

# the minimalist way

**MINIMALISM STRATEGIES  
TO DECLUTTER YOUR LIFE  
AND MAKE ROOM FOR**

joy

erica layne

the  
minimalist  
way



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To the incredible community  
that has rallied around  
The Life On Purpose Movement.  
Your stories inspire me every  
day. Here's to doing life with  
community—and on purpose.



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# introduction

I knocked, waited for an answer, knocked again, and then slipped the key into the lock.

As I stepped inside the apartment, something brushed my face, and my hand shot up to push it aside.

*Leaves, I thought. That's right . . . this is Charlie's apartment.*

I spent most of my twenties managing a large apartment building on the peninsula south of San Francisco. Every year for our annual smoke detector testing, I spent one full day stepping inside 53 different homes. As exhausting as that day was for me, my curious side loved getting a glimpse into how other people lived.

I saw apartments full of knickknacks collected over a lifetime or passed down from generations before. I saw apartments with not a dish on the kitchen counter and others without a clear surface in sight. One apartment was packed with an eclectic mix of mannequins, costume jewelry, and bottles upon bottles of health supplements. (I have no idea why.) Another—Charlie's apartment—accumulated more houseplants every year I entered, until most of the sunlight had been blocked by stretching green branches and I could barely walk through the living room.

Stepping through these 53 doors each year gave me an intimate glimpse into the many different ways people live.

## **A QUIET EPIDEMIC**

What I observed then, and what I know now, is that too many of us are burdened by our belongings, our

commitments, our calendars, and our mental loads. In this state, we can't slow down and enjoy our lives because we're too busy *managing* them. We're afraid, deep down, that we'll wake up one day and realize that we missed out on the precious years of raising our families or having good health—because we devoted so much of our attention to things that didn't ultimately matter. *This* is the problem I want to help you solve with this book. This is where minimalism steps in. It's not just about our stuff—it's a way of life.

### MY JOURNEY TO A SIMPLER WAY

I didn't know what minimalism was when I first felt called to it. I was knee-deep in midnight baby feedings, wet toddler kisses, and drastic swings from feeling immensely loved and fulfilled to feeling hopelessly tired of being needed and exhausted beyond what I thought possible.

Matching the chaos inside of me was the chaos around me. At the end of one particularly long day, I walked slowly through my apartment, feeling defeated by the mess. Papers, toys, bouncers, sippy cups, blankets, pacifiers, and books littered the surfaces. It looked like the baby and toddler section of Target had blown up in my living room.

It was in the thick of these years that I felt a quiet voice inside nudging me to a simpler way, to a life built around the things that really mattered to me—the things that brought me joy—and nothing else. I gradually stopped saying yes to every request that was made of me. I started going through our home, evaluating our belongings with a critical eye. I began fiercely protecting our family time—our adventures to the beach, our Saturday hikes, our outings to the local airport to watch the small planes land. It didn't happen all at once, but in a thousand ways, minimalism was changing my life for the better.

My journey to minimalism may have begun during new motherhood, but yours can begin at any time, in any stage of life. It can begin today.

### MY INVITATION TO YOU

This book offers a holistic approach to minimalism. My hope is to help you simplify your life not just by decluttering your belongings (although that's part of it!), but also by streamlining your time and mental energy so you have the space to enjoy what really matters. As you read, you'll learn to reduce what you currently own and commit to bringing less into your home going forward; you'll evaluate your relationships and determine how they can better contribute to your quality of life; and you'll take a critical look at your calendar to carve out more time for the people and pursuits that are meaningful to you.

But on a deeper level, I want to help you stop living from a place of hustle and overwhelm and start living *in* a space of contentment and joy. This doesn't mean you won't still experience the natural heartbreaks of life or that you'll never again find yourself in a season of busyness or stress. But through those challenging times, you'll have the tools and mental clarity to discern what you can let go of—and what you want to hold close. Welcome to *The Minimalist Way*.





# the heart of minimalism

I sat in a faded sage-green rocker while my three young children played on the floor in front of me and the sun painted soft strokes of gold across the sky. I was hundreds of miles away from family, raising our kids while my husband traveled for his career, and working a job I didn't love. I felt overwhelmed and alone.

In the midst of this challenging season, I remembered there on that rocker that *I* was in charge of my own path. I didn't have to do life by default. And if I wanted to design a life that really suited me, I needed to identify what mattered to me. I needed to focus less on *what* I was doing and more on *why* I was doing it.

I believe that when you know your *why*—your deepest priorities, your core values—everything else falls into place. The nonessentials get stripped away, and you uncover the life you've always wanted.

This is the heart of minimalism. It's the privilege of cultivating a life that matches who you are inside. It's the gift of pursuing what matters to you, free from the distractions that too often take you off track—and ultimately fill your life with things you never meant to acquire. Simply put, minimalism is the choice to live a life that fits.

In that moment, what drew me to minimalism was a desire to push back against the culture of too much. I'd had enough of too much—too much stuff, too many calls to make, too many errands to run, and too many commitments to people I hardly knew. I was ready for less.

But I quickly discovered that less isn't always easy in a culture that values busyness, achievement, and the endless accumulation of material things. Together, let's commit to adopting a minimalist mindset and begin to free ourselves from pressure, guilt, and burnout by living in line with our deepest values.

## Clutter: Physical, Mental, and Emotional

I believe one of the most powerful catalysts for adopting a minimalist mindset is recognizing and internalizing the impact clutter has on you. When you finally open your eyes to the

clutter around you and the clutter inside of you, that's when you feel the heaviness of it—and you begin to want a change.

### *Physical Clutter*

When I was in my early teens, a family down the street asked me to babysit. Our families knew each other well, but I'd never been inside their home until the first time I was left alone in it with their four children.

I remember walking slowly from room to room, astounded by the volume of stuff one little house could contain. Dishes and food lined the kitchen counters, bookshelves were stuffed to overflowing, and layers of toys concealed the carpet in the kids' bedrooms.

What stands out most in my memory is the path their kids used in one of the bedrooms. They'd launch themselves from the threshold to the first twin bed, and then if they needed to get even deeper into the room, they'd fling themselves to the next twin bed, because that was easier than trying to carve a walking path across the cluttered floor.

Looking back, I realize that their house may not have been as messy and cluttered as my memories have painted it. But it was so unlike my own home that I never really felt at ease there, even after spending a dozen Saturday nights taking care of their kids.

Now—decades later—if my own house starts to fill with clutter, I notice that same uneasy feeling creeping in and putting me on edge. This is my cue that it's time to simplify again.

How do you feel when you step into a cluttered space? Do you notice yourself feeling slightly outside of your skin?

If you sit down in that crowded space—maybe it's your kitchen, your bedroom, or your mother-in-law's living room—and allow yourself to really notice how you feel, do you find the pace of your thoughts picking up? Do you find it easier

to get distracted from your task or your conversation? Do you find yourself feeling a little less hopeful than you did before you walked in?

The more you start to pay attention to your thoughts and feelings when you're in a cluttered space, the more motivated you'll become to live a different way.

### *Mental Clutter*

My inbox is full of emails from readers saying they're buckling under the weight of their mental load. Do any of these comments resonate with you?

*"The inside of my mind feels like a game of pinball. I'm constantly darting from one thought to the next—to the point where I never really feel like I'm getting anything done."*

—Mariana M., Tucson, Arizona

*"It feels like my brain is constantly putting out fires. Did I answer that email that came in late last night? Did I reschedule those dentist appointments? I can't forget to buy printer paper. Did I RSVP to Danny's wedding?"*

—Aaron J., Charlotte, North Carolina

*"It's exhausting to be inside my head. Honestly, if I could spend my time anywhere else, I would."*

—Abigail S., Leeds, England

Technology is constantly at our fingertips, and 60- to 80-hour workweeks are becoming the norm. We're expected to overachieve both at work and at home, and we feel a nonstop pressure to do it all and with a smile. It's no wonder so many of us are buckling under the weight of our mental loads. If our minds are as brimming with thoughts as our homes are brimming with things, how can any of us really find focus and clarity inside?

## *Emotional Clutter*

Emotional clutter is the type of clutter that is the most unseen but has the greatest impact on your happiness and well-being. This clutter is made up of persistent thoughts that are so familiar, they may almost feel like old friends. Except when you drag them out into the light of day, you realize that they aren't friends at all. They never were.

Here are some common thought loops that can drain our emotional energy. Do any of these sound familiar? If you were to make your own list, what would you add?

*"I do everything around here."*

*"No one really cares about me."*

*"My boss doesn't appreciate me."*

*"I'm a bad [parent/partner/spouse/sibling/friend]."*

*"I'm terrible at making friends."*

*"I'm not cut out for this."*

The more you allow yourself to think these types of thoughts, the deeper the pathways they carve in your brain. This is why it may feel like your negative thoughts run on autopilot. Thankfully, our brains are malleable. (In scientific terms, this is called neuroplasticity.) This means that with conscious effort and consistent practice over time, you can actually short-circuit negative thoughts and slowly replace them with better feeling loops.

I've struggled for most of my life with a thought pathway of, "No one really notices or appreciates the things I do." I can vividly remember venting this frustration, with tears filling my eyes, to a mentor of mine as early as my mid-teens. And it only became more pronounced when I started my career, got married, and had children. (Toddlers are not known for articulating their heartfelt thanks!)

But over the last few years, I've begun to recognize this internal narrative as emotional clutter. It weighs me down and creates resistance in my soul. It holds me back from focusing on the good. I'm now choosing every day to throw out the manual I had for how others should act—to stop waiting for them to notice my efforts and to instead own that I do the things I do because I want to. I declutter our home because I enjoy a tidy, visually peaceful environment and the satisfaction of my hard work. I give my husband and children my best because I love them and want the best for them too. I've by no means arrived at this enlightened way of thinking, but I feel emotional freedom as I move in this direction. This is just one example of how applying minimalism to your internal life can have profound, lasting effects.

Do you have emotional clutter that's weighing you down? Start by identifying the harmful scripts that are playing out in your mind. Write them down. Get to know them. Notice them the next time they arise and question them (instead of accepting them as truth, as you may have in the past).

Once you've identified a recurring negative loop, don't try to immediately switch to a thought that's 180 degrees from the original. Your brain won't buy it. For example, it's a big leap to go from, "Nobody cares about me," to, "Everyone loves me!" Instead, make a small, positive shift that you really believe, such as, "My family cares about me, and I care about myself." Identifying and slowly replacing your negative thoughts with positive ones is how you begin to free yourself from this destructive form of clutter.

### *The Hidden Cost of Clutter*

The insidious thing about clutter is the heavy toll it takes on our resources and energy. First, we spend money on the

things we want. All too often these things end up forgotten in a corner collecting dust (which, by the way, we'll eventually have to clean). Then we set our sights on new and "better" things, and the cycle repeats. That's a waste of money, yes, but we also pay for these things with precious time, physical space, and mental energy.

Ask yourself these questions to assess the real cost of the clutter in *your* life:

- What could I have done with the time I spent over the last few months shopping online or looking for important documents that got lost in my clutter?
- Would I rather spend half of my days picking up after my kids and harping on them to pick up after themselves, or would I rather spend those same hours engaged with them?
- Does it feel like my brain is constantly at capacity?
- How does the emotional angst that comes with feeling like a slave to my things impact my relationships?
- Do I feel resentment when I think other family members aren't doing their share?
- Do my children see me as being obsessed with our stuff?

A minimalist knows that life is full of trade-offs. Giving your time to one thing means withholding it from something else. The real cost of the unused gear in your shed or the holiday decorations you secretly dread pulling out every year isn't just the dollar amount you paid for them; it's the time you spent researching, buying, tidying, storing, or repairing these. Imagine what you could do with that time and energy instead! Have you forfeited time with your family? Or time doing something you love—something that really brings you joy? Bottom line: If our lives are burdened with clutter, we're giving the best of ourselves away to the things that matter least.

## How to Talk to Others About Your New Way of Life

In this digital era, where we can portray ourselves any way we want, people are craving authenticity. We long to know that we're not alone in the struggle to find balance and clarity in a noisy world. For this reason, when someone makes a request or extends an invitation you can't accept, I suggest not only declining but also being honest about why you are. Even one sentence can encapsulate your values surprisingly well, and you never know—your honesty may inspire others to make positive changes in their own lives. Try experimenting with any of these:

*"I'm trying hard not to let myself juggle too many things."*

*"We're really trying to prioritize family time right now. The years are going by too fast!"*

*"I'm working on living at a more comfortable pace."*

*"I got tired of being burned out all the time, so I'm trying not to overbook my schedule."*

*"I need to take some time for myself right now."*

*"I'm focusing on my work and my homelife right now; I can't take on anything outside of my priorities."*

## Thinking Like a Minimalist

"Why is that gas pump talking to us?" my 5-year-old asked through the open window, perched in her booster seat as I stood outside of our car, filling the tank with gas.

"That little TV is playing advertisements," I answered.

"They want us to buy stuff."

"Oh," she said. "Okay."

Except it's not really okay. It's staggering, the volume of advertising we take in during a single day—not to mention the cleverness of those ads. Digital marketing experts report that Americans see 4,000 to 10,000 brand messages a day. And many of these advertisements are tailored precisely to our interests, based on where we click and what we share online. Additionally, because brands partner with influencers on popular social media platforms, we're often seeing products promoted in our *own* feeds, from people we choose to follow.

The landscape of consumerism has changed monumentally over the last few decades, with advertising becoming subtler and yet more pervasive. We've grown up surrounded by it and submerged in the message that more is better.

Thinking like a minimalist means questioning the status quo. If you want to adopt a minimalist mindset, start by regularly asking yourself these questions:

- How can I reduce my exposure to advertising, whether direct or indirect, so I'm not introduced to so many products I'm tempted to buy?
- Can I get even more honest with myself about the difference between a want and a need?
- How long does the euphoria of a new purchase really last?
- Would I rather own this item or have that experience?
- How much time am I going to devote over the next several years to maintaining this product? (Replacing batteries, cleaning it, dry cleaning it, repairing it, etc.)
- How do I feel in a crowded, cluttered environment?

- Does my home visually represent the person I'm trying to be?
- Who will sort through my belongings after I'm gone, and what can I do *now* to lessen that burden?

When I started seeing my life through a minimalist lens, I slowly stopped wanting a bigger home; a bigger home just meant more to clean. I stopped trying to fill my walls with frames and artwork; visually, less became more. I gradually stopped caring as much about how I looked in the eyes of others; my life matched my values, and this gave me more contentment and more confidence than I'd ever felt before.

