

54. Sustainability in Quilting and Weight Loss with Bridget O'Flaherty



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With Your Host

Dara Tomasson

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Did you know you could lose weight and keep it off for good? After 25 years of hiding behind my quilts, I have finally cracked the code for permanent weight loss, and I've lost 50 pounds without exercise or counting calories. I'm Dara Tomasson, professional quilter turned weight and life coach, where I help quilters just like you create a life they love by losing weight and keeping it off for good. Let's jump into today's episode.

Hello everybody. I'm so excited, we have Bridget O'Flaherty. So, she's going to introduce herself. And today we're going to be talking about something that's going to be so interesting to you as a quilter and someone who wants to lose weight because we're going to be talking about sustainable quilting practices and how they relate to the way that I teach weight loss with sustainable weight loss. So, Bridget, please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about what you're all about.

Bridget: Well, hi. Hi, Dara, I'm pretty excited to be here. I'm Bridget O'Flaherty and I am in Perth, Ontario so I am Canadian. And I have a background in sustainability actually in the residential construction industry. But it kind of crosses over into materials a little bit. I've been a quilter for about 30 years and really wanted to bring sustainability into my quilt practice and when I came back to quilting about eight years ago. And so, I started looking at what materials are around, what's kind of available.

And started realizing it was very difficult to find. And if I was having difficulty as somebody who knows about sustainability, I couldn't imagine people who don't know anything about it. So, I started trying to have these conversations around sustainability that are able to help people figure out what they can do in their quilt world to be sustainable.

Dara: Okay. So can you give us some really practical examples because this does sound a little confusing, especially when I first met you. I was like, does she mean I need to recycle everything? Can you just give us kind of a rundown of what do you mean by sustainable?

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Bridget: Yeah, it's a big word and it's a big idea, big concept. Basically, sustainability is ensuring that we've got access to materials and resources and it kind of takes a look at it from an environmental, social, and economic perspective. There's lots of different ways to look at sustainability. So sure, recycling all of your materials is definitely a way you can be sustainable. But it doesn't have to be this big thing, it's not all or nothing, it can be just little small actions in your own practice that help you to become more sustainable.

And it's more of a growth that happens rather than, you know, don't throw out all your fabric, don't get rid of everything that's not considered organic, or recycled, or recyclable, or it's not thrifty. That's not what I'm suggesting. What I'm suggesting is that we can make small changes in how we're looking at our quilting world and maybe support industries or support retailers that are doing sustainable practices in their work.

Do some upcycling which is re-using our clothing or going to a thrift store and finding fabrics there, or doing swap swatches with other quilters. There's lots of different ways you can do it. Is that too much?

Dara: No, that's excellent. So, one of the questions I have is what are actually the fears that you have in the future? Because I have to be honest with you, I feel like there's lots of fabric, there's lots of fabric designers. What are the potential dangers or what should we really be looking for?

Bridget: So, one of the biggest issues that we have around the textile industry is the waste. So right now, the average Canadian throws out about 80 pounds of textile waste every year and it just goes into the landfills. And it doesn't necessarily break down or biodegrade, or it just becomes, and it stays there. And a lot of these fabrics and materials are dyed with synthetic dyes. Those dyes then become part of our environment into the water stream, into the ecosystems that they're around.

And when these products are being made as well they're being made from materials and through processes that have harsh impacts on the

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environment, eroding soils and bleaching chemicals and products into our water stream. So that's the environmental side of it. There's also the impacts that it's having socially.

There are a lot of – in the textile world 75 countries out of the 90 countries that produce cotton and in developing nations, and so the people that are working in those industries are working in conditions that aren't necessary healthy, safe conditions and economically burdened by it. And they are dependent on it as well. So, it's not like we can just stop buying cotton, because then we have 250 million people who are out of work. So that's not the choice.

So, it's taking a look at ways that we can maybe choose materials that are not quite so harsh and impact on the environment.

Dara: So, can you just give me – sometimes I think when we hear things like this we're like, "Oh my goodness." It kind of feels overwhelming. It feels like oh my gosh, am I not supposed to buy fabric? But you [inaudible] buy fabric. So, what are some really simple things that I could do, and the podcast listeners could do to say, "I did something good today to help some people?"

Bridget: There's a bunch of different things. I mean there are projects out there for one thing. So, if we take a look at the social side of it, I don't want to jump around too much. So, on the material side you can buy organic materials. There are producers and there are companies out there that supply organics that are really amazing cottons. There's also recycled content out there as well that you can take a look at. And what you need to look for is labeling so that you know it's actually meeting certain standards.

