

Getting Started With Minimalism

Your guide to a simpler life through decluttering,
minimalism & mindfulness

Laura Spawn

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WHAT IS SIMPLE LIVING, OR MINIMALISM?

“THE PRICE OF ANYTHING IS THE AMOUNT OF LIFE YOU
EXCHANGE FOR IT.”

-HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Minimalism, sometimes called simple living, intentional living or mindfulness, is simply the art of living life with focus, people and belongings that bring joy and meaning. It's no more and no less than that.

Many people associate minimalism with owning very few physical possessions, and for some minimalists, that is what it's all about, but I prefer a more holistic approach, extending the practice to all areas of our lives, including health, emotions, finances, friends and family.

Minimalism or simple living isn't the practice of trying to eliminate every physical possession that isn't remotely necessary from your life, but more about removing ALL those things that are not adding value, joy, peace and satisfaction to your everyday living. Those things can come in the form of belongings, people, feelings, emotions and activities. For a more in depth meaning, take a look at [What Is Minimalism?](#)

WHY LIVE A SIMPLER LIFE, OR EMBRACE MINIMALISM?

“LIFE IS REALLY SIMPLE, BUT WE INSIST ON MAKING IT
COMPLICATED.”

-CONFUCIUS

When I first started reading about minimalism in 2012, it resonated with me due to my unintended nomadic lifestyle up to that point. When I had first gotten married and started having kids, I had every intention of trying to achieve the American Dream.

Besides just being a good person with charming well-rounded kids, I also wanted a big house, cars, lots of extra money in the bank, opportunity for travel and more, symbols of my family's economic success.

I didn't think about wanting these things intentionally, they were just kind of built in to cultural expectations and my upbringing, as they are for most people. What I didn't realize at the time was how much time, energy and focus achieving all those things would cost.

My husband had chosen a career in the medical field and with that would come years of education, moving around, student loans and three children. If he hadn't believed it was his calling life, I doubt we would have pursued it, but thankfully, it introduced me to minimalism out of necessity. For a more complete story of my road to minimalism, you can read about it in my post, [My Journey to Minimalism](#). For right now, I'd like to touch on why I believe minimalism is an ideal lifestyle for everyone.

MINIMALISM: THE IDEAL LIFESTYLE.

I say minimalism is the 'ideal lifestyle', because it involves purging your life of all the activities and possessions that aren't contributing in a positive way. Imagine living your life with only positive input and support? While that is certainly the ideal, as no one is free from stress and pressure of living, there are some very real benefits to living minimally. Just a few of the benefits my family has experienced include-

- **Improved Personal Relationships-** We have more time to focus on each other when we spend less time consuming, shopping, then caring for the items we've purchased. Our lives are filled with much more contentment for what we have as we have gotten rid of the constant pursuit of 'more'. Peace and joy in our lives has increased as we have focused on our relationships with each other, which are not dependent on the amount of physical belongings we have and money in our bank accounts.
- **More Financially Sound-** Less shopping = more money. We have ended up with more in our savings and more money to share with others in need because we are no longer spending it on the latest and greatest electronics, clothing, toys and convenience foods. We also feel more financially secure with less money, as we have realized that security comes mainly from immaterial items.
- **Fewer Belongings-** Minimalism has left us with only those possessions that we need, use and love. We ended up owning close to 50% fewer items as we originally had, which in turn has made it easier to keep our home clean and kept up without so many possessions to care for. With fewer belongings we are also surrounded with only those items that cause happy emotions

and memories, instead of things that we are holding onto for reasons of guilt or obligation.

- **Increased Time-** I am absolutely amazed at how much time I previously spent on 'stuff'. Thinking about things I wanted, shopping for them at the store and online, thinking about how to pay for them, working to earn money to pay for it, then taking care of the item once it was home, or not using it, then spending time feeling guilty every time I saw it because I wasn't using it. Minimalism has increased the amount of time I have both physically and mentally.

“MINIMALISM IS THE INTENTIONAL PROMOTION OF THE THINGS WE MOST VALUE AND THE REMOVAL OF ANYTHING THAT DISTRACTS US FROM IT.”

– JOSHUA BECKER

GETTING STARTED.

Starting to simplify your life and work towards a more minimalistic lifestyle can seem overwhelming and a bit daunting at first, especially if you are naturally a bit of a collector or pack rat, or are the type of person who says yes to everything and has a long list of commitments and activities that have made you feel overscheduled and stretched to the limits of time and energy.