Let's create this for you, too.

### 3 Thought Patterns that Fuel Overconsumption

When someone tells me they feel burdened by all the stuff they own, I encourage them to get curious about *how* they got there. I might ask: What led you to consume so much in the first place? What triggers you to reach for the credit card? Why do you think changing your shopping habits feels so hard? I've found that after we do a little digging, most people can attribute their consumption to one of the following thought patterns—and sometimes to all three.

#### 1. *Emotional Avoidance*

I clicked the button that said "Place Your Order," watched the webpage confirm my purchase, and closed my laptop with a satisfying click. It was then, as I noticed some of the tension slip off of my shoulders, that I connected my purchase with my mood. I realized I was seeking relief from the agitation that had been building inside of me for several days.

Think about it—how often do you make a purchase because you think it's a solution to a direct problem? Maybe you buy something to alleviate a point of friction around the house, like buying a new storage basket for loose items. If you're a parent, maybe you sometimes buy something to appease the kids, like the time I bought our 4-year-old daughter her own LEGO set so she'd stop breaking her older brothers' creations. We often tell ourselves we're buying something for legitimate reasons, like the ones mentioned, but really . . .

It's a little release, a dopamine hit, a distraction, a means of numbing.

Many of us will do anything to escape actually experiencing our own emotions—especially the difficult ones. For some, it's eating chocolate; for others, it's a glass of wine or a few mindless episodes on Netflix. For my mom, it's cleaning a bathroom. (There are far worse outlets, right?)

For plenty of us, it's spending. This is why shopping is so often jokingly referred to as "retail therapy"; we use it to create short-term pleasure that helps numb underlying emotions. And with the massive migration we've experienced in the last decade from traditional retail establishments to online shopping, it's easier than ever to get the instant satisfaction of buying something new—a practice that's leaving us with unprocessed emotions, depleted bank accounts, and overfilled homes.

## *2. Scarcity Thinking*

I have a friend whose dad is a collector. (Some might call him a hoarder.) He saves every rubber band that comes with his daily newspaper, every soy sauce packet and plastic fork that comes in the take-out bag, and every issue of *National Geographic*. He's an organized collector, and although an

outside eye may not be able to decode his systems, if you asked him for an individually wrapped toothpick—or a black and white TV—he'd find one for you. His family recently built a large shed in their modest backyard because his collections were spilling out of the house and needed somewhere to go.

If you were to stand face-to-face with this warm, put-together man and ask him why he can't let go, he'd shrug, smile, and answer, "You never know when you might need something in here."

It sounds like a perfectly reasonable answer. But beneath that statement is the assumption that someday, something in his home (or who knows, everything in it!) might not be available anymore. *The world might run out*. While I can't speak to the deepest root of this good man's unwillingness to part with his belongings, I can see echoes of this behavior in many of us.

Have you ever hung onto a pair of shoes that were falling apart because you wondered if you'd ever like another pair quite as much? Have you maxed out your budget during a sale by one of your favorite retailers because you convinced yourself they would never run a sale that good again? Have you ever clicked "add to cart" just because you noticed small red text saying "only 5 left"?

This is scarcity thinking: the belief that resources will run out, balanced against the knowledge that our wants and needs will not. We often let ourselves fall into this mindset because scarcity feels like such a justifiable reason to make a purchase or hang onto something we don't need. And these two actions—buying new things *and* keeping old ones—leave us physically burdened and emotionally overwhelmed by the volume of things we've accumulated.

### *3. The Comparison Game*

It's never been easier to compare your lifestyle to someone else's. Where once we might have graduated college and kept in touch with our fellow grads through the occasional phone call or lunch date, now—through social media—we're often aware of every promotion, every new baby, every vacation, and every home purchase. The world has become infinitely smaller as we get a glimpse into the intimate lives of our childhood friends, long-lost cousins, co-workers, bosses, neighbors, fellow school parents, and even public figures.

What's worse, we all know that this glimpse isn't accurate. We tend to document the highlights of our lives, leave out the messes and the struggles, and throw a filter on reality. We know as we scroll that no one's hair always looks perfect and no one's home is always immaculate. But still, when it's right in front of you, it's hard not to compare.

Brands contribute to this epidemic considerably, as their social feeds make us feel like we should be backpacking the Pacific Coast Trail (wearing expensive, trendy gear) or gathering our friends and family for perfect outdoor meals (lit by globe lights and served on beautiful tablescapes).

The more we look, the more we want our lives—our homes, our cars, our clothes, our families, our vacations, and our social status—to mirror what we see, even if we know that the standard is unrealistic. Just like emotional avoidance and scarcity thinking, the comparisons we draw inside our heads drive our desire to spend, acquire, and accumulate.

## 10 Common Consumerist Thoughts to Watch Out For

Whenever you find one of the following thoughts crossing your mind, consider it an in-the-moment reminder that you can take a new approach. As you let these thoughts pass without acting on them, you'll become a more mindful consumer.

*“It would be so much easier to eat out tonight.”*

*“I can just put it on the credit card.”*

*“I need a new outfit.” (Or a new phone or a new sound system—anything that’s not actually a need.)*

*“My [best friend/sister/buddy/kid] would love this.”*

*“I have to buy it because it’s on sale.”*

*“What if they run out?”*

*“This will make me feel better.”*

*“Our neighbors have one. I should too.”*

*“I need a distraction.”*

*“Wouldn’t this product make my life easier?”*

## Joy and Fulfillment: A New Approach to Consuming

The kind of consumption most of our society is practicing offers distraction and temporary satisfaction. Distraction from our problems, and the temporary satisfaction of buying something new. My hope is not that we stop consuming altogether, but that we consume more mindfully—and that our purchases actually support the lives of joy and fulfillment we’re creating. Instead of using consumption to build

lives that *look* good, let's limit our consumption and build lives that *feel* good. After all, a life that feels good has very little to do with the things we own.

Lori Sanders learned this lesson in a profound way during Hurricane Irma when she watched her husband swim through their front yard to capture a small, orange kayak so they could paddle to safety. As she sat precariously in a kayak with her husband, their 5-year-old son, and one small plastic bag of their belongings, she felt a sense of peace—completely out of place for the situation they were in—wash over her.

"At that moment," she says, "I wasn't thinking about what I left behind, only that right then I had everything I needed. I knew as long as we had each other, we would be okay."

If you were to make a list right now of the things that make life joyful and fulfilling for you, what would it include? Quickly jot down what comes to mind. I think most of us would put family and friends right at the top, because we inherently know that relationships are foundational to our happiness. Below that, you might list creative interests, the ways you give back or serve others, your faith, financial security, and having a sense of purpose in life and work. I bet you didn't write down that new pair of jeans, or the fancy lawn mower you bought last week, or your last five Amazon orders (can you even remember what they were?).

This is the beautiful secret of minimalism: It may seem like it's about the stuff, but once you've cut through the clutter and adopted a new frame of mind, you learn that it's barely about "the stuff" at all.





# the key to minimalist living: know your values

Lauren Prescott was 26 years old when she started noticing a sense of unease deep in her gut. At first, she couldn't put a finger on what was causing it. Was she anxious about a certain work project or client relationship? *No*, she thought. *I love my job*. Had she forgotten to pay a bill or call in for jury duty? Nope. She was set there, too. After a few weeks of living with this low-level but constant discomfort, she even started reaching out to family and friends to make sure everyone she cared about was okay.

The unease prompted Lauren to take a step back from her life—to take it in with fresh eyes. Slowly, she began to see that her world had become almost one-dimensional. Her work as a self-employed graphic designer was exactly what she'd always imagined for herself. It brought her so much fulfillment that she could do it all day, every day—and in fact, she did.

But that quiet, persistent discomfort had woken her up to all the things she'd let slip away, telling herself she'd do them tomorrow or next week. The yoga sessions she used to start her days with . . . the long phone calls with her dad or sisters . . . dinners with friends—they had all fallen by the wayside.

Sometimes it takes a sense of dissonance, disconnect, or tension for us to realize what our real values are. This feeling, although unsettling, is a gift—a call to realign our lives with our hearts.

## What You Value and Nothing More

In this chapter, I'm going to help you get reacquainted with what's really in your heart. You'll identify exactly what your values are for each area of your life, and together we'll create a personalized framework that will help you make decisions going forward—decisions that reflect your truest self and allow you to build a life that matches.

While working on this book, I had the opportunity to tell many people the topic I was writing about. From friends and fellow parents to the baristas at the coffee shop where I spent a hundred hours on a laptop, most people responded with a comment about how much stuff they own. A few even looked at me with curiosity (and a hint of incredulity) and asked, "How much is there to say about minimalism? Can't you just tell them to throw out all their junk?"

Fielding these questions made me even more motivated to share the real message of minimalism through this book. Yes, what we own and what we consume is one facet, but what it really boils down to is so much more meaningful than that. This movement is about living a values-driven life—a life that feels even better on the inside than it looks on the outside.

### *What Are Your Values?*

For the purposes of this book, we're going to define values as *your personal judgment of what's important in life*. Read through the following values and use a pencil to circle any that immediately resonate with you. Feel free to use the blank lines at the bottom to add values you don't see here.

Adventure	Family
Authenticity	Flexibility
Balance	Focus
Boldness	Friendliness
Bravery	Friendship
Citizenship	Fun
Commitment	Gratitude
Community	Growth
Compassion	Happiness
Consistency	Humor
Contentment	Influence
Contribution	Inner Peace
Creativity	Integrity
Curiosity	Joy
Dependability	Justice
Determination	Kindness
Empathy	Knowledge
Faith	Leadership

Learning	Self-Sufficiency
Love	Service
Loyalty	Simplicity
Meaningful Work	Spirituality
Nature	Stability
Novelty	Strength
Openness	Trustworthiness
Perseverance	Unity
Presence	Vitality
Reputation	Wisdom
Respect	Wonder
Responsibility	_____
Security	_____
Self-Confidence	_____
Self-Love	_____
Self-Respect	_____

### *Determine Your Core Values*

Now that you've read through the list of values and circled those that resonated with you, let's talk about how to narrow it down—how to really recognize what matters most.

#### **1. QUIET THE "SHOULD"**

As you continue to home in on your values in the upcoming exercises, do your best to discover what you really value—not what you think you *should* value. If you can cut through the noise and the pressures you feel from outside of yourself, I believe that somewhere inside, you already know which principles you want to base your life on. Your values don't have to be the same as those of your parents, your partner, your in-laws, your religious leaders, or the woman down the street you're always trying not to compare yourself to. Push past the "shoulds" to see who you really are.

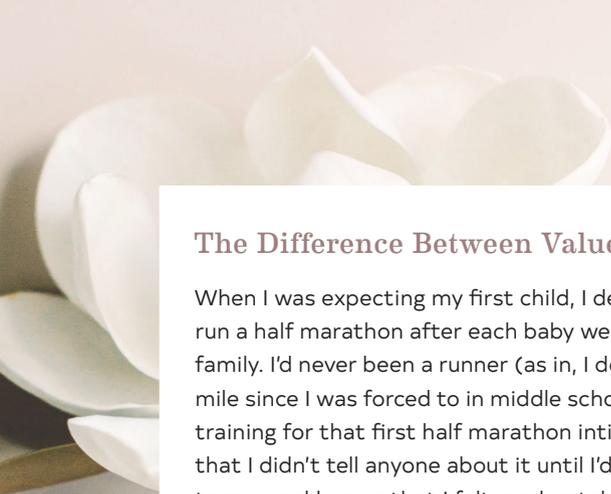
## 2. ASK YOURSELF, "WOULD I HOLD ON TO THIS VALUE EVEN AT A COST?"

Think of the moments in your life when you sacrificed time, money, popularity, approval, or success for something you valued more. Maybe you came clean with your boss when you were mistakenly given credit for something you didn't do, because your integrity in the long run was more important to you than your boss's praise in that moment. Maybe you sacrificed some of your precious alone time at the end of a long day to take a friend's call and listen with genuine empathy as he opened up about something that was weighing on him. When you're willing to give up something that feels good for something you care about more, that's when you know you're acting on a core value.

## 3. LISTEN TO THE VOICE INSIDE

Think of the upcoming exercises along the same lines as taking a personality test. When you answer questions on a personality test, you're encouraged not to overthink but to instead go with the first answer that comes to mind. Your gut knows what you value, and I think you'll naturally be drawn to those qualities when doing the exercises.

We all have a voice deep inside of us, a voice that knows us better than anyone else. People call it the universe, the spirit, the highest self, the Holy Ghost, the intuition, the gut, or the soul. What we call it isn't as important as learning to *hear* it. Zoning in on your values is an opportunity to practice listening to the voice inside, and this practice will serve you as you navigate your new, minimalist way of life.



## The Difference Between Values and Goals

When I was expecting my first child, I decided I wanted to run a half marathon after each baby we brought into our family. I'd never been a runner (as in, I don't think I'd run a full mile since I was forced to in middle school), and the idea of training for that first half marathon intimidated me so much that I didn't tell anyone about it until I'd added enough miles to my weekly runs that I felt moderately confident I'd be able to finish the race.

This was a goal—based on one of my values. My goal was to run a half marathon after each baby, but my motivation was a value that sat deep in the core of my being: I wanted to feel good in my body, to have strength and energy that would allow me to keep up with my family and continue chasing my dreams.

We never achieve our values in the way that we achieve our goals. We never arrive at them as I eventually arrived at the finish line—sweaty and out of breath—of three half marathons, one for each baby. Although we can't *accomplish* our values, we do set goals and take actions that are *in line* with them. They are the subtle but solid underpinning of our lives, and we experience our greatest personal alignment when our choices and actions reflect them.

Differentiating between values and goals is important within minimalism because in the long run it's our values—not our goals—that motivate us. You might feel a rush of excitement and motivation when you set a new goal, like decluttering one main area of your home each month for the next six months. But a few months in, when that rush begins to wane, it's knowing the value behind your goal that will carry you through to the finish line. Minimalists know that values are the slow-burning fire that spark us to accomplish our dreams.

## *Exercise 1: Identify Your Top 3 Guiding Values*

Reread the values you circled and take more time to think about which ones represent you best. Using the tips under Determine Your Core Values, slowly narrow them down to the three values that feel integral to who you are.

