

# How to live ethically



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# Introduction

**E**thical living is a big issue these days. Companies want us to think that their products are ethical, pressure groups are asking us to change our behaviour to solve global problems like climate change and many newspapers talk about the need for ethical living.

There is however very little discussion in the mainstream media of what ethical living actually means, or how to live an ethical life.

It is not simply about buying the latest fairtrade coffee or about using your car less (although these things may be part of it) – it's about living in line with your values.

This booklet takes you through a step-by-step guide to thinking about your values in life, understanding these values, setting achievable goals and building an action plan to help you move towards living in line with your values.

To take you through this process, we have provided some numbered actions throughout the booklet with some advice and explanation of how to do them. We suggest you work through the actions as you go through the text – but read through the whole chapter before you take the action in it, as there may be more guidance about it in the rest of the chapter. Look out for the tip boxes too.

We have also provided an action plan template that you can download from our website and fill in as you go through each stage of developing your ethical action plan in this booklet. The action plan template can be downloaded from the 'Ethical action plan' link at the bottom right of the screen at:

<http://lifesquared.org.uk/thesite/booklets/how-to-live-ethically>.

# What is ethical living?

**H**ow can we live good lives? This is one of the central questions that philosophers, thinkers and religions have been seeking to answer ever since philosophy and religion began. We all seek meaning in our lives and one of the ways that many people find it is by trying to live good lives; lives that are not only enjoyable but that feature a strong connection with the people, animals and world around us.

Ethical questions are a part of human life, and every historical period features a particular set of ethical concerns. In the modern world, some of the key global ethical issues include our over-use of the planet's resources, a massive inequality of income between nations and the abuse of human rights in some countries.

Some of these issues, particularly climate change and the environment, have received greater media attention in recent years and there is an increasing sense that we all need to take individual responsibility and do more in our own lives to address these problems.

As these ideas have emerged, the idea of 'ethical living' has gained ground. Everyone wants to be seen as ethical, and companies and advertisers have latched on to this fact. As a consequence, products are now sold to us on the basis of their ethical qualities - and some products may not be as ethical as we are led to believe.





This commercialisation of 'ethical living' not only means that we need to be more careful when we are seeking truly ethical products, but can also lead to a rather vague and diluted definition of what 'ethical living' actually means.

So, what does 'ethical living' really mean? This term is often used to simply mean 'living your own life in a way that is considerate towards the wider world beyond you'. In this context, the wider world includes other people, animals and the environment.

Given that our modern global problems require us to take individual responsibility, we want to define ethical living in a slightly different way in this booklet. As individuals it is our values that define how we think we and other people should live, including what we view as considerate behaviour. In this booklet we will therefore define ethical living as living in line with your values – living in a way that reflects the person you want to be and the way you think people should live generally.

The remainder of this booklet provides a series of steps you can take to think about your values and put them into practice, using an ethical living action plan.



# Your ethical action plan

**F**rom this point in the booklet, we will be taking you through the process of reviewing your values and writing an ethical action plan. To help you do this, we've developed a template document that you can download from our site, save to your computer and then fill in as you go through the remaining sections in this booklet. The action plan template can be downloaded from the 'Ethical action plan' link at the bottom right of the screen at:

<http://lifesquared.org.uk/thesite/booklets/how-to-live-ethically>.

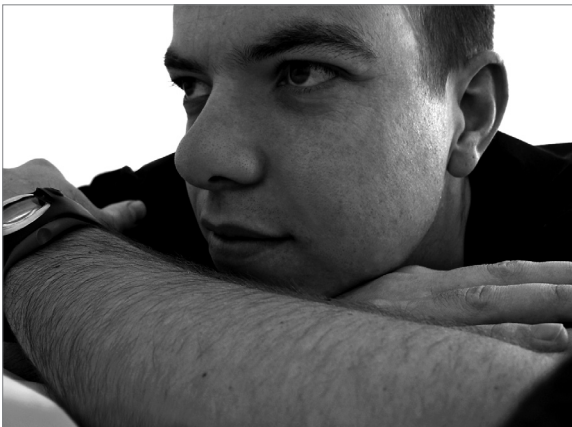
Good luck in writing and implementing your plan! Now, turn to the next section to see your first step...

# Reviewing your values

## Action 1 – review your values

The first stage in planning how to live ethically is to review your values. Are there some principles for life that you think you should try to live by? Are there particular ways in which you think you should behave or live your life? Make a list of these values.

