

COLUMNISTS

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Bye-bye, balloons

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[Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) / 05:20 AM February 19, 2021

In the last several years, we've heard so much about the dangers of plastic waste, and I occasionally write about it. But at this point, I have to acknowledge that giving up plastics is incredibly hard. It's a major change that just cannot happen overnight, especially not in the Philippines where plastic shampoo sachets and coffee packets and food boxes (which we call "Tupperware," whether they're Tupperware or not) are ingrained in daily life. It wouldn't be fair to fault a Pinoy consumer for buying sari-sari store sachets when more eco-friendly alternatives are either inaccessible or too costly.

When plastic usage seems inevitable, it can be difficult to keep a personal commitment to reduce plastic waste. But this shouldn't be a reason to give in. We can start by opting out of plastic items that we can afford to cut out. Exhibit A: party balloons.

Many of us were reminded of this on Valentine's Day, when photos from celebrating couples showed roomfuls of balloons and ribbons. Amid the kilig and the "sana all," we suddenly realized, "Wow, that's a lot of garbage to dispose."

Most of the balloons used in celebrations are made of either latex or mylar (a kind of polyester film or plastic sheet). Latex balloons are technically not plastic, and they may decompose within four years. But in that time, they can easily harm wildlife just like plastics do.

Conservationists note that when latex balloons pop and fall into water, they tend to look like sea jellies or squid, which are some favorite foods of many marine animals. That is why over and over, wildlife researchers find dead or ill birds, fish, and turtles with balloon debris in their digestive tracts.

In one Australian study, birds that ingested balloon fragments were 32 times more likely to die than those that swallowed hard plastics like lollipop sticks. The researchers

posited that “soft rubber items” are more prone to squeezing into stomach cavities and getting stuck there, leading to lethal conditions for the animals.

Some animals also get injured from getting entangled in balloon strings or ribbons. Sometimes, the injuries are so severe that they end up dying of them.

Mylar balloons, a.k.a. foil balloons, are even worse. These are the ones that are shinier and a little harder to pop. It’s become quite a trend to get mylar balloons in the shape of letters and numbers spelling out the occasion. But these balloons are not biodegradable, which means that apart from posing risks to wildlife, they also contribute to the plastic clumps that clog our waterways, and ultimately, to the massive islands of plastic waste floating in our oceans.

I’ve seen people give away their mylar balloons for reuse in another occasion, instead of throwing them away. While this is a good idea, an even better one would be to avoid decorating with balloons altogether. Reused mylar balloons, like other plastic products, can break down into microplastics that make their way into our air, food, and water. Scientists around the world are currently investigating these minuscule plastic particles for their potentially toxic effects on humans and other organisms.

Some will call you “bitter” or “killjoy” when you call out the exorbitant use of plastic décor during celebrations. I guess part of that is the Pinoy fondness for festive celebrations. We love to put together joyous gatherings and make them look bongga. And at this point, balloons are almost synonymous to lively parties. It’s tricky to burst that bubble.

But it’s time to separate from this notion that every celebration needs balloons. So much waste and several hazards could be avoided if a little more thought and creativity are put into gifting and decorating. It’s so easy to find more sustainable alternatives to balloons anyway—a quick Google search would give you thousands of suggestions that are just as festive. If we can’t stop using sachets and plastic tubs (for now), then the least we can do is let go of this one unnecessary plastic. Really, it’s just balloons. We can live without them.

Read more: <https://opinion.inquirer.net/137868/bye-bye-balloons#ixzz6njmElqR9>

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