I suggest choosing three now, and then letting your mind mull it over for a few days before you officially pin them down. The brain makes connections when it's allowed to wander, so there's power in purposefully letting your subconscious do its work. You'll return to your list with even more clarity than you have today.

### *Your Top 3 Guiding Values*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## *Exercise 2: Create Your Value Tree*

Think of your top three guiding values as the trunk of a tree. The trunk is essential to the health of the whole tree; without it, there would be no tree at all. But growing outward from that trunk are separate branches that make the tree what it is.

With your top three guiding values as the basis of yourself (the trunk), you also have several separate but connected life domains (the branches). In Exercise 1, you determined what you value in a broad sense. Now it's time to get specific—to think about how your values play out in each area of your life. The following are the life domains I encounter most, but you're welcome to drop or swap out a domain if one doesn't feel like a fit.

1. Family
2. Home
3. Career
4. Community & Relationships
5. Health & Spirituality

Keeping your top three guiding values in mind, think about each of these areas of your life and brainstorm three values for each. It's 100 percent okay to repeat values across areas or pull from your top three guiding values. In fact, doing so means that your values are congruent across the board. For example, if "vitality" was one of your top three guiding values and it perfectly sums up what you want for yourself in the health & spirituality domain, then by all means, use "vitality" again. But maybe in addition to that, you want to be consistent with your health habits and to use those habits to contribute to your sense of inner peace. In that case, add "consistency" and "inner peace" as well, making your top three values for the health & spirituality domain vitality, consistency, and inner peace. See the example on the next page, and use the blank value tree that follows to fill in your own values.

# Value Tree



# Your Value Tree

**Family**  
.....  
1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Career**  
.....  
1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Home**  
.....  
1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Community & Relationships**  
.....  
1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Health & Spirituality**  
.....  
1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Top 3 Guiding Values**  
.....  
1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## How to Embody Your Values

Once you feel good about the values you've chosen, do everything you can to memorize them and stitch them into the fabric of who you are. If you've chosen well, your values are already a part of you—and always have been. But going forward, let's make them your guiding force; let's make them so deeply *you* that you can't help but build a life on them. Here are six exercises to help.

- Write about each of your top three guiding values and what they mean to you in your journal, on a blog, or even on Instagram—wherever you like to document your life.
- Every day in your journal, jot down your top three guiding values before writing anything else. Repetition is a powerful tool, because it helps take a concept from the conscious mind and imprint it on the subconscious mind.
- Invite a friend to do the values work with you. We can benefit tremendously from having an accountability partner, not just for the process of determining values but also for the journey of living them.
- Print out your values or write them on Post-it Notes and hang them where you'll see them often, like on the bathroom mirror, the fridge, or by your computer.
- Make, or hire an artist to make, a wall hanging of your values.
- Talk about your values regularly. Share stories about times when you had a decision to make and used one of your values to help you, as well as times when you made a decision that wasn't in line with your values and how that felt. (It's especially powerful for our kids to understand that we learn from our failures as much as we do from our successes.)

Remember: It's when you know your values and are living by them that you're most able to see your priorities and make choices that will help you build a life that fits—a life that has room for joy.

## The Power of Pause: How to Use Your Values in Daily Life

When we're knee-deep in the business of running our day-to-day lives, we often make decisions based on habit, convenience, conformity, and the fear of making waves. But knowing our values—and continually getting back in touch with them—allows us to take a step back and see a fuller picture. With our values in mind, we remember to do life with purpose, not by default. We give our best energy to the things that matter most, and we let lesser priorities slip away (guilt free!).

As you move forward, remember to come back to your values again and again. This isn't a one-and-done exercise destined to be tossed out and forgotten like the rest of the clutter you're planning to clear. My hope is that you'll refer to these values as often as possible—and certainly every time you hit a junction in your life and need some direction.

### *3 Steps for Mindful Decision-Making*

A minimalist's mindset is rarely more helpful than when you're staring down an important decision. Instead of wasting time wondering what your older brother would do in your shoes or how others will react when you tell them what you've decided, you can cut through those distracting voices

and listen instead to the one voice that matters most: your own.

### 1. TAKE A MINDFUL PAUSE

To stop living in a reactionary state, practice stepping back and breathing before making any decisions. Should I buy a new car or make do with the one I have for another year? Should I apply for that promotion? Should I sign my kid up for one more extracurricular? Whenever circumstances allow, give yourself the gift of a pause. When you take time to consider how each option aligns with your values, you're more likely to make the decision that's best for you.

### 2. CHANGE YOUR SURROUNDINGS

When was the last time you climbed a mountain or stared at an endless ocean?

My husband and I went to college at the base of the Rocky Mountains, where anytime we needed a break or a fresh perspective, we could hike or even drive until we reached a stunning viewpoint.

It was at dusk, standing on a mountain and looking over the soft city lights, when we first talked about getting married one day. It was there, with dusty shoes and water bottles in hand, that we first allowed ourselves to look to a future together beyond the next semester.

After that, we'd return any time we had a decision ahead of us, from grad school and first jobs to when to start a family. Both individually and as a couple, we relied on the stress relief and the bird's-eye view those vantage points gave us. Something about being physically above our daily routines and struggles helped us see ourselves—and our vision for the future—more clearly.

When we eventually found ourselves living in the Midwest, surrounded by miles of cornfields with barely a hill in sight, we realized we could no longer climb until our problems felt miles below us.

But we learned then that you don't actually have to stand on top of a mountain to see your life with fresh eyes. A weekend exploring a new city, a drive through beautiful cornfields, or even a simple stroll to the park at the end of your street can be enough. Changing your surroundings is one of the quickest ways to get a fresh perspective and prepare yourself to make a decision that reflects your values.

### 3. IDENTIFY THE OPTION MOST IN LINE WITH YOUR VALUES

Reread the value tree you created in Exercise 2, and think further about which of your options are most in line with your deepest priorities. I find that this practice is especially helpful when the decision isn't clear-cut—like when my options are good, better, and best, rather than right or wrong.

For example, what if you were given an unexpected holiday bonus this year and found yourself deciding whether to save it, spend it on travel, or apply it to a debt like your car or home loan? These are all great options, but the catch with great options is that they can often land us in some serious analysis paralysis.

This is exactly when returning to your unique values is so helpful. Any of these options could be right for someone, but according to your values, one of them might just be the best fit for *you*. It's comforting and confidence-building to know that you're letting go of something appealing for something better—something that's a tight fit with your most deeply held values.

## The Essential Questions

Whether you're contemplating something small (like making a new purchase or finally throwing out your high school yearbooks) or something much bigger (like starting a family or moving across the country), ask yourself these essential questions to find clarity:

*Will this increase my capacity to experience joy?*

*Does this align with my values?*

## Know Where You're Going

A few weeks after Lauren first started noticing that persistent sense of unease deep in her stomach, she woke up one Saturday morning, strapped her bike onto the back of her car, and drove to her favorite biking path alongside Lake Michigan.

She soon found herself breathing hard (it had been a long time since she'd last put on her cycling gear), but she enjoyed the burning in her chest, because it made her feel alive. And after months of 10-hour days in front of a computer, she needed to feel alive again.

She'd recently been offered a position with one of her graphic design clients. The pay was excellent, the company's name was well known and highly respected in its industry, and she'd have traditional benefits for the first time in five years. But the company's culture was . . . exacting. She knew they would expect a lot of her and that accepting this role would likely mean she'd have no time left over for her smaller clients, much less her morning yoga sessions or visits home to see her family.

Pulling off the path, Lauren swung one leg over the bike and slowed to a stop, taking in the view of the lake while her breathing returned to normal. She pulled a small notebook from her backpack and in an unexpected moment of inspiration, jotted down the things she most wanted out of her life. No surprise: A fancy brand name on her resume was not one of them. Neither were achy shoulders and tired eyes from too many hours hunched over a laptop.

Self-sufficiency? Yes. The ability to set her own schedule and do creative work she enjoyed? Also yes. Time to move her body and get fresh air? Absolutely. And most importantly, time to connect with family and friends (and maybe even start dating again).

Where a few months ago Lauren would have jumped at this professional opportunity, she now had a clearer vision for her life, and she knew as she tucked her notebook away that this position didn't fit inside of that vision. She was learning that when your vision is based on what you really value (not what other people value or what you think you *should* value), the important decisions come into focus.

What people traditionally think of as minimalism—clearing clutter, owning only what you need—is only a part of it. A true minimalist lifestyle means applying that same intention to your day-to-day choices, just like Laura did, in order to make space for what you truly desire. In the next chapter, we'll apply your new decision-making skills to the process of decluttering your home.







# home

When my husband and I graduated college as newlyweds and headed a thousand miles east for his master's program, we'd never heard of the minimalism movement. But on instinct, we decided to take with us only what we could pack into our small, silver Toyota Corolla.

My entire wardrobe for that year, from day-to-day clothes to shoes and winter coats, fit inside one plastic storage tub. We rented a small set of furniture and limited our purchases, knowing that anything we bought would have to fit in that Corolla when the time came to move back west.

We could have lumped our moving expenses into our student loans or splurged on our own set of furniture. It wasn't really about the money (or at least, not completely); it was about the sense of freedom we felt as we drove across the country and into a new chapter of our lives, with very little tying us to the one before. That feeling of lightness stayed with us all year—and that experience became a building block for the minimal lifestyle we live now, as a family of five.

Do you ever feel the weight of your physical belongings resting on your chest? Or maybe for you, it's your shoulders or lower back. When I feel like I own too much, I feel it on my chest—right over my heart. I can't breathe as deeply or move as freely. Thankfully, every belonging I get rid of lessens that weight, so the solution is always available (even if not always easy).

Could you imagine—with as much detail as you can summon—that every item you donate or pass on takes a bit of the weight off you? Keep this image in mind as you read through this chapter and work through your home. Every item you part with takes you closer to the lighter, freer, purer version of yourself.

## Reflection

Look back at the value tree you made in chapter 2, focusing on your top three values for your “home” life domain. Write

them here, and use them as a guide as you implement the strategies in this chapter.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Take a moment to write in your journal or reflect on the following questions before moving on: How do you want to feel at home? What's your vision for your home? What's preventing you from feeling this way or achieving this vision?

## Creating a Minimalist Home

As we dive in, keep one principle in mind: You don't have an organization problem. You have a too-much-stuff problem. So often I see people writing off their hope for change by saying, "I'm just not an organized person." But the problem is more fundamental than that.

You don't need to organize more; you need to own less. It's exponentially easier to be an organized person when you don't have too much stuff! And when you don't have too much stuff, it's much easier to find a designated spot for each item. The first and most requisite step is simply reducing what you own.

### *Strategies for Reducing Clutter*

At this point, you're probably well aware of the impact clutter has on you, and I'm guessing you're motivated to change. The question, then, is where to start and what to do from there.

### **1. START WITH ONE SMALL AREA— LIKE YOUR JUNK DRAWER**

If you let yourself wander your home and take note of every corner, every drawer, every closet that needs cleared, you're more likely to get overwhelmed and give up than you are to get fired up and dive in. Start small. Whether it's a single shelf in a closet, your junk drawer, or the cabinet under your bathroom sink, choose one small space that you can declutter right now—and that you can also maintain.

Get rid of everything you don't regularly use, tidy the things you do, and commit to keeping it that way. Going forward, notice the satisfaction you feel every time you open that drawer or cabinet. It's empowering, right? It will likely motivate you to do another drawer. And another. And another. But first—especially if you're new to clearing clutter—start with one small area, and focus on the freedom and satisfaction it gives you, before moving on.

### **2. SET A TIMER FOR 10 MINUTES**

Clear clutter in one area for 10 minutes, knowing that when the timer rings, you're done—guilt free. If you happen to want to continue, set that timer for another 10. But keep in mind that every time your timer sounds, you're free to stop. Look at what you can achieve in just 10 minutes, and allow yourself to feel that wave of accomplishment and growing confidence. Pieces of the biggest puzzle are placed one at a time.

### **3. TRY THE TRASH BAG METHOD (ALSO CALLED THE GOODWILL DIET!)**

Do a sweep of your house with a trash bag in hand, seeing how quickly you can fill the bag. You can choose where the bag is headed—trash, recycling, or a donation center.

One reader said her record for filling an entire bag was 45 seconds!

For insurance that this strategy helps you make real progress, plan to do it right before your trash gets picked up or right before you do a donations drop-off. That way you won't be tempted to change your mind and keep the clutter you've cleared.

#### **4. APPLY THE SKILL OF "HABIT TRACKING"**

Research shows that we have greater success with the habits we track. For example, a Harvard Business School study of 2,943 households across West Bengal found that families who were told their soap consumption would be tracked were 23 percent more likely to use soap when washing their hands.

Similarly, people who write down what they eat every day eventually see more weight loss over time than those who don't. People who meditate daily using the Headspace app can watch their "streak" (the number of consecutive days they've meditated) grow, and it motivates them to keep it up. When I was working this book, I wrote each day's word count on a calendar next to my desk, and I found so much satisfaction—and motivation—in seeing my progress.

How can we apply this to our clutter-clearing efforts? Could you commit to finding three items per day to donate, for a total of 30 days, checking each day off on your calendar as you go? Could you set a goal to get rid of 365 items in a year and check off a box for each item you donate? The bigger that streak grows, the more you'll want to keep it up.

#### **5. KEEP IT SUSTAINABLE**

I often hear from people who go on a clutter-clearing rampage but burn themselves out so thoroughly that in no time at all, they find themselves right back where they started.

Marie Kondo, author of *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, recommends an all-in, no-holds-barred approach to decluttering and tidying up. If you've had a lightning-bolt conversion and are certain you won't backslide, then by all means, go full force like she recommends. But if you have a life full of things that might get in the way (children, a job, health challenges, a less-than-eager spouse . . . ), keep it sustainable. Declutter one corner at a time, one room at a time, and move at your own pace, keeping those areas clutter-free as you go.

#### **6. DESIGNATE A PERMANENT SPACE IN YOUR HOME FOR DONATION ITEMS**

Whether it's a shelf in your linen closet or a basket next to your back door, create an official place for donation and give-away items, and make sure every member of your household knows where it is. It's amazing how this easy tactic can make editing your belongings a regular part of your family's routine. At our house, it surprises me every time I find a piece of my kids' clothes (now outgrown) or a once-treasured toy sitting on our donation shelf—placed there without any encouragement from me. There's power in this simple strategy.

