

You know you're consuming too much – how to stop before it consumes you too

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After five of years writing ad copy to sell everything from toasters to condiments, Greg Foyster just couldn't take it anymore. So he started writing a magazine column about environmental issues, one of his passions (...)

"Disproportionate resource use is linked to climate change," he told the Guardian. "The director of the Princeton Environmental Institute has calculated that the richest 500 million people in the world emit half the world's fossil fuel carbon [...] People who consume the most place the greatest demand on natural resources, and therefore cause the greatest destruction.

It's advertising that helps to create desires to drive this overconsumption."

With this knowledge and the crisis of conscience he experienced because of it, Foyster made the decision to quit advertising. He didn't just change jobs, either. Instead, he began a cycling trip up the east coast of Australia to explore the idea of simple living. He eventually wrote a book about his journey.

(..) We tend to think buying begets contentment. We believe that a new lipstick or a new coat or a new car will make us happier. Better. And, as Foyster explains, this is no accident.

"This is now advertising's role in the economy – to convince people that non-material happiness can be gained through material belongings," he told the Guardian.

Desires for material things have limits – most people really only want or need one dishwasher, or one or two cars – but desire for emotional needs like status, love, acceptance and autonomy are bottomless. Tying material goods to nonmaterial desires ensures people are never satisfied with what they have.

(...) Our current buying behaviour has very little to do with what we need and everything to do with how having something will make us feel. Advertising points out a problem you never knew you had, makes you feel bad for having it, and then sells you a solution. The end result of this twisted process is lower quality of life, more time spent working, and horrific environmental damage due to over-consumption.

Foyster explains: "The root cause of ecological destruction from resource use isn't overpopulation, but over-consumption. Over-consumption isn't some vague term I made up – it refers to a level of consumption beyond what the Earth can sustainably replenish. For example, if everyone on the planet wanted to live the lifestyle of the average Australian, we would need 3.7 Earths to supply resources." So where does it end? Where do we stop? How do we stop?

For Foyster, the first step is acknowledging that we're all in this together. He says: "We all live in this consumer capitalist world, we all over-consumption, it's totally normal and we shouldn't feel guilty about it. We should just acknowledge that sometimes buying a lot of stuff is a distraction from the things we really want in life, the things that really make us happy."

How does one do that? I chose to cancel cable, thus reducing the sheer volume of ads I was exposed to every day. I chose to evaluate needs versus wants, and shop secondhand. I chose to turn consuming from a habit to a choice.

Likewise for Foyster, the answer lies in mindfulness. "For me, the answer is to ask myself a very commonsense question: do I want to buy something because it will be useful in my life? Or because it will help me feel like a smarter, better, more popular or successful person? If the answer is the second reason then there's a good chance I've been duped by the marketing."

He adds: "The antidote to wanting more, more, more is to take great pleasure in the wonderful life you already have."

(635 words)