



Less is more

Life can be complicated and cluttered. Could cutting costs, commitments and possessions bring peace, joy and planetary healing? Minimalists say replacing mindless materialism with conscious consumerism enriches everyone's life.

Words CAROLINE ROBERTSON

A tall, dark stranger walked into my clinic one day and handed me a box of expensive items. A new designer jumper, fancy headphones and shiny trainers. "Please give these to someone who needs them, I'm a minimalist," he smiled with monk-like serenity. I was reminded of the movie *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* when St Francis of Assisi dispersed his family's coffers.

What ensued was an enlightening conversation exploring needs versus wants and simplifying versus stockpiling. For years Richard was a workaholic to pay for his lavish lifestyle, which ironically helped him unwind from work stress! This vicious cycle led to burnout, depression and ruined relationships. After reducing work and radically downsizing Richard felt free. "I was straining so much to get more; I didn't appreciate what I had." Today he measures success by a more meaningful life rather than more money. He had the courage to escape his comfort zone and prestigious position to treasure himself over his privileges.

Richard's epiphanies inspired me to explore more about this minimalist movement. Distinct from the 60s reductionist art movement, minimalism mirrors the style of many traditional cultures. Zen Buddhists, monks, nuns, Quakers, Spartans, Japanese and Swedes embrace minimalism's pared-back style. Minimalism involves more than possessions: it promotes minimal impact on the environment through recycled, reusable and enduring products.

"Minimalism is the intentional promotion of the things we most value, and the removal of anything that distracts us from it," according to Joshua Becker, author of *Becoming Minimalist*. Following

Becker's bible many are finding that free time and freedom from encumbrances gives life more value than striving for material excess. This ethos echoes Bhutan's prioritising of Gross National Happiness (GNH) over Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in gauging success.

With the average person exposed to thousands of ads daily, how is minimalism's anti-advertising message selling? The minimalist movement has been popularised by Courtney Carver's

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book *Be More With Less* (2010) plus Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus' book and Netflix documentary *Minimalism*. It continues to gain momentum, with millions forced to adjust to lower incomes and less spending care of COVID-19, especially in countries experiencing post-pandemic recession. Despite the downside of the pandemic, it has elicited a shift in priorities from possessions to personal and planetary wellbeing. Many have adapted to appreciate a simpler lifestyle with less stress, shopping and social demands. Instead of "keeping up with the Joneses" the coup is to keep up a good quality of life.

Life edit

Are you surrounded by things that "spark joy", as professional organiser Marie Kondo advocates? Or do you hold onto things that drag you down? Posts on Facebook groups Minimalist Simple Living and The Minimalist Life suggest many suffer anxiety, confusion,

OCD and PTSD exacerbated by visual overload. Order and space are like Valium to their nerves. As people are realising that materialism is having a negative impact, the growing minimalist movement is offering an alternative to accumulation addiction.

I suspect many of us have an inner minimalist. Have you experienced the liberation of unloading? Do hoarders, spendthrifts and messy places disturb you? Do you compulsively clean before guests visit? Do you get excited by clear surfaces, culling possessions, council clean-ups and travelling light? If so, spring-cleaning your life could bring you clarity, calm and freedom. Making space outside can create more mental space. As Isaac Newton said, "Truth is ever to be found in simplicity, and not in the multiplicity and confusion of things."

Media lures us into purchases with promises of pleasure, practicality and prestige. But when you recall a really enjoyable moment in your life, was it related to possessions? Everyday highs such as relationships, experiences and vibrant health are often peak pleasures in our lives. As Oscar Wilde said, "Simple pleasures are the last healthy refuge in a complex world."

Quality over quantity

Have you felt the satisfaction of tidying the messy "miscellaneous" drawer, clearing clothes to make cupboard space, throwing moth-eaten food, tossing mouldy carpet and giving things to appreciative people? Purging possessions can be a cathartic clearing of the past. There's a smug satisfaction in sorting stuff. It makes you feel organised, grateful for what you've got and open to new energy.

Minimalist Madison Winter sums up the pluses of living with less: "For me, this



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is the order of priorities: saving money, less stress, easier to clean, eco-friendly and love the aesthetic.”

Saving money to ensure financial freedom supports security. Spending money unnecessarily gives a temporary high but can create buyer's remorse. As Sophie Kinsella wrote in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, “They said I was a valued customer, and now they send me hate mail!” We may be lured to splurge with the promise of pleasure, approval or self-worth. After all, a fool and their money are soon parted. Qualities such as service, presence and compassion impress others more than a designer accessory.

Superfluous luxury can even incite envy or a feeling of inferiority in others, creating a disconnection. Spending hard-earned income on experiences rather than products has been scientifically shown to elicit more happiness. Van Boven and Gilovich conducted a national survey in 2003 where participants rated their happiness after purchasing a product or experience. Those who bought experiences had a happier mood than those who purchased products.

Reducing costs, budgeting, paying off debts and saving is all part of the minimalist code. How do you feel when you resist buying an extravagant item so that you can easily pay an unexpected bill later? Minimalists see shopping as a necessity for essentials rather than a pastime for excesses. They resist temptations by shopping only when

essential, and many eschew advertising by avoiding commercial television and other media. Try digital minimalism by avoiding overwhelming information overload of the media and intentionally limiting screen time on the phone, computer or television.