**I**t might help to think first about some general categories or principles. For example, how you think you should behave towards other people, animals, the environment or even yourself. Then you can start listing more specific things about how you think you should behave. You may come up with some things that don't fit into the headings you've developed. Just list them.



To get you thinking about values, you might want to ask yourself some basic questions. For example, how do you think you should treat other people? Should this differ according

## TIP BOX

To think about your values, why not take yourself on a personal retreat? Take yourself away to somewhere quiet for a few hours. This could be anywhere, including your bedroom, the library or the countryside. Turn your mobile phone off and tell people not to disturb you. Take a notepad or Dictaphone with you. Then, think about what your values are.

to who they are – for example, should you treat your family differently from someone on the other side of the world that you'll never meet? How do you feel you should treat other creatures? How do you feel you should treat the environment? What do you think a 'good' life consists of? Or a 'bad' life?

List how you think you should behave towards all these things. It's no problem if your list is long!

When you're thinking about a possible value you may have, ask yourself whether it is a real value of yours or one that you've inherited from other influences, people, or places, and that might not be how you really feel. Challenge yourself on each value – how do I really feel about this? Always try to be honest with yourself and only note down the things you really feel.

Once you've made as much of a list as you can, review it. Are there a few general categories of values or principles you could live by that would cover all the values you've listed? For example, 'Caring for the environment' might cover all your environmental values. If not, no problem, but where you can do so, try to distil things into some overall headings or principles – maybe up to ten things but it doesn't have to be that many – it could be just four or five.

# Your values in practice

## Introduction

**Y**ou've now each got a list of your basic values. These values can affect a lot of your actions, choices and behaviour in a range of areas of your life. Let's now give some thought about how they could manifest themselves in some of these areas.

To do this, we will give you some categories to describe some of the main areas of your life. They are as follows:

- At home
- At work
- Shopping
- Leisure
- Travel
- People and relationships



You may want to break some of these down into further subcategories for yourself – for example, you could break the ‘people and relationships’ section down into further subcategories like ‘family and friends’, ‘acquaintances’, and ‘everyone else in the world’. Don’t worry about making sure that everything fits into exactly the right category – it’s getting the contents down that matters.

## Action 2 – think about your values in practice

Use these categories to think about what you would be doing if you were living in line with your values in every area of your life.

In this section, you can fill in the ‘Living in line with my values’ section of your action plan document. Just to remind you – a template of this document is available to download from the ‘Ethical action plan’ link at the bottom right of the screen at <http://lifesquared.org.uk/thesite/booklets/how-to-live-ethically>.

Select one value and look at the first area of your life that it could apply to - ‘At home’. What are the things you would be doing in your life at home if you were living in line with this value?

Let’s use an example. Perhaps one of the values you’ve selected is ‘caring for the environment’. For this value in the category of ‘at home’, you might therefore list things like using less energy, recycling as much as possible and reducing the amount you consume. There are many more actions for this particular value, so be creative and try to think of as many as possible.

Once you've done this for the 'At home' category, work through the remaining list of categories and note as many ways as you can in which your first value could manifest itself in that area of your life. Then, do the same thing for each of your other values in turn.

## Making actions specific

When you're thinking about the actions you need to take, some of the actions you come up with might be quite specific, such as 'do the recycling' whereas others might be very broad, such as 'reduce my energy use at home'. Here is how you can turn these broader points into specific, practical, actions.

For example, if you've noted the action of 'reducing my energy use at home', we now need to investigate what 'using less energy' actually involves and note some more specific actions to achieve it. In this case, it might involve the following:

- Insulating your home properly
- Generating some of your own energy (e.g. through solar power)
- Reducing the temperature of your thermostat at home
- Turning off electrical devices when you're not using them, rather than having them on stand-by
- Buying fewer electrical devices

So how do you break your actions down like this? Some of it will be common sense, but some of it might need some research. Use the internet to find out more about the most important actions that you can take for each value. We've also provided some initial links and resources at the end of this booklet to get you started. For example, the link to WWF's 'One Planet Lifestyles' e-book





gives you a range of recommendations of things you could do to live more in line with your environmental values, across various areas of your life.

## Prioritising your actions

When you're thinking about the actions you need to take, one of the most important things to do is to prioritise your actions. This involves thinking about which actions have the most impact in relation to the particular value you're thinking about.