The key is to just get started. I am the type of person who likes to read a lot about something, but then once I have made the decision to implement it, I dive right in and just go for it. However, it seems as though many minimalists recommend going slower and starting with a small project. Depending on your personality, you can choose which one works best for you. I recommend beginning with decluttering an area of your home that bothers you every time you walk past it, maybe a kitchen counter, a corner in your bedroom or the living room entertainment center. Starting with an area in your living space you see regularly allows you to immediately feel and see the difference having added space in your life makes.

Be sure to consider the following as you start-

DECLUTTER, DON'T ORGANIZE.

Some people make the mistake of organizing their possessions, when they think they are decluttering. The process of decluttering and minimizing means you relieve yourself of all items that do not bring value or are not being used in your life.

Decluttering creates space in your life and home for those items that are important to you, which you use on a regular basis. It is only AFTER

you have decluttered that you should spend time organizing what you have left.

GRAB FOUR BOXES OR BAGS AND LABEL THEM KEEP, DONATE, THINK ABOUT AND THROW AWAY.

Starting in the area you identified as the most visually stressful in your home, begin going through items and placing them in their respective bags. Try to move through the process quickly the first time, and don't be afraid of placing lots of items in the 'Think About' container, this is natural when you first start decluttering.

Be sure when you decide to keep an item that you can answer all the following questions with a 'yes'.

- ***How much time and energy will this item cost me in use and upkeep Is it worth it?***
- ***Will this item have a positive effect on my life, health and happiness and that of my family?***
- ***Does this item align with the type of life and values that I consider the most important?***

GET OVER THE GUILT FACTOR.

As you are going through items, you will most likely notice some unexpected guilt surfacing. Guilt that you spent money purchasing items you rarely use, or items you don't like, but keep because they were gifted to you and you'd feel bad getting rid of them. You may have family heirlooms you feel obligated to hold on to, but guilty that you don't get any joy from seeing them around the house.

A big step in the decluttering process is letting go of the guilt associated with physical possessions. Expectations of society of what you should own, expectations of family members and of yourself can hinder the process at times. It isn't healthy, nor is it pleasant to keep things around the house that cause you to feel negative emotions every time you see them, no matter their history or where they came

from, get them out of there! Donate them to someone who will appreciate them and you will feel happier and more comfortable in your own home.

MAKE TIME FOR DECLUTTERING.

The majority of people don't have hours and hours to spend each day during the initial decluttering process; so, it makes sense to 'schedule' regular decluttering sessions into your days or weeks. Just be sure to make it a regular occurrence, 15 minutes a day, or a 3-hour block on the weekends so you make enough progress that you can start seeing the new space and feel the benefits rather quickly.

Once you start reaping the benefits of more space, less visual clutter, fewer items to keep clean, the decluttering process will get easier as you identify those items that are not being used or bringing value into your life.

DONATE, DON'T SELL.

There will probably be quite a few people who disagree with me here, but I firmly believe that trying to sell the majority of items you are decluttering hinders, instead of helps the process. Donation allows you to remove the items from your home immediately, instead of letting them sit around until you have the time to list them online or have a garage sell.

Donating items you purchased helps you be more aware when you spend money in the future. It's kind of a self-regulating behavior, in that you will find yourself not wanting to 'give money away', if you don't use something and end up donating it after a while. The only exceptions I make are for those very few items that will actually help recoup some of the money you spent, like extra tools, large appliances or expensive clothing that you can sell to a boutique.

REVISIT YOUR 'THINK ABOUT' CONTAINER.

When you have worked your way through the designated area you are decluttering, you should have items in each of the four containers mentioned at the beginning of this section. You can now organize the contents of your Keep container, take your Donate items to your local thrift store and take the Throw Away items out to the trash.

Your 'Think About' container should go somewhere that you won't see it on a regular basis. Maybe up in the attic, or out in the garage somewhere or under your bed. You'll want to calendar a time 2-3 months away when you will take that container out of hiding, and go through it's contents again.

Chances are you are going to completely forget about what you put in the container to begin with and realize that you don't need the majority of it after all. If you have pulled something out of it in the 2-3 month interim, you will know you need to hang on to that item. This is a great way to practice getting rid of things, without the mental trauma and stress that sometimes goes a long with dropping things off as donations.

Use the tools and methods outlined above over and over for each area of your home as you work through the decluttering process. Whether you devote large chunks of time or smaller pieces throughout the week, you will begin to experience the benefits and relief increased space and fewer possessions brings into your life. For more help, I have created a couple of [Decluttering Worksheets](#) you can download and print for use.

