



Trashmagination Podcast #95 – Weighted Blankets

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown. Today's episode is about weighted blankets. A weighted blanket is a heavy blanket that some say can be helpful to those with sensory processing disorders, anxiety and autism. Sensory processing disorders affect both kids and adults. It makes it more difficult to process the information that comes through your five senses. Research has found that gentle pressure can help.

My daughter asked for a weighted blanket. You can get a weighted blanket online for \$50-200 but you know me - I wanted to see if I could make one from upcycled materials rather than buying a new one or new materials. I had been saving denim jeans for a few decades. It is such a heavy fabric, I wondered if it could give a similar feeling as weighted blankets that rely on inserting plastic or glass beads. I did a podcast episode about creative reuse of denim a few years ago, and in that episode I talked about boro, which is a Japanese stitching technique that involves mending something over and over again [<https://trashmagination.com/denim-jeans-recycling/>]. Many boro pieces can be quite heavy as people added new layers of patches and stitching. In today's episode, I'll share what I learned about making your own weighted blanket with or without beads.

First here are fun facts about weighted blankets:

- 1) On every website I researched, it was recommended to get one that is about 10 percent of your body weight. So if you weigh about 150 pounds, that means a 15 pound weighted blanket, which is a typical size of blanket based on what I see for sale online.
- 2) Most weighted blankets get their weight by containing plastic or glass beads.
- 3) Most weighted blankets are sewn on a grid so the beads can move to form around you, but only within a square in the grid so all the weight does not shift to one corner and rip open the seams.
- 4) One consideration when buying or making a weighted blanket is whether you want only the weight but not the warmth. If you get a blanket made from breathable materials and no fill other than glass, you will get a heavy blanket but it's not necessarily warm. On the other hand, the blanket I made from denim is very warm, especially since I also added squares of recycled wool both to add weight and a fun design. If you live somewhere that a weighted blanket is too hot, an alternative idea is to make a sheet that fits tightly to your bed like a tube, and that puts pressure on your body but doesn't add warmth. You can learn more about this idea at the blog And Next Comes L which has resources for those supporting neurodiverse people. They have a tutorial for making pressurizing bed sheet by sewing some jersey fabric in a giant tube and then pulling it up 2/3rds of the way up the mattress [<https://www.andnextcomesl.com/2016/04/homemade-stretchy-sensory-sheet.html>].
- 5) If you put a weighted blanket in your normal washing machine, it might be hard on your machine. For a blanket that is about 10 pounds, you likely can wash it alone, but if you have a heavier blanket, you might need to take it to a commercial laundry. Some weighted blankets come with a washable cover.
- 6) You want a weighted blanket that fits your body, and not your bed. If the blanket is too large and hangs over the edge of the bed, the weight of the blanket can pull it off your bed. Most weighted blankets are twin size which is about 60 inches by 80 inches or 1 ½ meters by 2 meters. In the case of my daughter's blanket, I'm not too worried about that issue because she likes to tuck the blanket around and under herself, and that means it won't be hanging off the bed so much. Since there are no beads inside my blanket, she can tuck it underneath without any bumps.

Plastic and Glass Beads or Pellets

Next I want to talk about the plastic and glass beads or pellets inside many weighted blankets. When I learned that this was the most common method for adding weight to the blankets, my first reaction was that the world doesn't need any more plastic pellets and I didn't want to buy them. The photos of the plastic pellets reminded me of photos I saw when I researched the podcast episode about beach trash. These pellets are called nurdles and they are a major pollution problem in the ocean because animals think they are fish eggs and eat them. However, there might be an environmentally friendlier way to use plastic pellets. If you already own a bunch of stuffed animals like Beanie Babies that contain those pellets, and you are already planning to creatively reuse them, this would be a great creative reuse idea. A Beanie Baby toy weighs about 6 ounces, and let's assume 4 ounces of that is the filler, so it would take 60 Beanie Babies to get enough pellets for a 15 pound weighted blanket. You probably don't own 60 Beanie Babies that need recycling, but you might be able to gather enough if you put out a call on your local Buy Nothing group. Even if half your filler was recycled, that's better than none!

