature and spirituality take the place of what’s really important to us.

Americans have a set of values and beliefs that characterize who we are as a society. These values (our perception of good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable) and beliefs (facts that are provable, measurable, and socially agreed upon) fall into three basic categories: **societal**, **economic**, and **environmental**.

### Here are some definitions:

“Economic sustainability” entails maintaining or increasing our standard of living **without** decreasing that of others. “Social sustainability” has to do with developing a sense of equity and fairness and the creation of vibrant community life. “Environmental sustainability” involves conserving and managing our ecosystems for future generations.

What do you value?

• Think of the three most important things you would like to accomplish in your life. Consider these your life goals.

2. Now let's say you have only 6 months to live. How would you choose to spend this remaining time?

3. Do your lists match? Of all the activities you thought about, which two or three are the most important? Do they align with your life goals? Do they align with your responses to earlier questions about things you love to do?

After you've identified what's most important to you—what you value—you can make your decisions based on these values. If you do this, you will be **living intentionally**, fully aware of the impacts of your decisions. For example, if spending more time with your family is extremely important to you, then your major decisions, such as the type of job you have or what you choose to spend money on, can be evaluated against that value.

*The average American adult devotes 2.5 hours a day to watching television.*



## How do we get there?

Sustainability is achieved when there's a relatively equal balance among our social, environmental, and economic values. This is the "triple win." It's simple, yet marvelously complex.



Let's look at an example:

### Buying food that is produced locally:

- Buying locally reduces the amount of transportation needed. This means lower food costs and fewer greenhouse gases, addressing both economic and environmental values.
- Purchasing food at a farmers' market provides the opportunity to meet local farmers. You can provide input on how your food is produced, thus addressing social and environmental values.
- Appropriate farming practices can conserve soils, protect watersheds, and improve wildlife habitat, all of which address environmental values.
- Rural areas provide access to open space and recreational areas for both residents and tourists, addressing economic, environmental, and social values.
- Locally produced food, harvested at the right time, has longer shelf life, can be more nutritious, and tastes great. These are economic and social values.



This is one example of the "triple win."  
There are many others.

Potential benefits of living sustainably include:

- Spending less money
- Saving more money
- Experiencing a better quality of life
- Having improved health
- Strengthening communities
- Building a more just world
- Creating deeper connections among individuals, communities, and nature



Sometimes we think we are too small to make a difference in this big world. Our actions seem insignificant in comparison to global issues such as climate change and population growth. However, the reality is that action on an individual level is exactly how big changes are made. Without individual and family sustainability, there's no community sustainability. And without community sustainability, there's no global sustainability. In fact, earth-wide change is absolutely impossible without individual change.

It really does come down to you and me.

**What's your first step?**



***Create an action plan!***



## My Personal Action Plan

To enhance the quality of my life and benefit the environment, I pledge that

- In the next week I will:

- In the next month I will:

- In the next year I will:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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*"Treat the world well. It was not given to you by your parents,  
it was lent to you by your children." ~ Kenyan Proverb*

## Notes

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## Additional resources

Local libraries and the Internet have many excellent resources. Here are a few to get you started.

### Books

*Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, by John de Graaf, David Wynn, Thomas Naylor, Vicki Robin (2005). ISBN 1-5767-199-6

*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, by Barbara Kingsolver, Steven L. Hoop, and Camille Kingsolver (2007). ISBN 978-0-06-085255-9

*Choosing Simplicity: Real People Finding Peace and Fulfillment in a Complex World*, by Linda Breen-Pierce (2000). ISBN 0-96720671-5

*Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder*, by Richard Louv (2005). ISBN 10:1-56512-391-3

*Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, by Peter Menzel, Charles Mann, and Paul Kennedy (1994). ISBN 0-871-564-300

*Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping*, by Judith Levine (2006). ISBN 0-7432-6935-7

*The Omnivore's Dilemma: The Natural History of Four Meals*, by Michael Pollan (2006). ISBN 1-59420-082-2

*The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*, by Juliet Schor (1998). ISBN 0-06-090768-2

*Stuff: The Secret of Lives of Everyday Things*, by John Ryan and Alan Durning (1997). ISBN 0-88609804-0

*Your Money or Your Life*, by Joe Domingues and Vicki Robin (1999). ISBN 0-670-84391-8

### Websites

The Center for the New American Dream. <http://newdream.org>

Living Green. <http://livinggreen.ifas.ufl.edu/>

The Simple Living Network. <http://www.simpleliving.net>

The Sustainable Living Project at OSU.  
<http://www.cof.orst.edu/cof/extended/sustain/>



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"The National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE) improves  
quality of life and reduces environmental degradation by fostering new  
consumption patterns and sustainable lifestyles through Cooperative  
Extension Service programs at land-grant institutions."

Additional copies of this guide are available from the Oregon State University Extension Service for \$3.50 per copy (quantity discounts available).

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