#### **7. WORK YOUR WAY UP TO SENTIMENTAL OBJECTS**

Build up your confidence by starting with things that hold no emotional value—the junk drawer, your kitchen utensils, or a bin of electrical cords. As you gain experience evaluating your less-important belongings, you'll learn how to discern what you really can and can't part with when it comes to larger or more sentimental items.

## 8. CREATE A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING— AND KEEP EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

When decluttering, the goal is to have a designated home for every item you keep, without exception. This will make it significantly easier to maintain your minimalist lifestyle because you'll immediately know exactly where to put anything away. And if you bring a new piece into your home but can't find a logical place to put it, it's time to question whether you need it at all.

This strategy also makes it obvious when you have too much of something. For example, when you buy a new sweater and notice that your stack of sweaters is starting to reach the top of the drawer, think of this as a nudge to either return it or send an old sweater to the donation bin.

I find it inspiring to remember all the times as a child when I asked my mom for a Band-Aid or a hair tie or a bottle of glue, and she knew exactly where it was. Now I get to do the same for my family; I get to offer all of us a home of order, a place that provides us comfort, consistency, and stability, even when the world around us may not.

## 9. PRACTICE THE ONE-IN, ONE-OUT RULE

It's a rule many people practice—and for good reason! Every time something comes into your home, something else must go out. It's simple: If you buy a new pair of jeans, send an old pair out. If you buy a new knife for the kitchen, send a dull knife (or another kitchen utensil) out. If you upgrade to a new lawn mower, challenge yourself to pass on your old mower before you even bring the new one home.

It may help to make this rule feel like a game—a hunt through your home. Where can you find an underused item that might serve someone else better? Celebrate the small win every time you find just the right thing to give

away. (Oh, and you'll make good use of the donations and give-away bin you made a space for in number 6!)

## 10. CURB YOUR CONSUMPTION

It's simple and difficult and undeniably essential: *Reduce your purchases*. If you happen to get off track at any point on your path to a simplified home, be sure to actively watch your consumption so that old habits don't land you back at square one. Being vigilant about what comes into your home is how you make real strides, because in the end, it's as much about what comes in as what goes out.

## Key Areas to Declutter

While we could address every minuscule area of your home, from your sock drawer to your dog's toy bin, we're going to focus on the areas that tend to feel the most overwhelming but also have the highest return.

### *Your Closet*

When it comes to decluttering clothes, I ask myself three simple questions about each piece: Do I love it? Does it fit? Do I wear it?

#### DO YOU LOVE IT?

This question is usually the easiest to answer, because it's more or less a gut check. We tend to know immediately whether we love something . . . or just tolerate it. Life is too short to wear jeans you don't love. That said, I realize it's not always financially viable to replace everything you "don't love" at once, so it's okay to play the long game here, slowly adding new pieces when your budget allows and gradually giving away those you don't love.

## DOES IT FIT?

I used to buy clothes that fit well enough, but not quite perfectly, just because they were on sale. But if the fit isn't spot on, I always wear it less, and when I do wear it, I don't feel great in it. Fit is key. Even if you love something, if it doesn't fit right, you probably won't wear it.

Unfortunately, fit can be complicated, as many of us fluctuate between sizes during different stages of life. If you need to save some clothing that doesn't currently fit due to weight changes from health challenges, pregnancy, or any other reason, I have two tips:

1. Go as minimal as possible with the clothing you store. Chances are you won't still love it, or it won't fit like you thought, when you finally pull it back out.
2. Store the few items you want to save out of sight, to keep your day-to-day dressing as uncomplicated as possible. (Fewer options means easier decision-making.)

## DO YOU WEAR IT?

The last and most important benchmark is whether you actually wear it. It's possible to love something that fits great but realize that you never actually wear it out of the house. A good friend of mine recently spent an evening cleaning out her closet and texting me photos, asking what to do about this item or that. My replies were simple, consistent, and—to be honest—a little redundant: "Do you actually wear it?" Each time, she answered with some version of "no, but . . ."

*"No, but it's so cute! I really should!"*

*"No, but maybe after I lose some weight . . ."*

*"No, but maybe someday I'll actually have a dressy occasion for it."*

I believe very few “no, but” items should make the cut. If you keep too many, the clothes you actually wear end up hidden behind all the things you might wear someday, making it that much harder to efficiently put together an outfit *today*. And when you embrace a minimalist mindset, you realize that time spent standing in front of your closet is time you could spend writing in a gratitude journal or talking with your family at the breakfast table—something that’s more in line with your values.

### TIPS FOR CLOSET PURGING

1. Pull everything out of your closet. This process forces you to bring every forgotten piece into the light; nothing can be swept under the rug. Additionally, seeing your empty closet—and really letting yourself *feel* the mental and emotional space that comes with it—is motivating. It makes you think twice about what you put back in. Last, I find that a huge pile of clothes, coats, and accessories always feels so much bigger when it’s in the middle of your room than it does when it’s all put away in your closet. Seeing this shakes most people out of the feeling of scarcity as they realize just how much they have—making it easier to let go.
2. Hold and touch each piece, critically evaluating if you love it, if it fits, and if you actually wear it. Only return your most loved, most worn pieces to your closet.
3. Clothes you don’t want to keep can be given to a friend or family member; sold on eBay, at a secondhand retailer like Pluto’s Closet, or at a yard sale; or given to a women’s shelter, a donation center, or another nonprofit organization.

4. After your purge, abide by the one-in, one-out rule. If you do, your closet won't need future purges of this scale.
5. That said, things inevitably build up even with the best of intentions, and every so often you may find the need to declutter your closet again. Use the seasons as your cue that it's time for another edit. When you swap your summer wear for fall sweaters and layers (or your winter wear for spring crops and sandals), remove anything that doesn't pass our "love, fit, wear" guidelines.
6. If you like to shop (or tend to shop to avoid your feelings . . . ) and will be tempted to bring too much back in, an accountability partner can help you maintain your newly edited closet. Convince a friend to do a closet purge with you (everything's more fun with a friend) and commit to checking in with each other at the end of each month to stay accountable. I know a pair of long-time best friends who do spontaneous searches of each other's closets to keep one another on track.

## *The Kitchen*

Maybe you own a Bundt cake pan, even though you haven't baked a Bundt cake in three years. Maybe you own four spatulas but really only use your favorite one. Or maybe you have 27 Tupperware lids . . . for the 13 containers you scrounge up in your Tupperware drawer. (Some things in life can't be explained.)

### **DO YOU USE IT?**

In the kitchen, the best question to ask yourself is, "Do I really use it?" And by "really," I mean regularly, even frequently.

Many of us fall for clever functionality in kitchen gadgets, and before we know it, we have drawers full of garlic presses, lemon juicers, and apple slicers—when day-to-day all we actually use is a cutting board and a good knife.

### **SPECIAL OCCASION ITEMS**

Because many of the special occasion items we find in our kitchens are connected to entertaining, it's helpful to check back in with your values for your home when you're evaluating these pieces. Let's say you're a family of four that hosts a dinner for extended family or a party for friends a few times a year. Because of this you keep dishes and glassware for 12, as well as an array of serving platters and fancy cheese knives.

When you think of your values, is gathering your loved ones a priority? Or do you prioritize simplicity and ease of use above entertaining? Depending on which way you lean, you might hold on to more or less. If you keep less, you can always borrow or rent for those few special occasions each year. And even if you do prioritize entertaining (and that's absolutely okay), I still challenge you to keep less than you think you need. Often it will be enough.

### **THE PANTRY**

The same principles apply to the food you buy and ingredients you keep. I used to jump at making any recipe that sounded good, but each time, I'd collect a couple new pantry ingredients that I couldn't use for any other dishes, and before long, those random ingredients filled an entire cabinet and a good part of my fridge.

As my minimalist mindset has developed over the years, I've become much more selective of the recipes I'm willing to make. I'm now in the habit of checking which ingredients

I already have before choosing what to cook, and I've also gotten better at making substitutions with ingredients I have on hand—two practices that help save time and money. Besides, isn't the best food made with fresh ingredients and a few, basic staples? A bottle of quality olive oil and a box of sea salt will take you further in your cooking than a haphazard spice collection ever would.

## Fridge and Pantry Maintenance

The best time to clean out your fridge is right before you grocery shop (which for many people, tends to be weekly). A quick fridge clean-out helps you see what products you need and allows you to make space for the food you'll soon bring in. Scan through the fridge for leftovers you can consolidate, toss anything that's expired, and quickly wipe down the surfaces.

Depending on the size of your household, you may only need to evaluate pantry contents (including your spice cabinet) every other week or even once a month. When you're planning a big grocery outing (for example, to a box store instead of your local market), scan through your pantry, making note of the staples you're short on—like nut butters, grains, pastas, and canned goods. Toss anything you haven't used in the last month. (Or, if the cans or boxes are sealed and not expired, donate to your local food bank). As you get into the practice of doing this, you'll find yourself wasting less food, as you finally know what you and your family really eat—and what's just not worth buying and storing.

## *Seasonal Decorations*

Every year of my childhood, I eagerly anticipated the day my grandmother, mother, and aunts would pull out their boxes of holiday decorations and deck out their homes for Christmas. I'd help my mom sprinkle fake snow onto her porcelain village depicting Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, carefully arranging (and rearranging) miniature figures of Tiny Tim and Ebenezer Scrooge. At Halloween, we'd line the surfaces inside our home with spider webs, light-up pumpkins, and homemade witches, Draculas, and mummies.

I always knew I wanted to continue this tradition. I wanted my own kids to feel the same sense of wonder I felt every year as we pulled box after box down from our attic and opened them up to rediscover the treasures inside.

When I began craving a simpler life, I wondered if only *some* festive decorations would be enough. Would the holidays feel less special? Would my kids miss out?

Now that I'm a decade into my own family holiday traditions, I can tell you that it *was* enough. It *is* enough. When our kids were young, they'd invite anyone they possibly could into our home to see our glittery haunted house and spooky spiders—the sparkle in their eyes matching the sparkle of our decorations. I learned that we don't need bin after bin of decorations to really soak in the magic of a holiday. More isn't always better; sometimes it's just more.

If you're just starting a collection of holiday or seasonal decorations, be selective about the decorations you choose, and buy much less than your instinct might tell you to. If you only bring in pieces you love, you'll build a small collection that will truly delight you as you pull it out year after year.

If, on the other hand, you have a large collection taking up space in your home, pare it down each time the special

occasion arises. Take every item out of storage, hold each one in your hands, and—following the same approach we took with your wardrobe—keep only your best-condition, most-loved pieces.

## *Storage Areas*

Storage areas, like the basement, attic, or hallway closet, are prime places for you to practice questioning your perception of what you need. If an item is squirreled away, buried under three boxes two layers deep in a dusty corner of your basement, can you really *need* it? Challenge yourself to store as little as possible.

### **BEFORE YOU STORE**

It can be way too easy to shove something in a closet, telling yourself you'll deal with it later. But this, we all know, is how clutter happens. Instead, think it through before you stash it.

- Ask yourself: Would I rather store this item indefinitely—or re-buy or borrow it if the need were to arise down the road?
- Make sure everything you do choose to store is easily accessible and clearly labeled.
- For closets and cabinets, corral loose items into a basket or small bin for organization and easy access.
- As a general rule, keep one of everything—and sometimes one spare. No more. (No, you don't need four extra phone chargers!)
- Twice a year, go through each storage area and make sure you still want to keep the items you're storing. (The more you let things build up, the more you'll put off doing this, so be diligent about assessing twice a year.)

## *Mail and Paperwork*

Paper clutter has a disproportionate impact on our mental loads. Because it doesn't take up a lot of space, it's easy to let it collect—a pile here and a pile there. But many of those papers require some sort of action on our part, which makes clearing paper clutter a lot more daunting than the task of clearing other kinds of clutter. Any time a pile of paper catches your eye, you may think, *What bill payments have I missed? How overdue is that permission slip for my child? Did I miss the deadline to sign up for classes? Is it too late to RSVP to that wedding?*

Take steps today to reduce the paper clutter that comes into your home, and you'll lessen this pain point and free up more space inside your head.

### **1. ASSESS AND UNSUBSCRIBE**

The first step is assessing what paper really needs to come into your home and filtering out anything that doesn't. For one week, collect all the catalogs, coupons, and fliers that come in the mail. Make a pile of anything you don't want to receive—from the coupon booklet you know you'll never get around to using to the catalog from that store you only shopped at once. Most commercial mailers have a phone number or website listed on them. Spend half an hour unsubscribing online or calling to have your name removed from their list.

I find that getting myself off these lists has double benefit: I have less paper to deal with in my home, and I'm less tempted to shop because I'm not regularly flipping through catalogs or getting coupon codes delivered to my mailbox. Plus, it's less wasteful.

Do this twice a year to stay on top of your subscriptions.

## 2. BEFORE YOU SORT, RECYCLE

After you've unsubscribed from anything you can, you'll probably still be left with some mail you don't want, so I suggest recycling it before you even step inside your home. If it never passes the front door, it can never pile up.

## 3. MAKE A SIMPLE SYSTEM

It doesn't matter how you choose to sort the paper once it's inside your home as much as it matters that you do. Sorting mail and paper the moment it comes into the home is critical to preventing paper clutter and the emotional weight that comes with it. I suggest immediately dividing any incoming paper into three categories: "paper to file," "action required," and "unopened mail."

In our home, I noticed that paper tends to collect in two places—our office and our kitchen—so I created a place in each room for the three categories. My husband and I take our mail to the office and immediately separate it into the appropriate categories, and our kids follow the same method in the kitchen with any papers they bring home from school, church, sports, or activities.

## 4. TEACH THE SYSTEM TO YOUR FAMILY

As a parent, I find it especially helpful for my children to know where to put papers that need my attention. Otherwise my kids end up vigorously waving their important papers in my face . . . or letting them slide into the hidden corners of their backpacks, never to be seen again. If you keep your processing system simple, anyone in your household can sort their paperwork appropriately, preventing it from lingering and becoming clutter—and an unnecessary point of stress—in your home.

## Common Clutter-Clearing Stumbling Blocks

Even when armed with strategies for staying on top of clutter, the what-ifs can often cause us to stall out. What if I regret getting rid of this? What if I need it someday? What if I can't get my family on board? What if my father-in-law comes over and notices we never hung the piece of taxidermy he gave us? While there are no easy answers, I hope this section helps you shift your perspective and ultimately create a home that's more in line with your values and vision.