GETTING STARTED WORKSHEETS

Download the PDF worksheets to print out and use to get started.

Simply. Clearly.

Decluttering Commitments

Are you spending too much time outside of your home, away from your family? Maybe you are stretched too thin and doing so many things, that you can't do any of them well? Use this form to help you identify those commitments that may be cluttering your life and keeping you from focusing on what you truly value.

Commitment Balance Sheet

Commitment Hours per Week	Family Hours per Week
How many hours do you spend each week with your entire family including meals, outings or family nights? How many hours per week are devoted to outside commitments such as community programs, PTA, religious involvement or kid's activities? Write the total number of hours for each area in their respective balances above.	

Are the number of hours spent with family versus outside commitments balanced? Most of us are overextended in our outside commitments. If that's you, consider the following to help you 'declutter' your life and focus on what's more important.

→ Which commitment do you feel least strongly about fulfilling?

Ending a commitment is difficult, but can be done respectfully, use the following when notifying someone that you will be unable to continue:

Specify a date
Acknowledge the inconvenience
Be willing to help train someone
Provide a short, simple reason

Getting Started Decluttering

Take a quick walk throughout your home and identify the room or area that makes you feel the most overwhelmed visually. Look for piles of items like clothing, paperwork, toys, etc. that cause you to feel some form of anxiety when looking at them.

→ Area: _____

Find four sturdy containers or boxes that are a good size and label them as Keep, Donate, Throw Away and Think About. You could use baskets, bags, plastic containers or cardboard boxes. Just make sure they are at least large enough to hold a grocery sack size of items.

→ ☐ Keep ☐ Think About ☐ Donate ☐ Throw Away

Choose four items from within the area you identified as being the most visually overwhelming. Ideally, you will choose items that you feel comfortable placing in each of the four boxes you labeled. If you have trouble deciding in which box a particular item should go, you can use the following questions to help make a decision.

- ✓ Do I use this item on a regular (at least once a month) or seasonal basis?
- ✓ Does this item cause me to feel joy or happiness when I see or use it?
- ✓ How much time does this item cost me in my life in terms of upkeep, cleaning or use?
- ✓ Am I hanging on to this item because of guilt associated with not using it, or because it was a gift?
- ✓ Do I ever think about this item or remember I have it when it is not in view?

STAYING MOTIVATED.

Keeping our motivation with any task in life can be difficult. Simple living and minimalism is no different.

After the initial purge of belongings, we tend to have what is termed as 'clutter creep', slowly but surely make its way back into our homes and lives. It is necessary to keep our motivation strong sincere or we can easily fall back into the cultural expectations of consumerism and collecting things and activities that we really don't need and won't benefit from.

It is normal to go through periods of intense decluttering, then taking a break and just maintaining the current level of what you have, although it seems inevitable that as we are in 'maintenance mode' we begin to fill our homes and time with additional 'stuff'.

Here are some ways that I have stayed motivated over the years to continually keep my possessions to a minimum and my commitments limited to those that truly bring joy to my life.

Ask yourself these three questions before making new purchases and commitments.

1. **How much will this item or commitment cost me, is it worth it?** *(Will you spend too much time working to purchase the item or pay for the activity, will you spend a lot of time cleaning or thinking about the item or commitment?)*
2. **Will this have a positive effect on my life, health and happiness and that of my family?** *(Will the positive effects of this item or commitment increase the joy and happiness in my life and family?)*
3. **Does this item or commitment align with the type of life and values that I consider the most important?** *(There are many 'good' things to do in life, but you still have to pick the top ones that add the most value for you.)*

SPEND 20 MINUTES A WEEK REEVALUATING POSSESSIONS AND ACTIVITIES.

Twenty minutes isn't a long time to commit to just doing a weekly walk through of your home and scanning your belongings to see if there are still items tucked away here and there that you aren't using and are just continuing to take up space. Likewise, if you find yourself dreading the time spent taking that spin class, or driving the kids to yet another soccer game they don't really want to attend, it's a good idea to spend a few minutes deciding if it is still a positive activity for you and your family.

COMMIT TO GETTING RID OF ONE ITEM PER WEEK.

I know, this may seem unreasonable, but unless you are an extreme minimalist (the kind that keep a count of their possessions), this should be fairly easy and painless, and will help keep simple living at the forefront of your mind. The items you donate or dispose of can be as simple as a rusty bobby pin to something larger like a crockpot you just don't use. As you are living day to day, you will come across items here and there you know you aren't using and can part with to clear more space for those things that are a positive contribution to your life.

