

Quitting The Supermarket Habit

Contributed by Lozzie

For many, the idea of giving up supermarket shopping is comparable to giving up toilet paper. However, there has been a marked increase in the number of people who believe that everyone in the UK should have access to safe, nutritious, unadulterated and affordable food; produced locally by an independent, viable industry within a healthy and sustainable environment.

With the recent occurrences of many food-related health scares in Great Britain and abroad, people are now looking more closely at where their food comes from, and how it is produced. The benign, motherly face of most British supermarkets, which has gone unquestioned for two decades now, is looking increasingly worried as shoppers begin to voice their discontent.

But how exactly does one break the habit that is so ingrained in the pattern of your days that you find it hard to remember life as it was before? How do you give up supermarkets?

It is perhaps not as difficult as you might believe (and ask yourself: who it is that has made you believe that supermarkets are an indispensable part of your modern lifestyle? The supermarkets themselves, of course!). I live in Bournemouth, and my own local research has shown me that more and more opportunities now exist in Dorset to get hold of fresh, locally produced food than ever before.

So here's some ideas on how you could give up Supermarket Shopping. Your own 12-Step Programme.

1. Admit you have a problem, and seek help

This stage happens when you awake one morning to the familiar headache-inducing slap of credit card bill landing on doormat. A brief, bleary-eyed inspection shows line upon line of debits in favour of your preferred supermarket choice. Discarded till receipts litter the floor, crunching underfoot. Crumpled plastic shopping bags flutter accusingly in the breeze. The remains of last night's chicken korma ready-meal gaze balefully at you from the overflowing bin in the kitchen. You need help.

2. Cupboard Love

Have a look in your cupboards (including the bathroom and under the kitchen sink), freezer and fridge. Are there things in there that you have bought but will never, in all honesty, get round to using? Why did you buy them? If there are more than 5 items in your cupboards that you know you will never use, then it seems you are already an athletic participant in the extreme sport of Downhill Impulse Buying. Supermarkets are specially designed to get you hooked on this pastime, and take a great deal of your money for the pleasure of it.

3. What a load of rubbish

Have a look in your rubbish bin. I'm not suggesting that you empty the contents of your wheelie bin onto a tarpaulin in your driveway - although this IS a very effective way of seeing how wasteful you are - but do have a think about the amount of waste you generate - especially food waste. Two recent reports on the BBC here and here claimed that about a third of the food produced for human consumption in the United Kingdom ends up needlessly clogging our already overwrought landfill sites. In financial terms, this represents about £420 per adult per year - quite a considerable amount of money to be tying up in black bin liners.

So can you change your habits to avoid wasting food? What if you gave your children smaller portions? Can you use up leftovers in other recipes? Could portions of cooked food be frozen for an "I-don't-wanna-cook-day" in the future?

4. BELIEVE that you can save money (and time) this way

Most people are convinced that shopping at supermarkets saves money and is convenient, and find it incredibly hard to break away from their conditioned responses to Three-For-Two offers, or managers' specials.

Buying food locally is not as expensive as you might think, either; a regional survey has shown that local food sold at farmers' markets represents very good value for money for the consumer. Four markets and a home delivery service

were selected and their prices were compared to equivalent products in the local supermarket. Local food came out as 30-40% cheaper than supermarket prices!

5. A journey of a thousand miles, et cetera...

OK, so you are starting to get that itchy feeling in the ends of your fingers and at the back of your tongue that means you will soon be on your way to the supermarket. At this crucial point in your recovery, you are very vulnerable. It is time to move on to the next Step; try buying just ONE of your everyday essentials from a different source.

For me, it was milk. I needed to contact my local milkman. Briefly I became a hunter-gatherer again, sniffing the pavements, searching for his trail, trying to gauge his habits and finally, with the help of kindly natives (the old lady next door), laying in wait for him, ready to pounce. And what a shock I got!

Milkmen have had to adapt or die in the face of vicious competition for grazing rights from huge supermarket chains. The milkman of today bears little or no resemblance to the surly man smoking a shabby roll-up that I remember from my suburban childhood. That creature has evolved into a honed and toned home-delivery MACHINE, able to supply not only a plethora of different types of milk but also everything from frozen sausages to bags of compost to boxes of organic fruit and vegetables (although, as I write, this scheme is still in its infancy and suffering a few initial problems).

6. Get informed, get involved

There are plenty of opportunities to buy food and other supplies locally, if you know where to look. I discovered early on that word of mouth is one of the most efficient ways of finding new sources of good food shopping. Pick up a local food directory from your library, tourist information centre or local council. Look in your local paper. ASK people.

Even if you don't have the time or inclination to grow or make your own food, try and find others who DO. Not just at farmer's markets, but at craft fairs, Christmas shows and summer fetes. The more you dig and delve into the workings of your local community, the more you will benefit in real terms from your interest and commitment.

7. Try a box scheme for organic vegetables

I found that once the bulk of my vegetables were being delivered straight to my door every week, the requirement to visit the supermarket began to diminish rapidly. The unpredictability of the box's contents kept me on my culinary toes, trying vegetables and recipes I would never normally have bought, all fresh and seasonal.

8. Take up cooking again

Dust off those cookbooks; look online; scour charity shops and car boot sales; phone your mother; gossip in the bus queue ... start thinking more about what you would like to eat based on the ingredients you have, rather than worrying about how you will find the time to shop for something new. Learning new cooking techniques and developing an interest in new processes could even lead to your having a go at things like jam making and soap making!

9. Take up gardening again

Even if you have no garden to speak of, it is still possible to grow some of your own food - even if it is only window-box herbs and lettuces, or cherry tomatoes on a sunny windowsill, or mushrooms in the garage. Growing even a tiny percentage of your own food not only reduces your need to supermarket shop still further, but also imbues a real sense of achievement.

10. Take up shopping again

Do you really and honestly ENJOY the experience of traipsing around a crowded supermarket every week? You probably wouldn't even be reading this article if that were the case. Try going a whole week without going into a supermarket: imagine yourself on holiday in a strange place where supermarkets do not exist.

11. Consider alternatives

Stopping Supermarket shopping is a cumulative and ongoing process. The more things in your house you can do

without, or find alternate sources of, the less often you will need to go to a supermarket. How about washing balls instead of powder and conditioner? What about a local organic meat producer supplying meat by post or courier?

12. Don't beat yourself up!

It is perfectly possible that you will never be able to truly give up supermarkets and, unlike other addictions, continuing to visit your supermarket on the odd occasion does not constitute a potentially fatal fall from the wagon. I for example, have not been able to find another source for the type of hard Italian cheese that my children like on their pasta and go to the supermarket for that as well as to use the handy machine that sorts your small change for you. My son likes the Postman Pat ride outside the door, too - and there are cash points and recycling facilities in the car park.

There are so many benefits to local food. Shopping at a small local shop or a farmers' market is a far more sociable and personalised experience than supermarkets can ever compete with. Plus, your health is likely to improve as you eat more food that is fresh; less processed, and not tainted with pesticides or genetically modified ingredients. I feel a certain freedom when I visit Sainsbury's nowadays - when I look back and see how I have gradually managed to overcome the brainwashing, advertising and numerous sneaky psychological strategies they adopt to encourage money out of your hand and into their directors' Christmas bonuses ... nowadays I find myself looking at over priced over packaged and unnecessary products and wondering how I could ever have been so duped.

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