Some actions will obviously have more impact than others, and you need to bear this in mind when planning your actions so that you make the time, money and energy you're investing in this as effective as possible. This is a really important area, as it can be easy to get worried or feel guilty that you're not doing enough to live in line with a particular value, when actually the few things

that you are doing are having a big impact, and the things that you're not doing and getting anxious about actually have little impact. It is of course also possible to mislead yourself in the opposite way - that you're living in line with your values when you're not. So, prioritising is important.

When you're prioritising your actions, make sure you focus on the value you're trying to live consistently with, as some seemingly small actions might be very important for some values. For example, a simple thing like being polite to strangers could be very important to upholding the value of caring for people.

In some cases, you'll be able to work out the relative impact of each action using common sense – simply by standing back from the action and looking at it objectively. In other cases, you'll need to do a bit of research. Use the internet to help you do this and the resources and links at the end of the booklet to get you started. As a principle though, research is the only way you can be sure of getting your prioritising right.

## Action 3 – make your actions more specific and prioritised

Go through the initial ideas you've listed of how to live more in line with your values. Identify which ones are specific and which ones need to be broken down into more specific actions. Then, break them down into detailed actions. Also, try to identify the actions that you think will have the biggest impact for each value – put an asterisk (\*) next to them.

# How to deal with values

**Y**ou've now started to look at your values in more detail, and during this process you may have found some questions and even problems cropping up in relation to how you can live in line with these values. Let us now explore some of these issues and how to deal with them.

One thing that may have come up while you were thinking about your values is how hard it might be to live perfectly in line with them – for example, how to behave in a way that is perfectly consistent with your environmental values. Would you have to stop consuming anything and only eat windfall apples? This is a problem that can make life difficult for values-conscious people all the time and cause them a lot of guilt and confusion - how do you try to live in line with your values whilst not feeling guilty that you're not doing enough?

To deal with this question, we will need to explore what values actually are.

## Values explained

Values are abstract concepts that we use to guide us as to how to behave. They make judgements about what we should do and what we shouldn't.

Values can arise for different reasons. Sometimes they can emerge as a result of trying to achieve a particular practical goal - for example, having environmental values so that we don't live in



a degraded world, or setting up an informal ‘social contract’ as a society so that people have some basic rules as to how to treat each other to enable us to live alongside each other without too much conflict. Other values may have emerged as a result of our biological makeup - for example, the desire to survive or protect our children. Additionally, particular ideas of how we should behave might have been made up to support religious ideas, maintain power or support prejudices.

So, these judgements about what we should or should not do could have arisen for various reasons. We may feel some of these values deeply (for example, a desire to protect our children) but it is also quite possible for us to become indoctrinated with values from other people that we don’t really feel. One important lesson here is therefore to be careful about the values you choose to

adopt. Think for yourself about values, and try to identify those that you genuinely feel rather than those that others might be trying to instil in you.

Another important point is that, once you've identified your values, working out how to put them into practice can be tricky. Values don't come with a user manual or a clear set of rules to tell us how to put them into practice. For example, there could be a limitless range of actions we could take to live in line with the value of 'caring about other people' - from being kind to strangers to giving more time to our families through to giving 50 per cent of our income to people living in poverty.

The list of actions that you need to take to live consistently with each value can therefore be never ending. In addition to this, the actions you need to take can be constantly changing according to the situation and environment you are in – for example, the advent of a new piece of technology may require you to take new actions to behave in line with your environmental values.

Additionally, even when you do select some actions that could be consistent with your values, there are no rules on where the line should be drawn on the strength of each of these actions. For example, how do we know that giving 50 per cent of our income to people living in poverty is consistent with our value of caring about other people? Should it be 70 per cent? Or would 20 per cent be acceptable? Again, there are no rules for this.

In conclusion, there is no simple rule that can tell you how you should live in line with your values. There is no definitive list of actions to take or clear place at which to 'draw the line' for each

action. You can learn about what scholars and religions have said about how to live in line with your values, and you can do some research and reflect on it yourself, but ultimately everyone (including religions and scholars) is making up the list of actions they take as well as where they draw their 'line' on each of them, so you will need to do the same.

One of the aims of this booklet is therefore to help you think about which rules you want to apply, which actions you want to select and where you want to draw the line for each of your values. In other words, how to manage your values so that you can not only be effective at ethical living but also happy at the same time.

There are some other conclusions we can draw from the discussion above. Firstly, it shows the importance of thinking for yourself about values, and realising that these judgements are up to you. When anyone tells you something is right or wrong, you should not take their word for it but make your own decision. Secondly, it shows that 'the right and the wrong things to do' aren't always as black or white as many people believe – there are often many different ways in which we could live in line with each of our values and in which the line could be drawn within each action. Deciding on how best to put our values into action often has to be a process of weighing up the different possibilities to reach the best set of actions you can, and reviewing this regularly in response to changing circumstances. At a societal level, this process of balancing the different arguments as to how we should live is one of the aims of the democratic political process.