So, there is different standards out there. There's the OEKO-TEX and I'm not sure exactly how you pronounce that. I think OEKO-TEX I think it's pronounced. And so, they are putting some thresholds on the amount of chemicals and pollutants that can be used in the raw material production. And then there is the GOTS which is the Global Organic Trade certification

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or something like that, GO, textile, it's gone from my head right now what it stands for.

Anyways they are dealing with organics and the organic thresholds and standards that need to be met in order to qualify for those certifications. And they have a social component to them as well so they're making sure that the people who are working for those companies are working in fair trade situations. So, any materials that have that GOTS labeling on it, you know has met those standards.

Dara: Okay. So, is this like if we went to an organic farm and picked berries, those farms need to have, the soils need to qualify to be labeled?

Bridget: Yeah.

Dara: Okay, so it's really similar to that, okay.

Bridget: Yeah, it's similar to that. So, it's just got a labeling on it and so if someone is calling itself organic it has to have a certification behind it. And then there is also BCI which is Better Cotton Initiative. And that one is not specifically targeting organic. It's targeting those three pillars that I talked about, the social, economic, and environmental pillars. And trying to get the people, members who are in that certification to meet those thresholds and meet those targets.

So, there are a lot of really good things out there happening and you can find materials that are made of those. And what you can do is you can go and ask your local quilt store to bring them in if they don't have them. And maybe just do one project that is that or you can even go simpler and just take your cloth bags with you when you go to buy fabric instead of taking their plastic bags. It's really small steps make a difference.

Dara: I see this in my weight loss, the journey that we've been on and it's all or nothing thinking. We eat a chocolate bar, we had a negative experience, so we turn to a chocolate bar. And then we think, oh. The rest of the day or the rest of the week we're like, yeah, it's over, bring on the

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chips, bring on everything and you just kind of overdo it. And I think it's the same thing that you're saying here of just let's just do a few things. And I just love, even that suggestion of just bring in cloth bags.

Bridget: Yeah, it can be simple, it doesn't have to be – I talk about all the technical terms. I get really excited about them because that's my thing. But I don't expect everybody else to have that same kind of passion or the same kind of knowledge, and understanding, and drive behind being sustainable. I think everybody gets to choose their area they want to focus on. And some people really like doing, for example, slow stitching, so doing a mending project, or hand quilting, or hand piecing, knitting, those very slow intentional projects.

Those are sustainability projects, and we don't think of them that way. But if you start realizing the amount of care and time, self-care that you're putting into that moment of sitting and relaxing and doing your stitching. And the amount of pride you have at the end of your project, and where it goes, and who gets it, and how long it stays as a legacy piece for you. Then you start to see, there is other links to what sustainability is. It's not just about materials and all the details and content.

Dara: Yeah, I love that. If you were to say, what would be maybe a top five takeaways from having this practice of just – I mean I guess the global idea is I just want to leave this Earth cleaner and better for my grandchildren. I mean that's basically what we're saying. And I also don't want to be living with fear before going to bed. Staying up at night being like, oh my goodness, we ruined the Earth.

So, I guess what I'm asking you is what would you say may be five simple ways that you can sleep better at night feeling like yeah, I'm doing a good job and knowing that what you're doing will make an impact? I'm talking like a really simple, the most basic thing.

Bridget: So, when you are doing a quilt and you have your offcuts from what you've done, instead of putting those into the garbage, you can use

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those as – well, you could do a couple of different things. One thing is you can swatch swap with them. So, if you know other people who like to do turn quilts or like to do small pieces, those can be a trade that you can do. Or you can also do donations. There are people who will make dog beds, pet beds out of the – use that as fill for making those pet beds. And those, I know that they are in every city, those people are in every city.

Dara: Yeah. I've actually donated so much of that, padding, fabric.

Bridget: Yeah. So, making a conscious decision to put your scraps into a bag that can go off to another purpose. So, it's having a second life to it. That's a really, really great way. If you don't already have cloth bags then out of your next sample project that you're doing, your next quilt block, your next – they do blocks of the month I guess, at quilt guilds, that kind of thing. Use that as your pattern for the front panel of your new cloth bag and make yourself a cloth bag that you take with you everywhere you go, and you use that instead of taking consumer bags.

Dara: One of my things that I've done with that one is I've used old sheets at my house because I mean I have kids and I have one son that just tends to have bleeding noses, it's just his thing. So, I don't really like putting those sheets on. But I cut those sheets up, I actually do quilt sandwiches for free motion quilting, especially when I was teaching this. Obviously I wouldn't use the bloody part for that, but I would cut up old sheets for that. And I even go to thrift stores and buy those.