### 1. WHAT IF I NEED IT SOMEDAY?

It's not easy—and for some people, it can even be painful—to get rid of something that feels like it's still useful. I find it helpful to revise the question and ask myself this instead:

*“Would I rather store this item for the next year—or would I rather re-buy, borrow, or rent one if I really need it down the road?”*

Almost always, the answer for me is the latter. Storing something I don't regularly use has a heavier mental and emotional cost for me than the potential expense of buying it again—or the simple effort of borrowing it from a friend. For instance, after my kids left the baby years, I was tempted to keep our portable crib for when my sister came into town with her baby and stayed overnight. Instead, I decided to give it away and simply borrow one from a friend when my sister visited. In the years since then, we've only needed a playpen twice, and it was no trouble to borrow. I'm

so glad I didn't store this bulky item for years, when it ended up being such an easy problem to work around.

If you weigh the real cost of storing your things and are still unsure about some items, box them up and place them out of sight for a predetermined amount of time, such as six months. Set a calendar reminder so the box doesn't end up indefinitely in the dark recesses of your basement. Once your time frame is up, if you haven't needed anything in the box, send it on its way. (Bonus points if you don't even open it up!)

You can use a similar strategy for clothing. After you've gone through each piece and separated out any pieces you don't love, fit, or you actually wear, you may be left with a pile of clothes you can't decide about. Hang those items up, but turn their hangers the opposite way from all the other hangers in your closet. Once you wear the piece, you can turn its hanger around to match the rest. But if you haven't worn it after a predetermined amount of time (I suggest two months), and the hanger is still backward, commit to passing it on.

## **2. WHAT IF THIS SPECIAL ITEM GETS DAMAGED OR RUINED FROM USE?**

I don't believe our most treasured items are meant to collect dust in a box or a cupboard. What's the point of keeping a significant piece if you tuck it away and then forget it exists? If your grandmother gave you an antique serving dish, wouldn't you rather run your fingers across it and think of her each time you pull it out for a meal?

The difficult truth is that a gifted piece that's meaningful to you will probably not mean as much to your children or grandchildren, because they won't have the same memories of the person who gave it to you. My advice: Use those

sentimental heirlooms now, while you can, knowing that even if they break, at least you used them for their intended purpose and enjoyed their value while you could. The same goes for expensive items. What's the point of buying something nice if you never use it?

If you need permission, consider this your permission to find a new home for an heirloom you don't or can't use—like a vase that doesn't go with your home décor. Storing it away indefinitely isn't better than passing it on to someone (maybe even another family member) who will actually use, enjoy, and appreciate it.

### 3. BUT HOW DO I LET GO OF SOMETHING SENTIMENTAL WITHOUT FEELING GUILTY?

On your minimalism journey, there will be no time when coming back to your values—your *why*—will be as essential as when you're considering sentimental items. Returning to the vision you have for your life and your home will make these difficult decisions easier, because you can ask yourself if each item contributes to your vision, or detracts from it.

When I'm decluttering sentimental objects, I like to remember that getting rid of an object doesn't mean I'm getting rid of the memory or the feeling. Your positive memories are yours for as long as your mind will keep them! And you can pull them up anytime you wish—you don't need the item for that. (Practical tip: Take a photo of the object before passing it on to help that memory stick.)

Barbara Kinsey, a member of my online community, shared with me her beautiful perspective on this stumbling block:

*"I want to look forward instead of backward, to see what's in front of me and to not believe that everything good has already happened to me. Sometimes my sentimental items feel like walls that keep me from seeing what is possible."*

#### 4. WHAT IF MY SPOUSE OR PARTNER ISN'T ON BOARD?

One of life's biggest lessons is that we can't control others; we can only control ourselves. It's incredibly tempting to believe that if that *one* person—your friend, your roommate, your spouse—would just change that *one* thing, everything would be better. I fall into this trap as much as anyone else.

This principle applies as you adopt a minimalist lifestyle. You can't make the people around you take the same path. The good news, however, is that regardless of the way your housemates, spouse, or children want to live, you still get to experience the emotional freedom that comes with minimalism. You don't have to feel burdened by another person's reluctance to join in; you can choose to let go of your expectations and to forge ahead on your own path.

As you begin, focus as little as possible on others' belongings—or their unwillingness to begin a decluttering journey. Instead, concentrate your energy on reducing your own physical, mental, and emotional clutter—and really live the freedom and joy that come with owning less. At the very least you can lead by example. You never know . . . your loved one may be inspired by the lighter, freer you and decide to join in. But waiting for that day will only distract you from your happiness, so keep your eyes—as best you can—on your own lane.

## Your Home Is an Expression of Who You Are

It's so easy to get mired in the details—the exact system you want to use for mail, the precise number of kitchen utensils you want to keep, the quality of each piece inside your closet. But from what I've seen, it's when people get overly bogged down by the details that they lose motivation, backslide, or even give up on minimalism altogether.

The details must be balanced out by your guiding values and your vision. Keep coming back to how you want to *feel* inside your home—and what your home says about who you are.

After all, our homes are about so much more than the stuff they contain. Our homes are the most visual representation of what we want our lives to be. Whether you want a life of adventure and playfulness, or tradition and security, your home is your staging ground. If it embodies what matters to you, you'll build a life that matches it. That's the power of home.







# workspace and career

Janine Bui, from Santa Clara, California, had always been a dreamer. She went to graduate school for biochemistry, planning to spend her career doing rare disease research and making an impact on people's lives. But after she finished school in 2009, the reality of the job market set in and she realized it would be a long time before she could realistically expect to get an industry job doing the research she wanted to do.

The job she settled for was a far cry from her longtime dream, but slowly, she followed her interests and leveraged her strengths within her role, and before long, she discovered that it was the problem-solving—not the particular problem—that really lit her up.

*"I was always talking to colleagues about the challenges in their work and trying to come up with out-of-the-box solutions for them. This eventually led to me proposing, setting up, and running a new facility in our department. I basically just created the thing I was interested in and convinced my boss it was worthwhile."*

Janine found contentment in her own curiosity, instead of clinging to the idea that her happiness depended on her ability to achieve her original vision. While at first glance it may not seem like Janine's career path has a lot to do with minimalism, in fact, it has everything to do with minimalism. Despite less-than-ideal circumstances, she created for herself a career based on her deeply held values: an innate curiosity and a passion for seeing the problems around her and finding solutions for them.

Any of us can apply this same intentionality to our work lives. Our situations may be vastly different, but we can all make small but significant moves to better align our work with our values.

## Reflection

Look back at the value tree you made in chapter 2, focusing on your top three values for your "career" life domain. Write them here, and use them as a guide as you implement the strategies in this chapter.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Take a moment to write in a journal or reflect on the following questions before moving on: How do you want to feel at work? Are you doing work you feel called to do? What's your vision for your career? What's keeping you from feeling the way you want to, doing meaningful work, and creating the career you envision?

## Solutions for a Minimalist Workspace

Think of the strategies in this chapter as long-term solutions. They require effort and intentionality now, but spare us so much time and angst down the road—leaving us with more bandwidth to devote to the things that matter. In our careers in particular, if we can set up our systems to run smoothly and efficiently, we can create more space—physical, digital, and mental—for the work we're *meant* to do.

### *Digital Organization*

"My brain is like an internet browser: nineteen tabs are open, seven of them are frozen, and I have no idea where the music is coming from."

Have you seen a meme like this floating around the internet? To me, it expresses what so many of us are experiencing: We're stumbling under the weight of our mental loads. And when we have too many "tabs" open at once, we're less able to focus, prioritize, and bring our best selves to our work. This meme may have been intended as an

analogy, but it also works in a literal sense. First things first, we're going to shut down some of those tabs.

*“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.”—JAMES CLEAR*

### CLEAR DIGITAL CLUTTER

- Close half of your tabs! Do this regularly throughout your day, or create a personal limit for yourself, such as never having more than four tabs open at once. If you're saving webpages to read later, try a new method. You could pin articles or blog posts you want to read to Pinterest, or you could use a web app (for example, an app called Pocket) to save content and read it later. You could even go as basic as creating a Word or Google document where you keep a running list of links you plan to return to later. (Your internet browser's bookmarking feature can work, too, but I find that unless you're deleting old bookmarks regularly, the list eventually becomes unwieldy and hard to navigate.) However you do it, the point is to practice a principle my mom taught my siblings and me every time she grabbed a toy we were fighting over and set it high out of our reach, saying in a singsong voice, “Out of sight, out of mind!” For almost everyone I've talked to, less digital clutter means a clearer mind.
- Regularly clear the desktop on your computer, keeping only your most used files or folders on it. Save other files under appropriate folders and subfolders. Be sure to label each document clearly so you can easily search for it.

- Scan through your folders and send to the trash any documents, images, and screenshots you no longer need. I try to spend a few minutes doing this monthly.
- Whether on your phone or your computer, open your photo library and select at least a dozen images to delete. Do this weekly to avoid photo clutter. (It's a great thing to do when you're standing in line somewhere!)
- Within your photo library, create albums for images you need quick access to or would like to reference later. Many of us take screenshots of information, but once those images are surrounded by photos of our kids or our food or our cats, they're almost impossible to find when we need them. Albums are an easy solution.
- On your phone, delete apps you don't use and organize others into folders.

#### **BECOME THE BOSS OF YOUR EMAIL (INSTEAD OF LETTING IT BE THE BOSS OF YOU)**

- Unsubscribe from any newsletters and promotional emails you don't regularly read. (All promotional emails should have fine print at the bottom saying, "unsubscribe" or "update your email preferences." Click through and follow the prompts to unsubscribe.) Get in the habit of hitting "unsubscribe" the instant you open an unwanted message.
- Work toward Inbox Zero (an inbox without any new mail) by reading, deleting, and archiving emails. Labeling your emails or filing them into folders can be helpful for very specific projects or topics, but just make sure you're not labeling superfluously, as our goal is to be as efficient with email as possible. Many emails can easily be referenced later by using your email provider's search feature.

- Turn off desktop and phone notifications for new email. Unnecessary notifications are a distraction and erode your ability to focus.
- Fight the distraction of email by scheduling designated time blocks to check email, and not allowing yourself to check your mail outside of those sessions. If you're worried about any pushback to this approach, talk to your manager about establishing best practices. You can also set up a temporary auto responder or even add a line like this one to your email signature: "I check email twice day and will do my best to return your email during an upcoming session."
- Keep it short and sweet. Adopt the practice of sending off a quick reply to any emails that don't need a lengthy response. Start thinking of email more as a messaging service than a snail mail replacement. A good rule of thumb is that if you find yourself spending more than fifteen minutes crafting a single email, pick up the phone instead.
- Utilize the "canned responses" feature of your email service to create email templates for common responses. If you have incoming emails that you usually answer in the same way, save time and brainpower by creating a short reply you can select and send every time.

### *Your Physical Space*

The eye needs to rest. It's why artists and graphic designers work what they refer to as "negative space" into their designs, and why interior decorators intentionally leave some walls empty instead of filling them with artwork and accessories. Similarly, clutter bombards our minds with stimuli, forcing our senses to work overtime. Minimalism—especially in the workplace—is all about giving our

attention to the most important things. Now that we've reduced the digital clutter in your work life, let's move on to physical clutter. Let's allow your eye (and your mind!) to rest.

### PAPER AND PAPER FILES

The principles we talked about in the "Mail and Paperwork" section of chapter 3 apply just the same to the office. You need a system so simple that it becomes a reflex to immediately process any paperwork that comes in. You can (and should!) customize according to your workflow, but as a general rule, I find that the same three categories work for sorting paper at the office as well as at home: "paper to file," "action required," and "unopened."

Once your organization system is established, set up a regular time (daily or weekly, depending on the volume of incoming paper) to take further action on the materials in your "action required" pile. This is great to do during the post-lunch slump or at the end of the day, when your brain isn't as sharp but you still want to tackle something on your to-do list.

### KEEP CLEAR SURFACES

A clean workspace speaks to possibility. It reduces distraction and projects confidence. It sends a message about you—to you.

First, ask yourself what absolutely needs to be on your desk or in your workspace, and what doesn't. Consider books, files, office supplies, Post-its, calendars, coffee cups, food, and even photos. Store only your most essential supplies and current projects on your desk, and utilize drawers and cupboards for everything else.

At the end of every day, set aside five minutes to clear off your work surface. There's something therapeutic about

the ritual of clearing your office space and putting work away. It signals to your brain that the workday is over. In the same way, the ritual of pulling your projects back out each morning signals to your brain that it's time to dive back into work mode.

### BRING YOUR VALUES TO WORK

This is my favorite part of the work chapter, because I love the idea of physically bringing our values into our workspaces. In 2013, LinkedIn published a photo series called "View From My Desk," showing the desks of 50 influential people. Some are minimal, holding only a computer, a bottle of water, and a Homer Simpson figurine. Others are colorful and eclectic—a mix of sports memorabilia, stuffed college mascots, and coffee mugs with witty messages. Arianna Huffington's office is open to the rest of the floor (a symbol of transparency, she says) and brimming with neatly arranged books.

I think sometimes we focus more on what our workspaces are telling others about us than what our workspaces are reminding us about ourselves. Sure, you can use your space to share your personality, from your interests to your quirks, with your co-workers. But why not take it one step further and display your *values*—your purpose for getting up every day and coming into work? These visual touchstones can have a powerful impact on your ability to stay focused on your essentials.

While I am all for keeping workspaces clear, what I think is even more important is knowing yourself and designing a workspace that suits your personality and your values. If, for example, one of your top three career values is "focus" or "efficiency," an organized and systematic workspace will help you fulfill that. In contrast, if "creativity" is one of your top three work values, you might allow yourself more wiggle room. Maybe you'd bring in some artwork or colorful

pens and notepads. Even if your personal space at work is currently a locker or a shelf, how can you make it reflect your career values? The point is, when your workspace reminds you of what you value, you'll stay more motivated to build a career that follows suit.

### Visual Representations of Your Values

Consider adding any of the following to your office area as a reminder of your values:

- A piece of word art with one of your life mantras—or better yet, the three values that guide your career.
- Photos of your family and friends.
- A printout of your value tree from chapter 2.
- A handmade gift from someone important in your life.
- Artwork or photography that represents one of your values, like your passion for nature, travel, or a particular charitable endeavor.

