

Simplify Your Life to Find Greater Happiness

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Do you know the Joneses (maybe for you it is the Taylors or the Andersons)? The neighbors who have better cars, clothes, furniture, and electronic toys than you do? In the search for finding greater happiness in life, many of us often turn to buying newer and better stuff. We mistakenly believe the lies of the advertisements that if we have new stuff (or at least better stuff than our neighbors), we are winning at life. What we don't realize is that all this consumerist mindset gets us is debt up to our eyeballs, added stress, broken relationships, and misery.

Because of this negative outcome due to a consumeristic society, many have finally decided that they don't believe the advertisements anymore. There is a growing movement against consumerism. Some of the names of this movement are "minimalism," "freeganism," and "tiny homes" to name a few. Tiny homes aren't just about looking cute but are a part of a movement that promotes living more simply and having sustainable living. Freegans decide on an alternative living strategy where they have limited participation in the conventional economy and instead consume resources that would otherwise be wasted (think dumpster diving and reusing the trash of others). Minimalists believe we give too much meaning and too much of our lives to our things while basically ignoring our health, our relationships, our personal growth, our passions, and our desire to serve others (see <http://www.theminimalists.com/minimalism/>).

What type of consumer are you?

Being honest with yourself, how much of a consumer are you? Do you, as Dave Ramsey states, "buy things you don't need, with money you don't have, to impress people you don't like?" If you do go a bit overboard on your purchases, ask yourself why? Is the new item really bringing you joy and peace or instead is it to make sure you're keeping up with your neighbors? Is life really just about competing to have the best, or at least the same, stuff? Would you feel inferior if you lived more simply and had an older car, a smaller house, and less expensive furniture and clothing? According to Dr. Thomas Stanley, the author of *The Millionaire Next Door*, living more simply with less expensive stuff is exactly how many millionaires live, in fact, that is how they built their wealth. According to Stanley, most millionaires avoid buying status objects (e.g., leasing or buying new vehicles, having the largest home on the block, and buying expensive clothing) but instead buy reliable used vehicles, have a regular size home, and buy their clothes and shoes from places like Walmart. Instead they decide to use their money to have experiences with those they love and to build wealth. The millionaire mindset reminds me of a financial principle that states, "money spent on things you value usually leads to a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment. Money spent on things you do not value usually leads to a feeling of frustration and futility." So, do we spend money on strengthening our relationships and other things we value, or are we just running in the rat race trying to keep up with what our neighbors and friends are doing?

Income, our perceptions, and happiness

Studies show that once we have sufficient for our needs, happiness and income are not related (see <https://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S15/15/09S18/index.xml?section=topstories>). Yes, money can buy a level of comfort and we need money for the necessities of life, but once we have our basic needs met, more money usually just means more problems rather than a happier life. Other studies explain that it is not how much we actually earn but our perception of how much we have and earn that really matters. For example, take two families who live in the same neighborhood, have the same number of children, and earn the same income. One family could be grateful for what they have and feel blessed with their household income while the other family could feel poor and consistently want new stuff. Rather than income, the family's perception would make their financial reality. What are your perceptions making a reality? Are you full of gratitude or desire for more stuff?

How this applies to you...

Be like a minimalist or freegan and instead of wanting the next new thing, look at what you have and fix it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.

Take the 33 for 3 challenge. Choose 33 items from your clothing (not including socks or underwear but does include shoes) and only wear (by mixing and matching) these 33 items of clothing for 3 months. Or, if you prefer, box everything up and only take something out when you use it. After a few months (or each season), look at what you never use and give serious thought to giving it to a second-hand store. According to minimalists, using only what we need, giving our excess, and decluttering our homes and our lives is liberating. Being free from our "stuff" allows us more time, room, and energy to focus on what really matters. It frees us from worry, from guilt, from consumerism.

Each year I take a group of students and professionals on a study abroad experience. In 2014 we went to Costa Rica where the focus was on consumerism and happiness. Students were asked to reflect on their lives and what truly mattered to them, what brought them happiness in life. They reflected on what their time was spent on and if it was spent on things that mattered most to them. They then were asked to reflect on the state of happiness of those they observed living in Costa Rica and where their happiness came from. Students overwhelmingly came to the realization that the people they observed in Costa Rica were happier than they were, even though they were the ones with the new phones, new cars, nicer clothes and homes, and more money. Most students were humbled and even felt ashamed at their selfishness and ungrateful attitude. The students desired to live more simple lives, lives like those they met in Costa Rica where they lived the "pura vida" or the good life.

While each of us can't travel to Costa Rica to have a life epiphany, each one of us can reflect on our lives and what brings happiness. If happiness truly comes from relationships, family, service, and experiences, are we spending the necessary time in these areas? Or, is most of our time, energy, and focus spent on acquiring more stuff? **Don't we owe it to ourselves to simplify our lives, to let go of the less important for the things that truly matter?** We shouldn't let our lives get so filled with good things that we don't have time for the essential things. Perhaps we should be like the Yale graduate, New York City journalist who quite her \$95,000 job to move to an island in the Caribbean to sell ice cream (see <http://www.today.com/news/woman-gives-95-000-job-new-york-city-move-island-t18536>). The prior journalist observed "that for most of the 20th century, a large part of the American Dream had to do with the accumulation of wealth and material things — but that's changed. 'I think that in the last decade or two, people started realizing that 'things' weren't making them happy. Experiences make people happy,' she said.

The bottom line – simplify your life to find greater happiness. Whether you declutter your home of stuff or your life of pursuits that don't really matter, freeing up space and time lightens your load and brings a smile to your face. Make a goal to simplify your life in at least one way and to spend more time and energy on things that truly matter, things that will bring you increased happiness.