And then we would use those for my classes and then I would encourage the ladies just to surge the edges and then take them to the SPCA and they could use those for pads for the pets. So that was something that I did. I've been doing that for probably 10 years. So that's another thing that I'm like, look at me, I'm helping the Earth.

Bridget: You are, yeah.

Dara: We are, yeah.

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Bridget: It's just they're small, small things that you can do. And I mean there's also really simple things. In your studio or your workspace, LED lights instead of the compact fluorescents which has nothing to do specifically with materials but it's materials that we're using on an everyday basis. And the LED lights are much better for the environment. The materials that are used in the CFL are not great and they're not easily recycled. It's also going to save you money at the end of the day because they're cheaper to run.

Dara: So, Bridget, so save all your quilt cuts, offcuts from your quilts, so collect them and trade, you can donate them to dog beds. Or you can even use them for fill. So, we had some ideas like using old sheets, or using stash that you're never going to use. I don't know about you but do people bring you fabric all the time, they've cleaned out their mother-in-law's?

Bridget: Yes, they do. And I get frustrated, but they also ask me to hem their pants.

Dara: Yeah, that's a whole other topic.

Bridget: Yeah. I get materials donated to me a lot, people don't know what to do with them. And I will often turn around and donate those back to a charitable organization because I don't necessarily use those. If there's materials in there I can use, I will absolutely keep them. I get canvasses dropped off and that kind of stuff which I love.

Dara: So that's the other part, that was another thing I'm going to add to my list here is donate to charitable.

Bridget: Yeah, if they're larger yardage, they don't love the scraps but if it's larger yardage they resell them often and they will put them out and I go and buy that. You can also make that decision for your next project is to do an upcycling piece. You've got some clothes that are memory clothes that you have in your closet that you just don't want to get rid of. Make them into

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a quilt and cut them up and have them be a hug forever. And it becomes a legacy quilt, those are important things as well.

So yeah, upcycling your own clothing or deciding to go and buy from a thrift shop, the materials that you want for your next project.

Dara: Most of my clothes come from thrift stores. I am a huge proponent of thrift stores, reduce, re-use, recycle. And so, we have come up with 10 easily. This is so fun.

Bridget: And then when you're purchasing fabrics, or materials, or whatever you are, that are making the efforts around sustainability. So, I can name a couple of companies if you want.

Dara: Yeah.

Bridget: So LDH Scissors is a great company that does – the way that they make their scissors is old school methods. And so, they are making every pair individually. It's not this great big cog and a wheel, and it's not great big manufacturing. They are hand hammering every single pair of scissors. And they're doing this really beautiful traditional way of scissor making. And then all of their packaging and materials is from recycled content and/or felt. And so, they're trying to put natural materials in their packaging and processing that they're putting out there. So, I think they're an amazing company.

And another one is soak wash, the spray based Flatter, yeah, they're amazing. They're a Canadian company and they use all natural materials, BPA free plastics. And yeah, they're low chemical products in there and they work really well too.

Dara: Are there any fabric companies?

Bridget: Kinderel organic fabrics is out of Vancouver area actually.

Dara: Kinderel?

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Bridget: Kinderel K-I-N-D-E-R-E-L. And then Simplifi Fabrics is also out of Canada. And Two Sisters is in Seattle. So those are all organic fabrics, and they have hemp, and cotton, and bamboo. So, they have other materials as well, so those are all considered...

Dara: But I'll put all of the links, so for everyone who's listening, you can just simply go there and just click and you can...

Bridget: Okay, awesome. Yeah, so those are some companies that I would definitely support. There's another company that I feel really awesome about, and their materials aren't organic or natural dyes but it's Sweshwe Fabrics and Sweshwe Fabrics are an African fabric. And it's a social enterprise. So, 60% of ownership transfers directly to the employees. So, the ownership is there, they have a five year ownership scheme for the people who work there.

And they also do a micro business project where they're teaching micro businesses how to be in the industries and how to be businesses. And they've started implementing some environmental changes to their wastewater that's coming out. So, they're making some really great changes to their products. And it's really more on the social side of things rather than the environmental but they are starting to bring in the environmental too.

Dara: Well, so I'm just going to – this has been so fascinating, it's so interesting and I love that this is on a weight loss for quilters podcast because so many, but truly, sewing is our joy. It is one of the ways that we create joy inside of us. And that's what we want. This is one of the problems that I see with weight loss as humans. It's like we are constantly looking outside of us to try to fill ourselves up with joy, but real joy actually comes from the inside.

