

Sustainable Consumption – The Seven R's plus one (7Rs+1)

How to fight the accumulation of stuff in our lives while also lowering our use of energy and resources associated with acquiring stuff.

1. Refuse

"No Thanks" is our first line of defense, and the most powerful. *Refuse* to buy or graciously decline the item. Refusal is facilitated by *awareness* of the remaining R's. The outcome of this awareness is the "bonus R" - *rethinking* our purchase decisions. Each of the following six R's are both a *purchase criteria* for deciding whether to buy something, and a *use guideline* for how to use the stuff we didn't refuse.

2. Reuse

Can the item be reused? If not, it is a single-use item, which could be immediate grounds for *refusal*.¹ Some items commonly used once (plastic bags) can be reused. Buying, selling, sharing, or gifting used items also counts as *re-use* and is another form of *refusing* (to enable new purchases in this case).

3. Reduce

If we have acquired an item and we are using it, we should try to *reduce* our use, so it lasts longer. This is especially relevant if the item fails the next four R's. Reducing use also makes it more possible to pass stuff on to others (see above). But some junky items wear out fast or are biased toward obsessive over-use and wear out quickly for that reason. These shortcomings can be reasons to *refuse* the item in the first place.

4. Repair

Can the item be repaired? If so, we can learn to *repair* it and feel pride in owning and maintaining something we value. If we repair an item, we have effectively *refused* to buy a new one. Repair also makes the item *reusable*. However, many items offered for purchase are *not* designed to be repaired. If so, that could be a reason to *refuse* them.

5. Repurpose

For items that have come to the end of their useful lifetime and cannot be repaired, finding a new purpose engages our creativity. If the new purpose really works, we might be able to *refuse* to buy something else we thought we needed. If an item has no potential to be repurposed, this might be a reason to *refuse* it.²

6. Recycle

You are ready to dump it. Can the item be recycled? Learn about which materials are recyclable and how to recycle in your community. If an item is non-recyclable, this could be a reason to *refuse* the item.

7. Regenerate

If the item can't be recycled, does it readily decompose? Can it be composted? Most plastics, for example, cannot be composted and end up scattered all over the world. If the item is non-recyclable and non-compostable, this could be a good reason to *refuse* it.³

Bonus R – Rethink

The item you want to buy looks really good, right? Without thinking too much, you want it. But we *do* have the power to *refuse*. How will you decide what to acquire? The R's provide the *purchase criteria*. For an item we do acquire, how can we ensure it will lead an honorable life? The R's provide the *use guidelines*. Notice how the R's all feed back into the first R – *Refusal*. Using the seven R's means we are *RETHINKING* our consumption. That is the bonus R.

Rethinking food and other consumables

On a basic survival level, food cannot be refused, reused, reduced, repaired, repurposed, or recycled. It must be consumed. However, most of us can refuse or otherwise limit (ie reduce) our intake of foods that have high environmental impacts. We can buy local, or if we are ambitious and green-thumbed, we can “grow our own”. We can eat more plant-based, and minimally processed foods. And most of our uneaten food can be composted. In similar ways, the 7Rs+1 can help us rethink our use of other consumables.

The Seven R's and the Good Life

Average personal consumption rates vary greatly between different nations in the world.⁴ Among high consumers, suggestions to lower consumption are often met with chilled silence, rolled eyes, “yeah, but...” or the equivalent of “no way”. But philosophers and spiritual guides have long argued that “more stuff” is not the key to happiness. As we contemplate the 7R's we should consider the possibility of a “double dividend”. Lowering our consumption is not only good for the planet, but also for our mental, physical, and psychological health and well-being.⁵

Concepts and terminology for further study

From the perspective of *circular economy*, the 7R's are embedded in two types of global material cycle – *biological cycles* (part of the *biosphere*) and *technical cycles* (part of the *technosphere*). The seven R's are examples of *retention loops* which extend the life of a product within these cycles before disposal. Reuse, reduce, repair, and repurpose are *short loops* that extend the life of the product for the consumer; refurbish and remanufacture (options grouped with “repurpose”) are *medium loops*; recycle and regenerate are *long loops*. *Regenerate* is the only R that is part of *biological cycles*. *Refuse* is the most powerful R because it cuts the flow of material through these cycles at the outset.⁶

References

Reike, D., Vermeulen, W. J., & Witjes, S. (2018). The circular economy: new or refurbished as CE 3.0?—exploring controversies in the conceptualization of the circular economy through a focus on history and resource value retention options. *Resources, conservation and recycling*, 135, 246-264.

Ellen Macarthur Foundation. *The Butterfly Diagram: Visualizing the Circular Economy*.

<https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/circular-economy-diagram>.

Notes

¹ Of course, there is a place for some single-use items (eg toilet paper), and some single-use items can sometimes be recycled or composted.

² Two other R's can also come into play at this point: Some items can be put back into the manufacturing stream (the “technical cycle”) to be *Refurbished* or *Remanufactured*. This is applicable to large, complex goods such as cars.

³ *Regenerate* draws our attention to earth's biological cycles that involve renewable resources. If the focus at this step is composting specifically, this R can be renamed *Rot*.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_household_final_consumption_expenditure_per_capita.

⁵ Some caveats: The 7Rs+1 are not telling us to never buy anything. Nevertheless, if you have decided you want something, the 7Rs+1 can guide you in the purchase decision (what to buy) and in the use of the item (how to give it an honorable life). Also, even if we adopt the 7Rs+1, we will still have to throw things away or replace them when they break. Lastly, the 7Rs+1 is about our material waste stream and not energy consumption. However, cutting one will often be correlated with cutting the other.

⁶ See Reike et al. 2018 or the Ellen Macarthur Foundation website for more about these concepts and terms.