

Taking Pride in our Beautiful Clean Spaces

One has a responsibility to clean up one's space and make it liveable as far as one's own resources go. That includes not only material resources, but psychological resources: the commitment of time and a portion of your mind to something when you'd rather be doing something else. Wole Soyinka

June is a joyful month for lots of local residents as well as tourists. The beaches are often crowded with people enjoying delicious BBQs and picnics and savouring the long awaited heat of the sun. People arrive to the beauty of the sea and a lovely clean beach to sit on. So why is it that once the crowds have left the beach, the clean and tidy beach disappears too as litter is left strewn across miles of pebbles and along the promenade, taking away the joy of June and our pride in our beautiful nature-filled environment.

Much research has taken place into the psychology of littering and here are the main theories.

- ◆ "Litter begets litter and no litter begets no litter". Social psychologists have found that people are more prone to litter if they see litter around them. Litter-free areas remain litter free whilst littered places see more litter.
- ◆ Some people who go to the beach see it as a venue, such as going to the cinema where they feel able to leave behind their popcorn packets and drinks cans. Rather than seeing the beach as a place of altruistic value and having a sense of personal ownership or responsibility over it, people feel that they can leave their rubbish there.
- ◆ Some people feel that it is "somebody else's job to clean up after them." "The cleaners will be there in the morning". Of course, they are and they do a brilliant job as do the volunteer cleaners.
- ◆ Sometimes littering is seen as a way of being anti-authority. Social psychologists have documented this phenomenon - a kind of "litter as graffiti" behaviour. Some littering is an aggressive thumbing of the nose at authority or society.

So how can we Encourage Ourselves and Others to relish in the joys of June by Creating an Environment that we can be Proud of and Take Pride in?

Research has shown that campaigns that reduce littering tend to be intense, expensive and well-designed and therefore unlikely to be put into place. In effect, littering is really just another way of throwing money away. Expensive clean up jobs just encourage littering instead of encouraging individuals to take responsibility.

There are, however, some incredibly effective strategies to reduce littering which do not rely on monetary resources. Here is what the research shows:

- ◆ Studies have shown the copycat method to be very effective. If offenders see someone else pick up and dispose of litter then they are likely to do the same. If they see someone drop their litter and leave it behind, they do the same thing.
- ◆ Studies in car parks show that if people see a litter free environment before getting into their cars, they will not litter in that area. However, if they see litter in the car park, they will drop their litter there too. So lots of studies show that cues in the environment determine people's littering behaviours. If you see an environment that is highly littered, you litter. If there is no litter, you are significantly less likely to litter.
- ◆ Interestingly, if there is just one piece of litter in an otherwise litter-free environment, people are even less likely to throw their rubbish on the ground. This is because it reminds people that most people are not littering here and it calls attention to the fact that the majority of people do not litter.
- ◆ If we see someone reacting disapprovingly to littering, we are also less likely to litter. So a disapproving look can have an impact as well. In one study, if someone saw a person picking up litter with a disapproving look, they did not litter. One library car park noticed that there was 33 percent more litter if no one was seen picking up litter with a disapproving look. So people tend to change their behaviour and adapt to this when they see what is being done around them.

Sometimes it seems that arguing for environmental reasons can be futile but changing our own behaviour really impacts on the behaviour of others. It is really about simple psychology: people are likely to do what they think is expected of them. It's about norms and expectations and if we can change these, we can relish in the joys of June and take great pride in our beautiful city that is filled with nature.

So the best thing to do for those of us whose hearts crack when we see rubbish defiling places that mean so much to us, is to pick up some of it. It makes more of a difference than we think, even in the centre of Brighton where people feel it is acceptable to dispose of litter in other people's front gardens.

For those of who are able to, why not consider 'Plogging' (a mixture of jogging and the Swedish word of plocka upp – to pick up), a Swedish fitness trend which encourages runners to pick up litter, thereby keeping fit and helping the environment.

Perhaps our signs need to change as well. Instead of saying 'no littering', they could say 'if one person litters, it destroys the beauty of our beaches, parks, gardens, streets and so on.'

So go on, this month relish in the joy of June by behaving in a way that makes each of us and those around us keep our beautiful city and beaches clean, so that we can be proud of our environment and take pride in it.

The strongest governments on earth cannot clean up pollution by themselves. They must rely on each ordinary person, like you and me, on our choices, and on our will. Chai Jing