### *Time Management and Productivity*

A true minimalist is someone who knows her gifts and uses them, giving priority to work that aligns with those gifts because that is where she'll make her greatest contribution. A true minimalist knows that no one can do it all; he's given himself permission to prioritize the most important work and to let less important tasks fall as they will.

Use the following strategies to help you prioritize your work and bring more focus to your most important tasks. And if your work happens to be more utilitarian at the moment, please feel free to apply any of these strategies to a project, side hustle, or hobby outside of your workplace.

## 1. ASK YOURSELF WHAT ONLY YOU CAN DO

It may take years of studying yourself to be able to answer this question, but I believe we all have a set of gifts that are uniquely our own—and that we magnify our impact on the world when we discover and use those gifts. If you're searching for your gifts, start by paying attention to the one thing I've found to be the most telling: your energy. You'll know you're working with your gifts—tapping into your unique strengths—when your work is giving you energy, not taking it away.

When you put a finger on the kind of work that gives you energy, you're able to prioritize it and make your greatest contribution within your place of work (and in my opinion, the world as a whole).

## 2. PRIORITIZE YOUR ESSENTIAL TASKS

Invest half an hour into listing out all of your work-related tasks in a typical week. Circle the things that are essential that you do (not anyone else), making particular note of the areas where your tasks overlap with your gifts. That's the work that matters most—and should be given the highest priority week after week.

Next, analyze the list for anything you could remove or simplify. For example, could you let go of a social media account that isn't generating any leads? Is there a weekly meeting that could become a simple email update? Is there something you can easily delegate to someone else? Simplifying your task list and devoting more time to the work that lights you up will keep you focused and aligned with your values at work—and happier and less stressed over time.

### 3. ELIMINATE TIME DRAINS

It takes significant mental acuity to do deep work—which we'll define as any cognitively demanding task. Even the work you find fulfilling and energizing requires tremendous focus and willpower to get into that zone and stay there. Our brains often look for distractions—such as eating, shopping, playing video games, scrolling, or replying to texts and email—to resist getting into that place.

Reduce your susceptibility to these time drains by identifying and limiting them. For three days, monitor yourself during your workday. Every time you flip away from your work and give in to a distraction, make a note of it. At the end of the three days, you'll have a clear picture of your go-to distractions, allowing you to better monitor yourself and to set up some parameters to avoid these time drains. For example, if social media tends to pull you away from quality work, use your phone's screen time monitoring feature to keep track of your time spent there, or download an app that blocks, limits, or tracks your social media use.

### 4. SINGLE TASK

Most of what we consider "multitasking" is actually the brain switching quickly from one task to another—and back again. Researchers call the time we lose between tasks the "switch cost," and although the seconds we lose may seem insignificant, they add up when we're continuously switching between tasks. For this reason, multitasking seems efficient on the surface but actually results in lost time and increased error. Additionally, multitasking uses up oxygenated glucose in the brain—the same fuel we need in order to focus on our most important work.

When do you multitask at work? Do you listen to podcasts while doing your more administrative tasks? Do you chat with co-workers while counting cash at the end of your retail shift? Do you allow notifications to interrupt your creative flow? Save time and devote more focus to your most important work by doing less multitasking—and more single tasking.

#### **5. FREE UP SOME BRAIN SPACE**

There's a reason many Silicon Valley executives wear the same outfit every day. The decisions we make, from how we dress to how we spend our time, wear us down. Researchers have even given it a name: "decision fatigue." No matter how inconsequential the decision seems, fewer decisions means a lighter cognitive load—and more clarity inside.

In contrast, turning something into a habit means putting it on autopilot and freeing up that cognitive load. What can you put on autopilot by turning it into a habit? In your work life, habits could range from the time of day you check your email to the food you eat at lunch to fuel your afternoon. A lighter cognitive load leaves you more space to pursue your gifts.

#### **6. OPTIMIZE YOUR WORKDAY BASED ON YOUR ENERGY**

Do you hit a wall after lunch? Do you do your best creative work first thing in the morning? Or late at night? Whether it means scheduling administrative meetings during your usual afternoon slump or carving out blocks of solo time for your strongest work, be mindful of your typical flow of energy when you plan your days.

## 7. TAKE PURPOSEFUL BREAKS— OUTDOORS WHENEVER POSSIBLE

Although up to this point we've mainly discussed how to get our brains into their "focused mode," our brains have another mode—"diffuse mode"—that also contributes to us putting our best work into the world. In diffuse mode, the brain is free to wander, to daydream. Where once it was thought that the mind essentially shuts off while daydreaming, brain scans show that activity actually increases in some regions of the brain when our minds are allowed to wander. It's why people often get their best ideas while vacuuming, showering, or driving on a long stretch of highway. The brain makes connections when it's set free.

To free your brain, take regular breaks, but be mindful of the quality of those breaks. Anyone who has worked in an office has felt the difference between taking a break on the stiff sofa in the lounge or getting outside for some movement and fresh air. Research supports that one is more restorative than the other, and I believe nature tends to spark better connections as well.

### *Work Relationships*

I believe that relationships are the greatest predictor of life satisfaction. And professional relationships are no exception. Like most people, I've had many different kinds of work relationships. I've eaten lunch day after day with two of the kindest, brightest women I've ever known—the type of people who inspire you to be more than you are. I've listened to others tell unflattering stories of fellow co-workers—or worse, try to pit colleagues against each other. At times, my

only "co-workers" have been other writers and online entrepreneurs, people I've come to think of as close friends but have never met in real life.

The catch here is that while we have general control over the people we choose to spend time with in our personal lives, we don't always have that same level of control in our work lives.

Take a few minutes to think about each of your colleagues and what they bring out in you. Do they inspire you to put your energy into the work that matters most? Do they model the values you want to bring to your career? Or do they tend to complain, distract, gossip, and tear others down?

Although we can't change the people around us, we can take steps toward more fulfilling professional relationships, no matter the situation. If you have a peer, report, or even manager who's detracting from the experience you want to create at work, consider trying any of these:

- Experiment with ways you can bring out the positive in a troublesome colleague. Even the most difficult person can shine under the right circumstances. Maybe your pessimistic peer simply needs you to really hear him, or maybe a co-worker who's always messing around needs to sense that his work is valued by the team. Focus on this person's good qualities, and help him do the same.
- Be willing to have a difficult conversation. You never know what a difference a few words, delivered with honesty and in the right spirit, can make. (And if no change comes of it, at least you'll know you spoke your truth.)
- Practice uncommon kindness. This person may never become easy to work with, but if an ongoing working relationship is unavoidable, better to keep the doors

open through consistent courtesy than to shut them down altogether.

- When all else fails, do what you can to spend more time working around the people who lift you up. Seek out new responsibilities that align you with another team, or even seek out a new role in your organization. Granted, a change like this might not happen overnight, but putting some long-term goals in place to eventually improve your work environment is always a good idea. You have the right to be protective of your time, feelings, and mental space and to be proactive in improving your day-to-day experience.

## Do You Work to Live or Live to Work?

I was sitting in a coffee shop when an older gentleman asked if the seat across from me was taken. The request surprised me, because it was only a two-person table, and other, *empty* tables dotted the floor all around us. I smiled, pushed my laptop to the corner of the table, and invited him to sit. I was torn inside between wanting to get my work done and knowing that a conversation with this sharply dressed grandfather figure might just prove more valuable than the work I'd planned to get done that afternoon.

He joked about how at his age, there was no reason not to ask whatever came to his mind, so he asked about my family, my hobbies, and my work, while also sharing some short stories from his past. As he finished his coffee and gathered up his wallet and keys, he said something that has stayed with me:

“What I wish I'd done when I was your age was zero in on the important stuff. I chased a lot of distractions—

promotions I didn't really even want, long hours that kept me away from home, more loyalty to my boss than to even *myself*. If I could do it again, I'd do it differently."

As he straightened up to his full height and wished me well, I thought about how I had no idea what the inside of his home looked like, but there standing in front of me was a minimalist. Life had given him a minimalist's mindset, even if it had taken him decades to understand.

It's never too late to start doing life the way you want to. I'm not saying you have to suddenly quit your job and start traveling the country in a van (although if that's where your heart is leading you, then by all means, go for it!). But you can make small shifts toward the work/life balance you envision, from taking a class, to putting more energy into your side hustle, to blocking out time to travel, to simply spending more quality time at home—starting today.







# family life

At 11 years old, my oldest son has lost all of his baby chub; he's traded it in for visible ribs and lengthening arms and legs. Recently, I sat in a camp chair facing the ocean, and he stepped in front of me to tell me something. I tugged at his hand, and he tucked himself happily into my lap. (Sadly, this is not a frequent occurrence anymore!)

I stared at the horizon and savored the moment, rolling waves in front of me and my first baby wrapped inside my arms. He didn't stay long, darting off to chase his siblings in the surf. As I felt the cool air rush in where his warm body had just been, I also felt a rush of gratitude for the many slow moments—like this one—that we've shared as a family.

I felt grateful that during my kids' childhoods, we'd prioritized low-key neighborhood play over tightly-run, competitive activities; we'd chosen relaxed family outings in nature over weekends stacked with birthday parties, recitals, and commitments. I knew that our pace wasn't for everyone, but I also knew that it was right for us, and that was all that mattered.

If I could grab you by the shoulders right now and tell you one thing about modern family life, I'd tell you that your family's life doesn't have to look like anyone else's. You don't have to hustle; you don't have to keep up. Every birthday party you throw doesn't need to be a Pinterest-worthy event. Every afternoon doesn't need to be booked with practices and productivity.

You don't have to compete against yourself or anyone else. You can do family life your way—and find immeasurable comfort and relief in knowing that your way is right for you.

## Reflection

Look back at the value tree you made in chapter 2, focusing on your top three values for your "family" life domain. Write them here, and use them as a guide as you implement the strategies in this chapter.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Write or reflect on the following questions before moving on: How do you want to feel as a member of your family? How do you want your family to feel? What's your vision for your family? What's holding you back from feeling the way you want to and achieving your vision?

## Strategies for a Minimalist Family Life

By now you understand that a minimalist life—a minimalist family life, in this case—doesn't necessarily mean stripped to the bones; it simply means a life built on what matters most to you. Once you know your values for your family life, you can use the following strategies to start living out your vision.

While some of the strategies in this chapter apply specifically to those who are raising children, many of them apply beautifully to any form of family life.

### *Your Family's Schedule*

"Hey! It's been a while!" I said to a friend recently. "How are you guys doing?"

"Oh, you know," she answered. "We're hanging on! Work has been crazy lately, and my mom sprained her wrist a couple weeks ago, so I've been trying to get over to see her more. The kids have three sports games this weekend at three different places. Plus, a birthday party for one of the kids' classmates, and my husband and I have to go to a fundraiser Saturday night . . . But you know how it is!"

The thing is . . . I didn't *really* know how it was, at least not completely. Like any family, our family has seasons that are busier than others. We have times when soccer takes the better part our weekends or when my husband's travel schedule leaves me juggling more than usual at home. But

for the most part, we see those seasons through, and then we flow back to our family's baseline: a pace that feels comfortable and balanced.

We live in a culture where our worth seems to be measured by our busyness. And as parents, the message is that if you're not offering your kids everything, you're keeping them from future success. How will they become college athletes if they don't start team play as preschoolers? How will they ever find what they're passionate about if they don't first try every club, sport, and opportunity out there?

I think the problem here is our assumption that *busy* equals *better*. Deep down, what do you really want for your family? A jam-packed schedule, or time to make real memories together? And how about for your children? A prestigious scholarship or a life of meaningful work? An excellent three-point shot or the life lessons you can gain from practicing a skill? Straight A's or the knowledge that their parents love them no matter what?

Take a look at your calendar. In your journal, write down everything in your family's schedule for the next two weeks. Then write down your top three values for your family life. Next, cross off every activity on the schedule that doesn't directly align with one of these values. What does this tell you about how you're spending your time as family? How are your activities and commitments contributing to your values? What do you need to let go of? Resolve to make some changes today.

### *Meal Planning*

For some, slowly preparing a delicious meal is a form of mindfulness, a time when the world stills and all you can hear is the sizzling of minced garlic hitting hot oil. For

others, cooking is a time to laugh and catch up with family members who tend to congregate in the kitchen. And for others still, food is simply something that needs to get on the table.

Wherever you fall on this spectrum, all that matters is that you accept it and embrace it. Know your values, and do what fits. For example, if connection is one of your top three family values, maybe your mealtimes are a beautiful vehicle for that. But if feeding your family feels like a chore more than a gift, you can find a hundred other ways to work connection into your family's routines.

Because this is a book about simplifying, I'm going to assume that you could use some help getting food on the table in a way that doesn't add unnecessary stress to your life. These three simple meal-planning strategies will help ensure that mealtimes support your values, whether by fostering connection or simply not adding to your stress. Try experimenting with any of these separate approaches.

#### **SIMPLE STRATEGY 1: THE MONTHLY PLAN**

At the end of each month, plan a meal for each of the upcoming thirty days. I find it helps to write the meals down on a calendar so you can easily stick to the plan. Evaluate which days of the week you'll have more time than others, and schedule more elaborate cooking for those days—planning to serve the leftovers on a day when your family tends to be busy. For example, cook a big meal every Sunday, and then plan to use those leftovers every Tuesday, your busiest night of the week. At the beginning of each week, look at the next seven meals you have scheduled, and make a grocery list. Try to shop only once a week to save time and money.

A monthly plan takes about one hour at the beginning of the month to create, followed by about 15 minutes each week to write out a grocery list for the upcoming seven days. But this strategy saves considerable time and angst later in the month. And if you save your meal calendars for a time, you'll have dozens of meal ideas to pull from going forward.

### **SIMPLE STRATEGY 2: THE WEEKLY REPEATER**

Using four note cards (one for each week of the month), write down seven different meals on each card—your menu for one week. On the reverse side of each note card, write the grocery list for that week's meals. At the beginning of each week, grab a card on your way to the grocery store, and both your meals and your shopping list are ready to go. This strategy means you'll repeat meals every 28 days—or until you create a new notecard to add into the mix. (I've gone as far as laminating my notecards and keeping them in my purse!)