Thirdly, and most relevant to this section, the discussion above shows why values can be such slippery things to live with – they

often don't give us clear guidance or answers on the actions we need to take. We have to work this out for ourselves.

## Where do you draw the line?

We've now established that you need to make your own rules for how you will live in line with each of your values. It can be useful to set some basic rules for yourself for each of your values, as this can make it easier to decide on specific actions to take, and also make it easier to see if you're living in line with your values.

For example, for your value of caring for the environment you may decide to make the rule that you want to live your life within your share of the resources of one planet – rather than the equivalent of 3 planets resources that most of us currently live within. Or for your value of caring for animals, you may decide you're not going to eat or buy any animal products. You may decide to set completely different rules to these – the point is, if you can, set some rules for how you'll live by each value.

This may not be as hard to do as you might think. When you went on your retreat, you may have started to come up with these rules when you listed some of the more detailed principles you want to live by – for example, in your value of caring for the environment you may have listed some more detailed principles, like 'live within my share of the resources of one planet' or 'avoid doing things that harm the environment'.

You may find it useful to now write each of these rules under each of your values on the action plan to remind you how you intend to draw the line for each of your values.



## Dealing with conflicts between values

Another issue that may have come up as you looked through the actions you could take is that an action that is consistent with one of your values may actually conflict with another value. For example, your planned action of visiting your relatives in Canada more often (to reflect your value of caring about people) might conflict with your value of caring for the environment (and the action of taking no flights). These potential conflicts can make people feel anxious or guilty because they don't know how to deal with them or feel they may have made the wrong decision.

Here's how to deal with it. When you see this type of values conflict happening, stand back from it and firstly look at the likely effect the action will have for each of the values. In this case, only you will know what the impact of going to see these relatives



might be on your value of caring for people. The impact of the flights on the environment will be very large and negative for your environmental values though.

Once you've weighed up the likely impact of the action, prioritise your values – which of the values matter most to you? Which do you have the strictest rules for? If you prioritise the environment and are quite strict in your rules on it, then this may mean that you can't visit your relatives in Canada more often, unless you can find a more environmentally friendly way of doing it than flying. If you prioritise people above the environment you may decide to take the flights. Or, you may reach a compromise between the two – perhaps by taking far fewer flights than you'd originally planned. Sometimes compromise may be possible, but sometimes it may not, and one action may have to go.

Again, a healthy dose of common sense is needed in these decisions. There are no clear rules that set out how to live in line with your values. Just be honest with yourself about the impact you're likely to have and then make the decision. Often we make these decisions in split seconds in our day to day lives, but we can become better at making them if we follow the steps above.

## Living happily with your values

The final point to consider in this section is how you can live happily with your ethical values.

Some people striving to live ethically can find themselves feeling guilty that they are not doing enough or confused about how they should behave. This form of guilt can occur when someone is worried about whether a particular action is consistent enough

with their values – for example, whether buying from a cheap clothes shop (and the possibility of sweatshop labour) may be inconsistent with their values about caring for people.

To deal with this situation, work out whether the potential impact of your action is likely to be big or small, and if it's big, decide whether you can make the time to do some more research about the impact to help your decision. In either case, make the decision then move on and don't give yourself a hard time. You've been through a proper thinking process on it and made the decision.

It's not always easy to live in line with our values so don't be too hard on yourself if you can't make the grade sometimes. However, you also need to be honest with yourself. If you find yourself continually failing to meet your rules, and feeling guilty about it, then perhaps you've set your moral rules too high. In this case, you can either make more effort to uphold them or set the level of your rules lower. So, be honest and firm but fair with yourself. Conversely, if you think you've set your rules too low, don't be afraid to try to set them higher and see if you can live by them.

## Summary

You have responsibility for your own values, as well as setting how you'll live in line with them and monitoring how well you are doing this. Taking this responsibility is something that can give us a great sense of fulfilment in our lives and strengthen our sense of our own identity.

Living in line with the values you've listed may take some changes in your life and behaviour. But don't let this stop you from making the changes - if you want to live the life that's really you.

# Writing an ethical action plan

**F**rom the process we've been through so far, you've now got some initial ideas of steps you need to take in various areas of your life for each of your main values. You are now ready to write your action plan.