So now let's talk about glass beads. On Amazon, you can buy 15 pounds of glass beads for \$43 as of today. From a cost perspective, since many weighted blankets cost that much or less, it might just make sense to buy the blanket and save your sewing time for more creative projects. But also from an environmental perspective, it still has more impact on the environment to produce glass beads than it is to reuse materials that already exist near you.

If you do decide to make a weighted blanket that contains pellets, I'll link to a tutorial in the show notes that explains how to sew the blanket on a grid and to use a funnel to put an equal weight of pellets into each section of the blanket –

- Made by Marzipan - <https://youtu.be/ORKvJC37LtQ>.
- I Love My Kids - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfXgmh1ZxY0>
- Man Sewing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svqiyDIJmus>

Sewing Tips When Making a Weighted Blanket

So all the tutorials I will share in the show notes are for the weighted blankets that use pellets. There were lots of great comments on the videos from people who made the project and who have family members who were neuro-diverse, so I'll share some of their tips here:

- Avoid using fabrics with busy prints on them if you are making your blanket for someone who has autism or Aspergers. It can be challenging for someone if the prints do not line up in the way they expect – for example if the images are not all going in the same direction. Some suggested more muted colors as well.
- A great fabric option could be minky, fleece or similar fake fur fabric because it has a similar sensation as patting a pet cat or dog, which can be very comforting for some people. I say use whatever fabric you have on hand and if you have that, great! As you'll hear, I used denim and wool because that's what I owned and I also prefer natural fibers.
- If you do add pellets, you have to be very careful not to hit a pellet with the needle on your sewing machine or you will break the needle. To avoid this, people use pins to create a compartment for pellets out the way from the needle when they sew.
- Sew this project with a walking foot. That's an attachment that you put on your sewing machine that helps walk the fabric through the place where the needle goes up and down. This is extra helpful with such a heavy project and also if you use more slippery fabrics. I had one, but I used it so much that it broke. So I sewed my project without a walking foot, but it is a good idea.
- Holding the heavy blanket in place under your sewing machine can be tiring, so it's best to sew this project on a large table that will help support the weight of the blanket.

My Denim and Wool Weighted Blanket

Next I'll tell you about my experience making a weighted blanket from recycled denim and wool. I am not exactly sure how many pairs of jeans went into the blanket but I would guess about 15. I also added red squares from a heavy winter coat and I used about half the coat. For the back of the blanket, I used a flat fleece bed sheet. It was a very stretching bed sheet which made it challenging at times to get the backing to be flat, but it just required more pins.

To make my blanket, I dis-assembled the jeans and cut them into 7 inch squares. I laid the squares in a repeating pattern of light, medium and dark denim. I sewed the squares in rows and then the rows together. I used a tight stitch so it would be nice and strong. I didn't use a denim needle but it would be a great idea. I cut squares from my recycled wool coat and sewed them in a random pattern over the blanket.

The only new items I added to the quilt were a new package of quilt batting, as well as new fabric for the binding (and when I say new fabric, I mean it hasn't been used in a project before, but I already owned it.) I hand-quilted the front to the back with big stitches and various colors of Pearl Cotton thread. I quilted it only on the vertical so my daughter would know at a glance which way to lay the blanket, plus that seemed to be enough quilting to make a solid blanket. Another benefit of quilting it only along the vertical is that if I decided later to add some plastic or glass beads, I could open up the binding on one end and slide them down into the vertical tubes, then sew a grid to make a more typical weighted blanket.

Here are the final stats about my weighted blanket:

- It weighs 10 pounds which is a bit light for an adult, but it was my first try. I am not sure you could get to 15 pounds using only denim unless you did a double layer of denim.
- The dimensions of my quilt were 78 by 86 inches or around 6 feet square. That's around 2 meters square.
- The rows contained 12 squares and there were 14 rows.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Please let me know if you have made a weighted blanket from recycled materials by connecting at trashmagination@gmail.com. For more info about upcycling denim, check out Trashmagination episode #55 about creative reuse of denim. Be sure to share this podcast episode with anyone you know who could benefit from a weighted blanket. I personally tested it and it makes me feel very comforted and sleepy! Until next time, may you see trash as a source of art in your life!