Some people feel stressed and suffocated in stuffed spaces. Spacious places make us feel that we can breathe and move freely. Minimalist Stacey Choptian-Schlichting admits, “I just find that the less stuff I have, the less anxious I feel. Open clean space calms me.” Clutter can cause confusion for those with autism or Alzheimer's, along with trip hazards and choking dangers for children. It also increases dirt, dust, dust mites, mould and pests. Minimalist Lis Vang likes “low-maintenance décor” because it's easier to clean and tidy. Indoor allergies are often alleviated by removing carpet, curtains and excess pillows, advises Dr Noah Friedman, chief of allergy and immunology at Kaiser Permanente in San Diego. “Having a minimalist bedroom with cool quiet tones may be calming and help induce sleep,” suggests Dr Jen Trachtenberg.

The trend for tiny houses, recycling and repurposing waste is people's way of mindfully reducing sweatshops, landfill, natural resource use, global warming and financial pressure. Minimalist Pamela Peterson says, “Freedom and time were big motivators for me ... I was able to cut back work hours, allowing for more living

hours to do the things I love with animals and people I love.”

Accumulating and maintaining material stuff is time-consuming. Minimalist Jamie Natasha says, “Having less creates more time, feelings of freshness and freedom.” The austere aesthetic appeals to many, though there's a fine line between sterile and simple. This can be hard to achieve with kids as hilariously lampooned by the Bettina and Max characters in *Absolutely Fabulous*. Before a baby their style was bare and bland. With a kid came all the colourful accessories that every parent is aware of. Life can be messy, but perceiving the perfection in imperfection and accepting temporary chaos allows children to be creative.

Some people feel imprisoned by their places and possessions. Joanne Allen downsized for more mobility. “I've had to move so many times in my life. I just got so sick of having so much stuff to lug around every time. With every move, I got rid of more and more stuff, until I reached my goal of only what would fit in my car in a single load. Achieved this goal with my last move, it was so satisfying!”

Some shop to fill an emotional void, but the distraction and satisfaction is fleeting. Wasted time in a treasure-hunt trance online or at a retail outlet could be spent cultivating more fulfilling pursuits. Comedian George Carlin said, “Trying to be happy by accumulating possessions is like trying to satisfy hunger by taping sandwiches all over your body.”



Divide and conquer

Are you ready to sift your treasures from trash? Could you create more mental and physical room by downsizing your belongings? Possessions pile up when we don't cull them, creating chaos and confusion. It's time to schedule a spring clean. Assemble bins or bags labelled throw, give, sell, keep and repair. If you're indecisive a supportive friend may assist. Tackle one area at a time. Perhaps clothes, then books and papers, followed by each room or area. Pull everything out, and if it's not pleasing, practical or precious then put it in the throw, give or sell spot. Thank things for giving you past pleasure, knowing that appreciation attracts future abundance. Then let them go with love. There's plenty more to come and you're enriched by experiences more than material assets anyway. Scrub surfaces and rearrange things to your taste. Before you have a change of heart dispose of the unwanted things. Reward yourself with an outing to return to the pleasure of an upgraded place!

Purposeful possessions

With a WHO study showing that more affluent societies experience more depression, maybe it's time we question the materialistic model of success. Are the happiest people those with the most stuff or the most substance? Minimalism is our natural state. We all enter and exit the world with nothing. But do those with the most money at death win? Or would the winners be those enriched by life's lessons? Of course, one could gain both riches and enrichment. However, if we sacrifice spirituality, morality, relationships, health or happiness for acquisitions, is the price worth the wealth? Does more money guarantee more happiness? Studies suggest that our happiness plateaus at a certain income that funds our essentials. More money or possessions may give a temporary thrill, but our happiness level returns to its set point.

There can be a downside to the high life. Those with excessive wealth can become so stressed about preserving their riches that they can't enjoy them. If spoilt with sensual excess people may suffer poor health, expensive addictions and obsessive greed, and exploit others and the earth. Placing prosperity over people and the planet has karmic consequences. As the saying goes, we should use things and love people, not love things and use people. Those with a very small comfort zone due to a luxury life may also struggle to appreciate simple pleasures and to connect with less affluent people. As Bertrand Russell said, “It is preoccupation

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with possession, more than anything else, that prevents men from living freely and nobly.” If Buddhists are right, then those with more attachments experience more misery in life. As Satya Sai Baba said, “Man's many desires are like the small metal coins he carries about in his pocket. The more he has, the more they weigh him down.”

However, having a detached, generous approach to affluence can elevate all. Religious renunciate Bhakti Charu Swami advocates simple living and high thinking: “It's not material objects that make misery but our attachment and identification with them. Utilising things for a positive purpose is a spiritual principle called *yukta-vairāgya*. Understanding everything is on temporary loan from the Lord there is no pride or proprietorship, only gratitude that one can give to the greatest good.” Managing material things for sacred purposes purifies us of attachment and negative repercussions. Philanthropists who channel abundance positively can experience the joy of sharing and purpose. Ultimately, objects are neutral; it's their effect on us and others that make them helpful or harmful. The earth has endless beauty and bounties for us to enjoy as long as it doesn't create suffering. It's not just what we get but what we give that brings blessings. As in the words of St Francis of Assisi, “When you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received — only what you have given: a full heart, enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice and courage.”

Caroline Robertson appreciates minimalism and mess according to the occasion. For decades, she has offered naturopathic consultations and first aid courses. For more, visit carolinerobertson.com.au.



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