"WHAT YOU GET BY ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS IS NOT AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT YOU BECOME BY ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS."- HENRY DAVID THOREAU

LIVING WITH NON-MINIMALISTS

These ideas have been taken from an earlier blog post I wrote called [Tips for Living with Non-Minimalists](#). The key is example when trying to declutter while living with someone who is opposed to getting rid of things. You would be surprised how much you can declutter just by going through your own possessions without even touching anyone else's items. In general, most people love and crave a clean space, so chances are if you quietly go through your own belongings, it will spark an interest in your family members to do the same with their own. Read on for some tips on living with non-minimalists.

- **Focus on your belongings first.** When I first start reading about minimizing, I did so for several months, then quietly just started going through my personal items. Clothing, shoes, books, magazines, jewelry, old letters, paperwork, makeup and hair products, and personal décor on my desk. Those things alone took me quite a while and I ended up with a significant pile to haul to the Goodwill. My husband was impressed with how much I was getting rid of, as it was much easier for him to see what I didn't need, then it was for him to think about going through his own possessions. I let him know if he had anything he wanted to get rid of, feel free to throw it in the pile and I'd take it with me. That was all I said. I think he put in a shirt or two.
- **Ask permission, set boundaries.** After I went through ALL of my personal belongings, and I seriously mean EVERYTHING, I was getting excited and wanted to dive right in to everything else in our home, but, I chose to go a little slower. I focused on cleaning out areas that I knew wouldn't cause any issues, like out grown children's clothing, duplicate cleaning supplies, random items in our 'junk' drawer, canned and dry food that was about to expire or already expired and old threadbare towels, sheets and blankets.

- **Ask permission, set boundaries cont.-** My husband was really concerned that I would start going through our kitchen appliances and cooking tools and get rid of things without telling him, so I let him know that I would consider all kitchen items off limits without first discussing it with him. That put him more at ease and he willingly went through his desk drawer and donated a bit more to my next donation pile.
- **Get the kids on board.** My kids are a bit older, but still young enough that they think the world of me and want to be involved in whatever I 'm doing. This worked in my favor when it came to minimizing, as I was able to focus on helping them with their belongings next. One of the cardinal rules of minimizing is that you NEVER get rid of things that don't belong to you, even things that are your children's. Part of minimizing is the emotional and mental aspect of learning to 'let it go', which won't happen if you get rid of something without asking. I went through each of my children's toy boxes with them, and they excitedly threw out most of their broken toys on their own, along with the odds and ends that always end up at the bottom of the box. This also helped my husband as he started to see how refreshing the additional space was that he was seeing all over the house as we were clearing out more and more. I started keeping a permanent donation box outside our front door to put items in, and I found a bunch of his clothes and shoes in it one day.

Personally, I think people in general crave a clean, minimal environment. When we look at homes to purchase, the most appealing ones are usually pretty bare with clear surfaces.

Store displays are more attractive when products are evenly spaced and orderly, and everyone loves the 'new car smell' when your vehicle has been freshly cleaned, cleared of everything that has been collected inside and is empty.

Consider natural outdoor areas as well. So many people, myself included, are attracted to camping, hiking, or spending the day at a park to refresh themselves in the simple, natural surroundings without all the 'extras' we stuff into our homes and lives. If you get started simplifying by focusing on your own 'stuff' and setting a good example without nagging your other family members, you have a much better chance of them seeing and feeling the benefits and getting on board with the idea of simplifying and minimizing your home.

"TO LEAD PEOPLE WALK BEHIND THEM." – LAO TZU

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

WEBSITES

- ↪ [Zen Habits](#)
- ↪ [Be More With Less](#)
- ↪ [Becoming Minimalist](#)
- ↪ [The Minimalists](#)
- ↪ [Mnmlist.com](#)
- ↪ [Loving Simple Living](#)
- ↪ [The Art of Simple](#)

BOOKS

- ↪ [Simplify](#)
- ↪ [Simplicity Parenting](#)
- ↪ [Organized Simplicity](#)
- ↪ [The Joy of Less](#)
- ↪ [Zen Habits](#)
- ↪ [The Power of Less](#)
- ↪ [Clutterfree](#)

WORKSHEETS

- ↪ [My Simple Day](#)
- ↪ [Get Started Decluttering](#)
- ↪ [Declutter Commitments](#)

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