

What goes around comes around

Harriet Clifford explains how to support a circular economy

As I settled down with a cup of tea and my laptop to make a start on this piece, a new email pinged into my inbox. It was a newsletter from one of my favourite sustainable clothing brands, Lucy & Yak (lucyandyak.com), explaining a new initiative they're involved with called Offset Earth (offset.earth). As I scrolled through the email, I realised that this was a perfect example of how the focus of this piece – the circular economy – works in practice. It explains how brands, organisations and individuals can make the shift and make a difference.

Over the last few years, it has become increasingly uncomfortable to buy something, use it and then throw it away. Twenty years ago, no one would have felt even a hint of guilt about taking their old television to the tip or upgrading their washing machine and throwing away the old one. Arguably, lots of people still don't, but if you're reading this magazine then recycling is probably on your radar.

In the developed world, we operate under a linear economy; making things, using them and then getting rid of them. This is something most people do naturally because it's just how the world works. I use the word 'naturally' lightly, of course, as this is not at all how the natural world works, but how humans in the world have decided to do things. Yet, those of us who try to live differently – perhaps by advocating a zero-waste lifestyle, growing

our own vegetables or refusing to travel via aeroplane – are seen as radical.

Although they may not think of it in these terms, people who go against the grain are advocating the circular economy. This is an economy for which the tagline would be 'reduce, reuse and recycle', rather than the 'manufacture, use and dispose' of the current model. As we look at the world around us, the saturated landfills, toxic water supplies and plastic-filled oceans are a clear sign that this model is simply not sustainable.

There are different levels on which the circular economy operates. An individual who buys their food from a zero-waste market stall, only wears clothes from charity shops and repairs broken objects in their home is more likely to be living their life in accordance with this principle. Which, of course, is great, but there is also an urgent need for a large-scale, global shift. Imagine a hamster in a cage in the back of a car. Furiously running in its wheel, the hamster is being incredibly self-sufficient and sustainable in its exercise. However, if you zoom out a little bit, the car is rolling along, pumping toxic exhaust into the atmosphere. That's not to say that what the hamster's doing is futile – it's better than running on an electric wheel – but no significant change can happen while it's being driven around in the car.

An Ellen MacArthur Foundation (ellenmacarthurfoundation.org) study from 2015 found that a circular economy path could halve global carbon emissions by 2030, thanks to a focus on renewable energies, recycling, and energy-efficient, non-toxic materials and processes (youmatter.world). Breaking this down a bit, we find that the main principle of a circular economy is that waste becomes a resource. This means that all biodegradable materials return to nature, and everything else gets reused. If we can replace things that are usually single-use or non-recyclable with things made from natural materials, that's even better. For example, Pela Case sells phone cases that can be put in the compost instead of ending up in landfill or the ocean (pelacase.com).

Aside from buying biodegradable phone cases, what does the circular economy look like in practice? Well, if you're a brand, like Lucy & Yak, then perhaps it looks like signing up to an initiative like Offset Earth, which results in each employee becoming carbon positive, through investing in projects to remove more greenhouse gases from the atmosphere than the company puts in. Individuals can also sign up, as well as buy products from the increasing number of sustainable brands which advocate the 'reduce, reuse, recycle' way of operating. Not only does this benefit the environment (and in turn the people who are suffering as a result of unsustainable use of resources), but it also makes things less expensive. Production costs are reduced, therefore lowering sale prices for the customer.

Another way of supporting the circular economy is through renting items rather than buying. This could be clothes, with

companies such as Girl Meets Dress (girlmeetsdress.com), or By Rotation (byrotation.com); even high street brand H&M (hm.com) is trialling a rental system in its flagship store in Stockholm. This could be how fashion works in the future, as well as how we use household appliances such as televisions, washing machines and dishwashers. Once the item has served its purpose, it would be returned to the manufacturer and its parts are reused.

In order to stem the constant barrage of waste that we are pumping into the Earth, a dramatic shift is required, from both individuals, businesses, governments and international organisations. The circular economy is a new way of thinking about how we live our lives, from what we wrap our lunch in, to how international companies make their money. Another way of configuring the famous phrase 'what goes around comes around' is 'we reap what we sow'. Surely it's time to start sowing seeds that don't poison the very soil on which they're scattered. ■

For more from Harriet, follow her on Instagram [@harriet_ella](https://www.instagram.com/harriet_ella)

