

High Style, Low Impact

Julie Ray

I've always taken great pleasure in adorning myself in bright, colorful, and unexpected ways. A thoughtful ensemble often boosts my mood and can also bring a smile to fellow commuters, colleagues, and kids. However, there is more to being a good neighbor than providing visual diversion, so I try to pursue my style in a way that has a lower impact on the environment and that doesn't directly contribute to global grief.

Our culture promotes the idea that new is good. Advertising makes us think that a new car, new shoes, or the newest iPhone will bring happiness. The problem is that new things usually have a high price — and not just in terms of dollars.

Many new items are made at great social and ecological cost (sweatshops, child labor, toxic fumes, animals' skin, pollution, etc.). Often we don't need the items that fill our shopping carts.



Do we really need, say, another pair of jeans, when we already have at least a dozen at home? And so many things we buy are for short-term or even one-time use (such as the irresistibly cute clothing we buy for fast-growing infants, or say, a mint-green prom dress).

Our society is purposefully geared toward throwing objects away. Why? Because it's great for business. Every time we buy new things to replace what we throw out, it increases business' profits. Businesses spend billions of dollars every year to persuade us that we can't get along without the latest gadget or the newest fashion. And it is difficult to resist The New when everything, even something as simple as orange juice, is frequently re-labeled "new and improved." If we don't get the new and improved kind, the implication is that we must have the old and bad kind. Thus, when our iPod breaks or isn't the latest version, or when our clothes rip or our shoes are "last-season's style," we throw the items away instead of fixing, cleaning, or using them until they are truly worn out or broken.

While new items feel pristine and special, I wish people could think about "new" in a, well, new light. I try to appreciate things that are new to *me*, such as clothes I find at consignment stores or yard sales. I love hand-me-downs (or hand-me-overs, as I think of them). I even find great stuff in the garage. Some people might think that these clothes are



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dirty (so wash them!) or that it is shameful to wear used clothing, but that is starting to change. People realize that wearing second-hand clothes is a form of recycling — another way to be “green.” Speaking of green, buying second-hand is also a way to save money while avoiding a transaction that exploits cheap labor.

Of course I buy brand new things too. It’s hard to pass up a perceived bargain. I walk by a trendy boutique that’s having a 75%-off sale, and I feel entitled. “I deserve to splurge!” I say to myself. But I know that the cheap clothes I find on sale come with a huge price tag for someone else. The person who made that item — maybe it was even a child — probably worked under terrible conditions and for a ridiculously low wage. I realize, of course, that those same children may have assembled the shirt that I got at the second-hand store, but at least when I buy something used, I rationalize, I am not contributing directly to the demand for brand-new, cheap clothing.

I can say that people are often impressed (and amused!) with how I dress. They ask, “Where did you get that?” and seem surprised when I say “at a clothing swap” or “I found it in my best friend’s mom’s give-away pile.” I keep an outgoing bag of my own give-aways too, and I encourage friends to “shop away” when they come over. And you know that mint-green prom dress? It would look great on your 1980s revivalist cousin!



Julie Ray (in photo on left) is a public health writer and editor at JSI and World Education in Boston. She lives with Kimchi, a rescued orange Dachshund, and gets where she needs to go on a second-hand blue Schwinn.



Host a Clothing Swap

A clothing swap is a fun and free way to bring in the new-to-you. Pick a convenient time (weekend or after work or school) and a roomy space (living room, basement, or sunny yard). Round up a bunch of friends and ask them to bring clothes and shoes that they don’t wear, that don’t fit, or that they are just plain tired of. Put on some music, provide some snacks and drinks, and let the trying-on fun begin! Whoever has a car takes what is leftover to a local shelter or Goodwill. (If no one has a car, some places, including Big Brother/Big Sister, will pick up.) At best, you will go home with a revitalized wardrobe. At worst, you’ll have cleaned out your closets, and helped to clothe others!