I actually have this quote that I was just reading yesterday by Agnes Repplier, and she said, "It is not easy to find happiness in ourselves. And it's not possible to find it elsewhere." But in this consumer society and with

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our society dictating, you can only be happy if you're wearing a size two pants. Or you can only be happy if you have a certain size of stash or people long arm, or whatever. There's so many different expectations. But true happiness comes from inside.

And I love how one of the things that could happen as people listen to us having this conversation, they could have this all or nothing thinking and think, look, I've done these really unhealthy practices, I've bought this fabric, I'm ruining the world. My grandchildren are going to be like, but no, we don't want to do that all or nothing thinking. That's not going to help us. And I asked you for five and you gave us 10 or 15. Once I write them all down, because really you gave us so many different suggestions.

There's just really simple small things to do and that's the same thing with weight loss, it's just why do we put more food in our mouth than our body requires? Because we're trying to find a different feeling, or we're hiding from a feeling, or whatever that is. And so, I love how this discussion has really opened our minds to something that frankly I don't have a lot of awareness for. So, I'm so grateful that I got to know you. And I also love what you've done too is you're highlighting examples of what's possible.

This LDH Scissors, and soak wash, and Kinderel, and so even for me, the ladies that have gone in my program, they are also the examples of what's possible. And the other part of this that I want to just emphasize is that we're just normal humans. We're not pretending we're superstars. That's not even our point. We're just like, I'm a human having a human experience and I want my human experience to be the most amazing experience. And I want to be my own legacy.

Bridget: Yeah. And really we don't, yeah, it's coming back to this all or nothing. I don't expect everybody to go to school and learn about sustainability the same way that I know about sustainability. That's not the point at all. The point is to do things that make you feel really good about how you're moving through the world. And leaving that small footprint for future generations, that's why we're here.

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Dara: That, and we don't have to burn our bras. We don't have to hug trees. We don't have to walk everywhere and sell our cars and never go on an airplane. That's not what we're asking.

Bridget: No, absolutely not. There's ways to offset those decisions as well. I am coming up to Quilt Canada in June, and I'm going to be talking to people out there. And I'm flying so I've then bought offsets that will help offset the amount of fuel that's being used on my flight. So, there's ways to kind of help make changes and decisions that still allow you to live your life the way you want to live your life.

Dara: And I love that. And so, this has been really helpful. And there's just another idea I had that also is helpful, one of the comfort things that I do is when I have my scraps I actually have a little two and a half inch square, a five inch square, and then I actually give them to people. I actually don't do a lot of piecing, I do a lot of quilting. And I give them to people and I'm like, "My scraps are being used." And it makes me feel really good. And then those offsets go into dog beds. So that's another just a simple thing.

So, if you can just do one thing today, just one thing and then in a week if you want to do another thing, great. If you just want to bring cloth bags from now on and if that's all you get from this discussion. Any other closing remarks, Bridget?

Bridget: No, it's really the same thing, for me it's small actions matter, and it doesn't have to be a big story at all. And I think really finding the space to give yourself permission to look at all of this stuff that you're doing in your quilting and looking at maybe how your practices are, and do you want to change anything? And if you don't well, that's fine. But if you do, how might you want to change those things and be that change that you're wanting to see. Is there something in the quilting industry that bothers you, that you wish was different?

Do you wish there was more recycled, I don't know, maybe we should get in some wooden rotary cutters. I don't know. And try and get something

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that's a little more, maybe those are the things that we want to start seeing, so start asking for them.

Dara: Yeah, I love it. I love it. This has been so fun. This is such a good awareness. And I love that we're Canadians just contributing to the quilting world and quilting industry. And helping women truly find that inner joy. So, once we have that joy inside of us then everything else in our life, so all these little practices. So, thanks so much, Bridget, I look forward to meeting you at Quilt Canada. It's going to be so fun.

Bridget: It is going to be fun.

Dara: So, tell people if they want to learn more how do they contact you?

Bridget: Well, I'm online, you can reach me. I've got social media. I'm on Instagram and Facebook and I'm there as The Sustainable Quilter or just my name. I'm easily Googleable. And then I have a website, bridgetoflaherty.com and you can go there, and you can see I have a community there. I teach my thread painting. I also have a community for sustainability there and the podcast is going to be there. Yeah, so you'll see everything there on the website.

Dara: That's perfect and it'll be linked in the show notes. Alright, thanks so much for meeting with me.

Bridget: Yeah, thanks so much, Dara.

Dara: Take care. Yeah, bye.

Bridget: Bye.

Thanks for listening to *Weight Loss for Quilters*. If you want more info, please visit daratomasson.com. See you next week.