## Action 4 – write your action plan

When you're working through this action, you can fill in the 'Moving forward – your values action plan' section of your action plan document. Just to remind you - this is available to download from the 'Ethical action plan' link at the bottom right of the screen at: <http://lifesquared.org.uk/thesite/booklets/how-to-live-ethically>.

In your action plan, you will need to list the specific actions you want to take to live in line with each of your values across each area of your life. You've done a lot of the work already by writing your lists of how to live in line with your values, but now you'll need to expand these lists, prioritise the action points and then set dates by which you'll aim to complete each action. If you've worked through this process so far on a computer, you may be able to copy and paste some of the actions you've noted already into your action plan.

## How to fill in your plan

The easiest way to fill in your plan is to write the actions for each value in turn. First, work out how much time you've got available to do this, and then divide it by the number of values you've listed, and leave some time at the end to review it and make your final changes. If you have two and a half hours to do this and four values to work on, you could split his time up into 30 minutes for each value and then another 30 minutes at the end to do final checks and changes.

Select one value and look at the first area of your life that it could apply to - 'At home'. Fill in action points for this value under each of the category headings in your life. Remember to be aware of which ones have the most impact, and to do some prioritisation. In some cases, you may need to do some research to find the most important actions to take.

As a general principle, it makes sense to put some 'big win' actions in the first few weeks of your action plan. These are actions that have a substantial impact but are reasonably easy for you to put in place - for example, consuming less or planning your next holiday in the UK or Europe and not flying. There are bound to be some actions that have a big impact but are harder or more expensive to do, and you should still try to do these, but perhaps put them later in your action plan, so that you get a sense of having accomplished some easier, but significant, things early on.

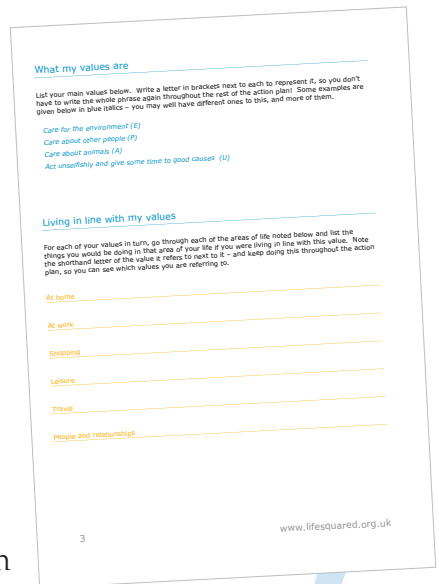
As you note each action point, make it measurable and finite – not vague. For example, 'reduce flights to none per year' or 'reduce car journeys by 50%', rather than just 'use the car less'. Do your best

to make your goals measurable and finite, but if you can't do this for a particular one, don't let it stop you from putting it in.

Give each action a timescale of when you expect to do it - within the next week, month, and so on. Some of your actions will be one-off things to complete (such as 'buy a compost bin'), whereas others will be ongoing habits you need to start getting into, and continue to stick to regularly (such as 'turn lights and appliances off when I'm not using them').

Once you have finished writing your action points for each area of life for your first value, go through the same process for each of your other values.

After you've been through all your values, you may have a long list of actions. In the remaining time you have in your writing session, review your list. In particular, look at the goals you've set yourself in each timeframe (next week, next month, and so on). Are you being realistic? Have you been over-ambitious and put too many things in the short term





which it won't really be possible to do? If so, move some of them to later dates in your plan. Alternatively, you might feel you could do more in the short term – in which case move some actions forward.

Overall, try to get a plan that you're comfortable with, that is both challenging and achievable. In the end only you will know what you can do and can fit in and can afford.

# Taking action

**I**n this section, we'll give a few ideas on how you can keep yourself motivated to take your actions and to see your action plans through. We'll also show you how to monitor and review your progress.

When you've drafted your action plan you'll need to start taking the actions that you've set out in it. Hopefully, this will be an exciting time getting started on making changes to your life.

A couple of tips that might help you to keep going are firstly just to keep a printout of your action plan with you – maybe in your diary – to remind yourself of the habits you need to adopt and the action points you're going to do in the week ahead and beyond. Some of the things you've got in your action plan will just be changes you need to make in your habits (such as doing the recycling) and others will be specific actions you need to take (such as ordering a new recycling bin). If you've planned in a number of these specific actions in the coming week, try to plan out in advance when you'll do them, so that you find the time to do each of them – maybe write them in your diary.

