

A Minimalist Lifestyle

Simplifying your life isn't about your possessions — it's about value

Jennifer Taylor Chan

A minimalist lifestyle looks different for everyone. For me, it's helped me pay down \$42,000 of student loans in just over two years, lend more of my attention to my loved ones, and set me on a path of intentional living. In the past six months, I've felt happy, healthy, and at peace.

While I can't guarantee that what I have incorporated into my life will do the same for you, reflecting on a few of these things may help provide clarity to your life.

1. Downsize your stuff

Personally, I donated about 70% of my clothes to various non-profit organizations. I realized that I owned several items of clothing that I hadn't really worn in months. If I didn't love it, I didn't keep it. To prevent myself from accumulation creep, I review the contents of my wardrobe once a month to see if I can get rid of anything more.

I've also slowly donated shoes, bags, books, mugs, electronics, and artwork. I thought I would regret letting go of some of these things later, but I can honestly say I don't even remember everything that I've gotten rid of. This goes to show that things we may have grown attached to don't mean as much to us as we think. Of course, I still have some sentimental items (I have every single card that my girlfriend has given to me—which is now quite a lot!) and I have no problem letting them take up space.

If you are like me and live in a small home (i.e. a junior one-bedroom with a partner, a dog, and a rabbit), learn to fight the urge of upgrading your space and instead discard items that you haven't really used or don't value.

2. Turn off all the notifications on your phone

The only notification I get is when I receive new text messages. The person who texts me the most is my girlfriend, so I'd like to ensure that I'm available for her. As for e-mail, news, social media, and all the other ancillary apps—I've turned off their notifications and background refresh.

3. Actually, just go ahead and delete the social media apps on your phone

A few weeks ago, I deleted Twitter, Medium, and Quora off my phone. I finally acknowledged that I suffered from the twitch—you know the one—wherein you find yourself reaching for your phone—on the subway platform, in an elevator, or perhaps even walking—to avoid momentary boredom. I wanted to break free. And so, I finally did.

I *have* kept the Instagram app, mostly because I'm unable to upload photos using their web application. Aside from that, there is hardly anything on my phone anymore. Text messages. Podcasts. Notes. That's it, that's all. As a result, I've started to look up instead of down. I've become more tuned into the world. And best of all, when I do login to those social media websites from my laptop, I've found that I haven't truly missed anything.

4. Select a few go-to meals

During the weekday, I have go-to meals: a three-egg, spinach omelette for breakfast, a vegan stir-fry for lunch, and usually a salad for dinner. It may not be very exciting, but my meals are generally easy, nutritious, and filling. When it comes to eating healthy, my general philosophy is to eat relatively healthy meals and then indulge in some not-so-nutritious snacks. By keeping things simple, I'm able to grocery shop quickly, spend less time preparing meals, and reduce my monthly food expenses.

5. Purchase most books on Kindle, unless you really love it

As an aspiring author, I consider reading a duty. On top of reading long-form articles online, I average four books each month. However, in order to reduce physical clutter in my apartment, I either borrow books from the library or purchase books on Kindle. I simply throw my iPad in my work bag and pull it out during my commute.

6. Simplify your finances

One of the biggest impacts minimalism has had on my life is steering myself away from hyper-consumption. I used to be someone who bought everything with credit cards. I would estimate how much money I needed each month and pay the minimum amounts on my multiple forms of debt.

Now, I've created a simple money management system that's enabled me to pay off over 80% of my debt in a little over two years. This includes making a budget, building an emergency fund, and investing in low-fee index funds. I've also shifted from paying for daily expenses exclusively with cash or my debit card.

Not only have I learned to spend intentionally, but I've eliminated the financial anxiety that used to plague my life. Making the conscious decision to buy less physical things and invest in experiences or myself (i.e. books), have led to a deep realization that I am already enough.

Adopting a minimalist lifestyle is an immensely personal journey.

Although I touched on a few ways that I've reduced physical clutter in my home, **minimalism is not about what you own**. It's about reducing the things in your life that aren't providing value, so you can have more space for the things that truly matter. It's subtraction for addition.

Minimalism has its fair share of critics. It's elitist. It's something poor and low-wage earners can't incorporate into their life. It's insensitive to those who don't have enough to purge. I've heard it all before and in large quantity. But *my* definition of minimalism isn't about that. It's not about white walls, expensive capsule wardrobes, and pairing down to a few things that are top of the line. It's not an aesthetic that can be displayed on Instagram.

For me, minimalism has always been about a shift in mindset. Silencing the noise of an increasingly loud world. Calming the millions of thoughts that flow through my monkey mind. Giving myself permission to slow down and take a breath.

With so much going on at work and at home, I found that the only way I could survive was to make my life as simple as possible.

By reducing the number of decisions I make, avoiding consumption as a substitute for happiness, and establishing simple systems for things like my meals and my money, I'm able to focus more on the things that truly matter: health, work and my loved ones. Since this shift, I am happier, calmer, and feel more free.

As Minimalists Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus point out:

“Even though everyone embraces minimalism differently, each path leads to the same place: a life with more time, more money, and more freedom to live a more meaningful life.”

If minimalism still isn't for you, I understand. No single lifestyle, philosophy, or doctrine is meant for everyone. But it is an enormously general concept that we can tweak as we see fit. I've learned that embracing simplicity does not mean you're unaware of your privilege. In fact, I would argue that it frees up more of your resources to utilize your privilege for social good. If I were still on the consumerism treadmill, I would have never been able to take a job at legal aid, while still being able to aggressively pay off my debt.

For me, living a simple life works. It keeps me calm in a chaotic city. It keeps me sane in a stressful work environment. And most importantly, it keeps my day-to-day problems in perspective.

While I can't say that adopting a minimalist lifestyle has been the answer to all my problems, I can confidently say that it's made my life, on both a personal and professional level, sustainable.