### **SIMPLE STRATEGY 3: THEMED DAYS OF THE WEEK**

This strategy is a win for parents and kids alike, because everyone knows what to expect each day (and because alliteration is fun!). You can choose any theme and any structure that work for you, but here's the general idea:

Meatless Monday  
Taco Tuesday  
Wild-Card Wednesday  
Crock Pot Thursday  
Pizza Friday  
Breakfast-for-Dinner Saturday  
Soup & Sandwiches Sunday

Now that you've taken a few minutes to think about *how* you want to feed your family, take a moment to think

about *what* you want to feed your family. Flip back to your top three values for your “health & spirituality” life domain and consider where your eating habits are supporting your values and vision for the health of yourself and your family—and where you could make small changes to better support your vision.

### Getting Support as a Parent: Don't Do This Alone

For those of you currently raising families, I don't believe you're meant to do parenting alone. That said, it can also be difficult to build a supportive network during a stage of life when we're most strapped for time and energy.

But think about it this way: How would it feel to trust that your children could play in your neighborhood with other watchful, protective eyes on them? How would it feel to know that help—from a ride for your child when you're in a bind to a gallon of milk dropped off at your home when you can't wrap your mind around taking the new baby to the grocery store—was only a text or a phone call away? More important still, what would it feel like to know that in your lowest moments as a parent, you could show up on a friend's doorstep, no questions asked?

If you want to cultivate a family life based on your values and live at a pace that doesn't feel frenzied, you have to be willing to invest in your village and to allow them to invest in you. Ask a friend or a family member to alter your daughter's dance uniform or bring your son home from band camp. Ask for help, and offer it in return, because a network you can rely on will make such a difference in the kind of family life you can build.

## *Household Chores*

No one wants to spend hours upon hours every week just trying to stay on top of the house. And I'd argue that most minimalists are unwilling to, because they know what matters most to them and want to use their gifts for a purpose much larger than laundry and yard work. Luckily, any of us can take on a minimalist approach to our responsibilities at home, starting with these three strategies.

### **1. OWN LESS—AND SEE HOW YOUR SYSTEMS CHANGE**

A father of two recently told me that he and his wife had done a significant edit of their belongings half a year before.

"I expected to feel lighter," he said. "Less weighed down by our stuff. What I didn't see coming was how much time it would free up—and not just time shuffling our things around and taking care of them, but also time doing laundry, meal cleanup, yard maintenance, and more. Chores that I hadn't previously associated with our stuff."

Living with less means you have less to sort through; your systems become more efficient. Instead of digging through your utensil drawer looking for a certain spatula, you pull it right out, because you only own one. Instead of spending 10 minutes clearing the living room floor before you vacuum, you pick up a couple of things and plug in the vacuum. Instead of re-washing loads of laundry because you went so long without folding it that you can no longer tell what's clean and what's dirty, you have to fold your laundry promptly or you won't have anything to wear. Multiply those small actions by the dozens of times you do them in a week, and your time savings become significant.

## 2. DETERMINE WHAT LEVEL OF “CLEAN” FITS WITH YOUR FAMILY VALUES

It may sound counterintuitive, especially in a book about minimalism, but I think one of the best things any of us can do to increase our contentment at home is to simply decide what level of mess we can tolerate.

Re-read your top three values for your family life and think about how the cleanliness of your home impacts your ability to live those values. For example, if your values are presence, love, and humor, you could ask yourself questions like these: How does the state of my house impact my ability to be present and give love to my family? What expectations could I release in order to better live my values at home? For example, could I accept a certain level of messiness if it means nagging my family less? Could I approach the cleanliness of our home (or lack thereof!) with more humor?

I firmly believe—and any minimalist I've ever met will attest—that cleaning is astoundingly easier when you're living with less. But even within those parameters, it helps to get realistic about how the state of your house affects your ability to practice your values and live your vision. You may find that some chores are simply better left for another day.

## 3. SPREAD THE RESPONSIBILITY OUT

I sometimes think of myself as the center pole of a tent. I can work hard to hold the tent up and spread the fabric outward, but there's no way around it: I can't do it alone. When other poles join in, meeting me in the center and spreading out from there, we can cover much more ground. My influence on my family—and my impact on the world—is infinitely stronger when I welcome help from others.

The other poles holding up *your* tent may be your parents, your partner, your children, your housecleaner, your neighbor, your babysitter, your friend—or any combination of the above. See them for what they're doing, and invite them further into your circle by asking for help when you need it.

If you're a parent, here are a few ideas, as well as my family's simple system, for getting kids more involved in running the household.

- I once heard someone say that if your kid is old enough to operate a handheld device, he's old enough to help with chores. It's amazing what even young kids can do, from sorting laundry to cleaning windows to putting away the silverware after you run the dishwasher.
- In our family, starting around age 3 or 4, we give our kids what we call "daily jobs," which include making their beds, putting away their shoes, and clearing their plates from the table, among a few other small responsibilities. Additionally, we assign each kid at least one bigger job (more as they get older) for the year, such as helping with laundry, taking out the trash, wiping down the table after meals, or unloading the dishwasher. Assigning a job for an entire year takes the guesswork out of chores and prevents any arguing over who's doing what. (A big sanity saver in my book!)
- As long as the kids have been consistently doing their "daily jobs," we also offer about a dozen "money chores," which they can choose to do anytime throughout the week to earn a bit of money.

In my experience, the trickiest part of sharing household responsibility with our kids—or really, with anyone—is deciding what to accept. An 8-year-old is not going to clean the counter exactly the way you would. (Your spouse, for

that matter, isn't going to either!) But more often than not, done is better than perfect, especially when it means you can devote more of your time and energy to the things that really matter.

### *Your Family's Toy Collection*

If you've raised young children, you know what a stumbling block toys can be. No one has the physical and emotional bandwidth to create a meaningful life when they're spending most of their time cleaning up toys.

During my early years as a mom, day after day ended the exact same way: me, exhausted and longing to climb into bed . . . but instead walking around our apartment, gathering the random toys our kids had pulled out, played with for two seconds, and *left in the middle of the floor*. For way too long I accepted this as part of my life, one of the responsibilities that came with raising small children. But eventually, it dawned on me that if I didn't want to finish all of my days collecting Tonka trucks and toy telephones, maybe I didn't have to. This is the approach that worked for me.

#### **1. WATCH WHAT YOUR CHILDREN ACTUALLY PLAY WITH**

I started watching our toddler-aged boys more carefully, paying close attention to the toys that captured their interest for more than a few minutes. I also took note of the toys that they dragged around the house and almost immediately discarded.

Then one night while they slept, I snuck into their room and boxed up any toys that didn't meet my new criteria. (You know you're a parent when you're decluttering with a flashlight in hand!) Our boys woke up to an apartment containing a third of their toys and a mom wondering how soon they'd notice what was missing.

The truth? They barely noticed. If anything, they acted like the few toys I'd left out were new. I compare this to the decision fatigue I experience when standing in front of an overstuffed closet. When you have too many options, it somehow feels like you have none. After our toy cleanse, our kids no longer needed to sift through the toy clutter that had previously been crowding their minds.

For your first toy cleanse, I suggest temporarily holding onto any toys you wonder if your child will miss. That way you have the option to bring a beloved toy back out if your kid keeps asking about it. But after a predetermined amount of time (about two to four weeks), pass the unneeded toys on so they don't become a permanent fixture in your basement or storage room.

After our family's first toy cleanse, I realized that the only toys I'd left out were our building and imaginative sets—the ones our kids could come back to over and over again and engage differently with every time. Wooden blocks, a marble run, LEGO bricks . . . These are the kinds of toys that have provided hours and hours of value to our family.

## 2. ROTATE THE TOY SETS YOU KEEP

I started keeping our toy sets in the top of our boys' closet, leaving one set at a time on the floor of their bedroom. Whenever they were ready for a new set, I'd tell them we could switch it out as soon as they picked up their current set. In a matter of days, I went from cleaning up armfuls of toys every night to cleaning up barely any toys—ever. I found that owning a handful of toy sets was really all we needed, and rotating them regularly made them feel almost new each time we pulled them out.

### 3. SWAP TOYS OUT AS THEY GROW (BUT BE SURE NOT TO KEEP THE OLD ONES!)

We've since added a daughter to our family and watched our three children grow and change in so many ways. We may have swapped out our classic alphabet blocks for a well-loved LEGO collection, and our family of toy ponies for a set of Shopkins, but it's still the same kind of toys that really capture their attention, spark their creativity, and keep their parents feeling sane, all at the same time.

Parent after parent has shared with me how much better their family functions with fewer toys. Their kids fight with each other less, they get more creative with the toys they do have, and perhaps best of all, they know where everything goes and can clean up after themselves without getting lost and overwhelmed. If toy freedom appeals to you, try experimenting with a less-is-more approach.

#### *Leisure Time: Carve Out Time to Just Be*

I've never been on a road trip when I didn't come home with a clearer perspective and a renewed energy for doing my life on purpose. It's like climbing a mountain or taking in an incredible sunset: Time away from the minutia of our lives helps us see the big picture again.

Leisure time as a family allows us to recapture that broader perspective and put into practice any family values that tend to get lost in the shuffle of day-to-day routines and responsibilities. If your family values include beauty and adventure, use your leisure time to explore the natural wonders near you or much farther from home. If you value experiencing cultures different from your own, try a restaurant that serves, say, authentic Peruvian cuisine—or you could save up and travel to Peru instead!

Leisure time offers us a much-needed break from all the doing and the becoming; it gives us the chance to just be. For all the effort we put into living intentionally, both as individuals and as families, I believe we need to balance that effort out with time to just be who we are and enjoy the companionship of the people we love.

Exactly how you work leisure time into your family life will vary depending on your personality, your values, and your season of life. Maybe you prefer to work it into your life organically, because leisure time doesn't really feel like leisure time to you if you have to calendar it in. Or maybe knowing that your family keeps the first Saturday of every month wide open brings you relief during the month, because you know you have some down time to look forward to. Just make sure you don't push leisure so far to the back burner that it never happens for you and your family. You need this time to breathe, relax, and connect.

## Bringing Love and Connection to Your Family Routines

I have a friend who wakes his son up every morning by climbing into bed with him for a morning snuggle—no matter how short on time they are. A longtime reader of my blog tells me she calls out, "Love you more!" every time she closes the door to her mom's assisted living apartment.

Whatever you've chosen as your values for your family, I bet most of us share a common thread: a form of connection, cohesion, unity, and love. According to researcher and storyteller Brené Brown, we are wired for connection.

Whether you're supporting your sweetheart, raising children, caring for aging parents, loving on your grandkids, or anything in between, I hope these small but powerful actions help you work more love and connection into your family's routines.

*“After collecting thousands of stories, I’m willing to call this a fact: A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all women, men, and children. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong.”*

—BRENÉ BROWN

- Regularly tell stories from your life. Childhood adventures and youthful run-ins with the cops. What you thought the first time you saw your spouse. What you felt on your wedding day and the day your child learned to ride a bike. Tell your stories at the dinner table, in the car, or before you say goodnight. Use story to tie your family—past, present, and future—together.
- Refer to your family as a team. Team Williams, Team Rodriguez, Team Russo . . . Call yourself a team, and you'll live like one.
- Use the words “no matter what.” *I love you no matter what.*
- Maximize your time at the dinner table with purposeful conversations. Take turns sharing what you're grateful for or sharing a thorn and a rose (a negative and a positive experience) from your day.
- Keep dating your partner.
- Read aloud to your kids, no matter their age.

- Post your family values where everyone can see them, and make them a part of your daily walk and talk.
- Put down your phone.
- Double the amount of eye contact you make with your spouse, children, and other loved ones. (Better yet, triple it.)
- Have stay-up-late nights, where one kid gets to stay up an extra 15 minutes and enjoy some low-key, one-on-one time with a parent. I suggest doing it on your child's birth date every month. That way you and your child are less likely to forget and more likely to look forward to it.
- Watch your kids or your partner when they're sleeping and then tell them about it the next day.
- Say you're sorry (and mean it).
- When a family member is hurting, try to place yourself in a similar situation from your past and really remember what it felt like to be where they are.
- Write a note of appreciation for your partner and tuck it into their bag before they leave for work.
- Call your parents. Text them pictures of your life. They like to see what you're up to.
- Use a chalkboard, a dry erase board, or even a dry erase marker on a mirror to write encouraging notes and quotes for your family. It's a subtle way to let family members know you're aware of them and their struggles.
- Look for recurring times when you can work a little more connection into your days, like giving your young kids a kiss every time you buckle them into their car seats or greeting your spouse with a bear hug at the end of every day.
- Let your family see you being silly. Sing at the top of your lungs in the car, dance in the grocery store, pull a harmless prank. Model a life of joy.

## Minimalist Families Go Their Own Way

It boils down to this: Minimalist families are families who trust themselves more than they trust the crowd. They aren't afraid to go against the grain, whether it's treating family dinner like it's sacred, refusing to do too many activities at once, being conscious and purposeful with their spending, or dancing to the Michael Jackson song that comes on at the supermarket. They know their values as a family and use them to shape their identities in a profound way.

Knowing your *why* as a family will help you finally quiet the noise around you and instead listen to the voice within.





# finances and budgeting

Tim Jenkins had always thought of himself as someone who didn't need a lot to be happy. In his early twenties, he'd driven to every one of his college classes in an old Volvo that had been passed down to him from an aunt. He nursed that puppy straight through college and the first six years of his marriage, to the point where the driver's side door no longer opened and one of the brake lights had permanently failed.

Wisely, he married a woman who also didn't care much about stuff. They drove paid off cars, owned a modest house just outside of town, and believed in fixing things up instead of replacing them. Maybe it was because of their frugality that they hung onto things even when they shouldn't have. If they paid good money for something (and by "good money," I mean any money at all), they didn't want to part with it. *Besides*, Tim figured, *you never know when something might be useful again*.

When Tim started cleaning out the garage in 2012, he discovered that he and his wife, Emily, acquired way more than they thought—and that they got rid of very little of it. Their garage was full of baby bouncers, collapsed cribs, and piles of onesies, all of which their kids had long since outgrown. *Maybe hanging on*, he thought, *has just become our habit*.

As someone who had always prided himself on not being a material person, he was disturbed by the realization of how much his family consumed. He started seeing the impact of their consumerism, even if it was less than many others'. He noticed the toll their belongings took on their mental bandwidth, their patience, their physical energy, and—on the most basic level—their bank accounts.

At about that time, Tim and Emily heard about a movement of people who were committing to buying nothing new (except for bare essentials, like brake fluid and toilet paper) for one calendar year. They decided to join in, pledging to only shop secondhand and only when necessary.

In the 12 months that followed, Tim and Emily learned that, although they had always valued thriftiness and financial security, they had lost sight of those values over the years.