Secondly, make sure you regularly take time to remind yourself of the broad principles you want to follow in order to live consistently with your values and the detailed actions you need to take. Perhaps look at your values, rules and your action plan for a couple of minutes at the start of each day to do this. After a while both these things will become habits and you won't need to remind yourself so much.

## Action 5 – keep your action plan updated

Your action plan is your route map to get to where you want to be. It's therefore not a static document, and you need to keep it updated as time goes by – partially to keep a record of the action points you've achieved and also to keep yourself up to date with the next action points you need to do.

1. The first thing you'll need to do is note your completed actions on an ongoing basis. Each time you complete an action you should move it into a different section of your action plan. It will either be a completed action or an ongoing habit that you've started. So move it into one of these sections at the bottom of your action plan, and note the date that it was done.

You may find it easiest to do all these updates at once, at the end of each week, as you'll be reviewing your action plan weekly anyway.

2. Second, you will need to review your action plan weekly. At the end of each week, sit down and review what you've achieved. Celebrate your achievements. Then, move forward new actions into the coming week or months – so the plan is updated and you know what to do next.

Print out a new copy of your action plan, and work out when you'll do your next week's activities. Remember to also look at the ongoing activities at the bottom of your plan – once you've



started a new habit you need to make sure you're keeping up with it.

3. The final point is to review your action plan monthly. In the weekly review that falls at the end of each month, do a special review. Do the normal weekly review, but also stand back from the plan and look at the bigger picture. Are there any more action points or even values you'd like to add in the coming weeks or months? Keep new ideas and action points coming into the plan, as this keeps the document fresh and keeps you moving forward, making progress.

## Final points

Here are a few final suggestions about implementing your ethical action plan.

Firstly, don't feel guilty if you're having trouble completing all your action points, but don't give up either. Simply adjust your expectations of what you'll be able to do. As you go through each week of implementing your actions, you'll get a better idea of how many you can do in future weeks.

Having said that, make sure you are allocating a reasonable amount of time each week to make your changes. These are changes that you've decided will improve your life, so try to make the time for them.

Similarly, when you're reviewing your progress, don't try to mislead yourself about whether you've really done the actions or not. Again, you're doing this for yourself, so there's no point in trying to fool yourself.



Finally, on a happy note – make sure you acknowledge and celebrate your achievements! When you’ve taken an action, give yourself a pat on the back and recognise that each of these actions will be helping you move towards the way of living that you wanted!

Good luck! And do let us know how you get on – email us at [info@lifesquared.org.uk](mailto:info@lifesquared.org.uk) with details of the plans you’ve put in place and the changes you’ve been able to make!

# Useful websites and resources

The following resources provide a starting point for information and options on ethical living.

## **[www.ethicalconsumer.org](http://www.ethicalconsumer.org)**

Website and magazine with information on the ethical rating of different products and services, to help you make decisions on which actions to take.

## **[www.wearewhatwedo.org](http://www.wearewhatwedo.org)**

Website showing a wide variety of small actions you can take to make the world better.

## **[http://assets.panda.org/downloads/op1\\_ebooklet.pdf](http://assets.panda.org/downloads/op1_ebooklet.pdf)**

WWF 'One planet lifestyles' e-book. From page 25 onwards this gives some detailed suggestions of steps you could take to live more in line with your environmental values.

## **[www.greenelectricity.org](http://www.greenelectricity.org)**

Site to help you evaluate which 'green energy' provider to go with.

## **[www.farmersmarkets.net](http://www.farmersmarkets.net)**

Directory of genuine farmers markets across the UK.

## **[www.gocrueltyfree.org](http://www.gocrueltyfree.org)**

Site listing products that are free from animal testing.

## **[www.timebank.org.uk](http://www.timebank.org.uk)**

Site providing information on volunteering across a wide range of areas, and ways of registering to become a volunteer.

## **Hickman, Leo. *A Good Life*, Eden Project Books, London, 2005**

A useful book with both information and practical ideas on how to make changes in various areas of life. Contains extensive links to suppliers and producers in each section.





# How to live ethically

Most of us want to live in a way that reflects our values – the principles and things we care about in the world and the way we think people should live. But many people find the issue of ethical living complicated, confusing and guilt-inducing. What does it really mean to live ethically and how can we live ‘good’ lives without having to give up everything and live in a cave?

This booklet takes you through a step-by-step guide to thinking about your values in life, understanding these values, setting achievable goals and building an action plan to help you move towards living in line with your values.