Luckily for you and for me, a year of little to no spending isn't the only way to find the clarity Tim and Emily arrived at. An open heart and a discerning eye as you examine your finances is often all it takes to start reining in your purchasing.

## Reflection

Look back at the value tree you made in chapter 2. Because “finances and budgeting” isn't one of our five life domains, read over the values you selected for all of the domains, and pull out three words that best fit with your vision for your financial welfare. Write them here, and use them as a guide as you implement the strategies in this chapter.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Write in a journal or reflect on the following questions before moving on: How do you want to feel when you think about your finances? What's your vision for your long-term financial welfare? What's holding you back from feeling the way you want to and achieving your vision?

## Strategies for Minimalist Finances

At first glance, the connection between minimalism and money is obvious: A minimalist spends less and saves more! But beyond that, minimalists get to enjoy the mental and emotional space that minimalist spending frees up, from worrying less about bills and debt to feeling more secure in their financial future.

Most of us, though, weren't born with a minimalist mindset around money—and surprisingly, not many of us were ever taught it. Use the following strategies to change the way you think about your current habits and your future financial welfare.

*“The only way you will ever permanently take control of your financial life is to dig deep and fix the root problem.”* —SUZE ORMAN

### 1. FIND OUT WHERE YOUR MONEY IS GOING

If you don't already keep track of your spending, pull up your last six months of credit card and bank statements, and start a simple spreadsheet. (You can also use a personal budgeting software, like Mint.com.) Create columns for the categories that make sense for you and your family, such as grocery and dining, personal shopping, auto costs, entertainment, medical bills, health and fitness, etc. Go through your statements and enter expenditures under each category, breaking them up by creating a new tab for every month. Total your expenditures up (by month) when you're finished. This exercise should give you a picture of where your money is *really* going month after month.

### 2. ASK YOURSELF IF YOUR SPENDING REFLECTS YOUR VALUES

Think back to your top three guiding values. Let's imagine that two of your top three are adventure and wonder. But when you look at your recent spending, you don't see a single charge for an airline flight or a kayak rental or even a parking fee at a nearby state park. Where's the adventure and wonder you've been craving?

Or let's imagine that two of your top three guiding values are openness and novelty, because one thing you want more than almost anything else is to *experience* life, instead of watching it pass by. But on your credit card statements you see more than a dozen charges for Chinese takeout and movie rentals—movies you watched in your pajamas on your couch.

While there's nothing inherently wrong with a movie in your pajamas (I'm a fan!), tracking your finances can open your eyes to how you *really* spend your time and money—and whether your choices are in line with your values.

### 3. SET A BUDGET THAT SUPPORTS YOUR VALUES

Using the spreadsheet or budgeting software, create a tentative monthly budget for each category you created in step 1. If you've determined you're spending more money than you want to on food, for example, (and very little on new experiences) adjust your food and entertainment budgets to better reflect what you value. For the first month, plan to check your credit card and bank statements as often as possible—at least weekly—to help you stay on track.

Then, for the first six months after you've created your budget, schedule into your calendar a time at the end of each month to review your spending, update your spreadsheet, and evaluate whether the amount you allocated for each category is on target. You may need to adjust the budgets per category as you become more familiar with your needs, your values, and your consumption habits.

Over time, as you practice intentionality with your finances, you'll start to feel the peace of mind that comes from not just living within your means but from putting your money toward the things you really value.

#### 4. KEEP YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE

This, I admit, is sometimes the point where my zeal for budgeting begins to die a slow, sad death . . . And I don't think I'm alone in this. So often we read a chapter like this one (or watch an inspiring TED talk or have a great conversation with a friend who happens to be a budgeting *boss*), and we get all fired up about mastering our spending habits. So we create a budget and maybe even stick to it for a few months. But then life happens, and we lose the fire.

My answer for this obstacle is accountability. But even more than that, it's knowing yourself—or more specifically, knowing what kind of accountability is most effective for *you*. Some people resist being accountable to someone else, whereas others prefer it.

If you notice that you tend to push back against external accountability, such as from a friend or your spouse, look for it inside of yourself by continually coming back to your *why*. Remind yourself of your answers to these questions:

- What do I hope to accomplish or change within myself by living in this budget?
- Why is it so important to me to monitor my consumption?
- What am I trying to prioritize financially?
- What will I show myself if I stick to this?
- What kind of person am I trying to become?
- How will my new habits benefit my family?

On the other hand, if you do your best work when you have someone or something holding you accountable, brainstorm ways you can build that accountability into this process. For some, a recurring reminder in your calendar might be enough. Others might need to get a friend or a spouse on board—someone who will regularly check in with you about your monthly spending.

## 5. PAUSE BEFORE PURCHASING

In chapter 1, under Emotional Avoidance, I talked about how we often use shopping as a way to distract ourselves from our feelings. Rather than feel what we're meant to feel in a given moment, we seek out—whether consciously or not—that dopamine hit we get from strolling through a favorite store or scrolling through a favorite retailer's website.

What if one of the most powerful things you can do to improve your financial well-being is as simple as a pause? What if every time you wanted to buy something, you made yourself wait a day, an hour, or even five minutes? I'd bet your purchases would drop in half, if not more. Next time you go to buy something, even if it's something you think you need, step back, pause, recite your top three guiding values, and ask yourself which one of your values this purchase is serving. More often than not, you'll realize you don't really need the item after all.

## 6. REDUCE UNNECESSARY SPENDING

To me, minimalism isn't synonymous with living frugally (although they often occur in tandem), because minimalism is more about spending your money in ways that feel right to you than it is about saving money all around. That said, adopting a minimalist mindset means becoming aware of areas where you want to consciously spend your money, as well as areas where you want to cut back. I hope the following ideas inspire you to see areas in your own life where you can save your money in order to put it toward the things and experiences that mean the most to you.

- Plan your meals (see chapter 5) to take advantage of grocery sales, minimize trips to the store, and prevent food waste at home.
- Experiment with couponing.

- Schedule online autopay for your bills to avoid late fees (and as a bonus, free up some space in your brain!).
- Use a subscription-based TV service (like Netflix or Hulu) instead of paying for cable. Or try living without TV altogether.
- Attend free events put on by your church or community.
- Spend more time in nature.
- Avoid buying fast food by taking snacks with you when you travel or go on outings.
- Pack your lunch for work instead of eating out or buying food at the cafeteria.
- Check in with family and friends (or even post your request on Facebook) when you need an item, to see if you can borrow or have one for free.
- Organize clothing swaps with friends, for either you or your kids.
- Be more mindful of your utility use.
- Share a car as a couple, or use public transportation more often.
- Walk or bike short distances instead of driving.

## 7. DETERMINE YOUR APPROACH TO CREDIT CARDS, HOME LOANS, AND OTHER DEBTS

How you choose to handle credit and debt is such a personal decision that, rather than tell you how to do it, I'd like to highlight the experiences of two people who have adopted powerful minimalist mindsets regarding debt.

If you feel weighed down by debt, commit now to seeking help, developing a minimalist's perspective on consumption, and actively working to change your habits so that you can pay your debts off and ultimately experience the deep relief of financial freedom.

*"Years ago, my wife and I decided we'd pay our credit card balance in full every month. We use a card that gives us points toward travel, which we love, but knowing that we'll be paying off the balance every month forces us—in a good way—to watch what we spend, because if we don't have the money, we won't be able to pay it off, and there's no way we're breaking our decade-long streak!"*

*—Steven N., Toronto, Canada*

*"In my twenties I developed some pretty poor money management habits. I opened all kinds of store credit cards and was constantly getting hit with late fees or overdrafting my checking account. When it finally got so bad that I had to move back in with my parents at age 31, I knew something had to change. I canceled my credit cards and only let myself use my debit card. I also turned off overdraft protection, so if I tried to spend more than I had in my account, my card would get declined. Even now, three years later, I won't let myself open a credit card. While I know that many people do fine with two or three credit cards, I know that I need simple. By only using my debit card, I can see all my transactions in one place, and for now, this feels right for me."*

*—Maren S., Columbus, Ohio*

*"My background is in accounting, so while I'm conservative with my day-to-day spending and choose to almost never carry consumer debt, I own a few rental properties—all of which are mortgaged. In each case, the rental rate covers the mortgage payment, and I make sure I always have enough in savings to float a property for up to six months if it were to go unrented for some reason. I'm comfortable with home loans when they support my long-term financial wellbeing."*

*—Andrew J., San Jose, California*

## There's No One Path to Financial Freedom

As you can see from the examples I shared, there's no one path to minimalist finances. One minimalist could have his home paid off but always keep a loan on his car, because cars are his passion. Another minimalist could live in a true "tiny home," with a shed out back to store her well-loved, well-used (and not cheap) art supplies, because painting is *her* passion. One minimalist family might decorate sparingly, buying the best pieces they can afford—and little else. Another minimalist family might choose to shop almost exclusively secondhand and to decorate their home with meaningful trinkets they pick up on their travels.

This brand of minimalism isn't a one-size-fits-all equation. It's about making financial decisions with intention, instead of by default—spending your money on what is necessary and important to you, and forgetting the rest. With this approach, we each gain the space to live our own values. When you understand that minimalism can look different for everyone, you begin to release judgment and instead offer others love and respect no matter where they are in their journey. Now that we've explored the magic that happens when your finances and your values are aligned, let's dive deeper and explore a minimalist's mindset around shopping—an action that plays a leading role in our ability to live with less.

## Strategies for Minimalist Shopping

I walked through the box store like I did every other week, using one hand to keep the toddler from escaping the cart's

safety buckle and the other hand to grab what we needed and throw it in—all while fielding question after question from my then 4-year-old son.

“Mom, can I pleeeeeease get a new swimsuit today?”

“Mom, how about these flip-flops?”

“Oooh, Mom, I need these Ninjago LEGOs!”

*So many wants!* I thought.

As I walked toward the grocery section of the store, I looked down at my cart and suddenly evaluated its contents with fresh eyes. Children’s pain reliever, double A batteries, three boxes of tissues to donate to our son’s preschool classroom. Those were fine, but what about the new hair product I’d throw in just because I’d seen someone talk about it on Instagram? Or how about the after-Easter clearance decorations I’d picked up? Sure, those cute polka-dotted mason jars were from the dollar section, but did I really even have a use for them?

How could I expect my 4-year-old to know the difference between needs and wants—and to be judicious with our money—when I was barely practicing it myself?

Most of my impulse buys went back that day, and that particular Target run became one of the guideposts on my path to a minimalist lifestyle. Now that we’ve explored the magic that happens when your finances and your values are aligned, let’s dive deeper and explore a minimalist’s mindset around shopping—an action that plays a leading role in our ability to live with less.

*“If we can’t be happy with what we have right now, how will we ever be happy with more?”*

## 1. HARNESS THE POWER OF STRATEGIC INCONVENIENCE

For many years, the dating website eHarmony required its users to fill out a 150-question survey before joining, stating

that the process was key to their success rate for long-term relationships. This laborious signup process, designed to help secure great matches for their users, naturally weeded out people who weren't willing to invest 30 minutes of their time into making a potential love connection.

Before you start worrying that I'm trying to marry you off, let me ask this: Is there a way we could use eHarmony's strategy of inconvenience to help us keep our shopping in check?

A reader recently told me that her best solution has been moving to a town with nothing more than a Dollar Tree and a mom-and-pop grocery store. The nearest Target, she said, is almost an hour away—inconvenient. Other (less drastic) measures include canceling your Amazon Prime subscription so you actually have to pay attention to shipping charges; changing your driving route to work or school so you no longer pass the store that always calls your name; or canceling your store credit cards so you no longer earn points or get their mailers.

Even the smallest inconvenience can hold us back. Use it to your advantage.

*“One thing that continually astonishes me is the degree to which we’re influenced by sheer convenience. The amount of effort, time, or decision making required by an action has a huge influence on habit formation. To a truly remarkable extent, we’re more likely to do something if it’s convenient, and less likely if it’s not.”* —GRETCHEN RUBIN

## 2. REDUCE YOUR EXPOSURE TO ADVERTISING

We've already touched on how pervasive—and how effective—advertising has become. It's also made shopping infinitely more convenient. If you do a search for, say, cross-country skis or cordless vacuums, you'll start seeing skis and vacuums pop up on Facebook, the header ads on the websites you visit, and the in-feed ads on Instagram—and across any of the devices you use. On top of that, when a price gets reduced on one of the items you've looked at, you'll know within minutes by way of the ads you see, and we all know how hard it is to resist clicking through when you see a slashed price.

The obvious answer here is to reduce the amount of advertising you see. The less obvious answer is *how* to go about that. Try experimenting with the following:

1. Unsubscribe from brand email lists. The (unfortunate) power of those "20% off!" coupon codes cannot be understated!
2. Install an ad blocker to reduce the amount of advertising you see while browsing online. This idea is controversial because many small businesses and solopreneurs rely on the income they earn from third-party advertising, so an alternative is simply being more selective about the websites you visit. If you find that the advertising on a site you visit frequently is disproportionately influencing your consumerism, take a break from that site.
3. Unfollow any social media influencers who make you feel like what you have is not enough—or who continually share products and post sponsored content with the hope that you'll click through and buy.

4. If your budget and your personal values allow, upgrade your subscription-based entertainment accounts (like Pandora, Spotify, or Hulu) to the ad-free plans.
5. Consume less media in general, and read more books, which are ad-free!

### 3. TRY A SPENDING FAST

If you've tried—without much success—to reduce the amount of shopping you do, or if you're struggling to stick to your category budgets, a spending fast might be the clean break you need. The parameters are yours to shape; you can choose how long you want to do it and exactly what kind of shopping you want to fast from.

One reader told me she does a spending fast every time her husband goes out to sea. She makes it a game for herself to see how little she can spend for the month he's away. Another said he does a spending fast every time he's saving up for a big purchase, like a new piece of furniture or a mini-renovation within his home. The fast from all other purchases allows him to reach his goal dollar amount much quicker, and it saves him from putting the expense on his credit card.

Yet another reader, a musician living in Sweden, told me she recently fasted—much like Tim and Emily—from all new purchases for an entire year, only spending money on essential toiletries and experiences, like travel.

*"The small debt I had disappeared. I didn't worry about needing new clothes for events. I wore jeans and a black top for everything except my brother's wedding, where I wore a dress I already owned. I found I was far less concerned with appearances; I stopped judging people to be similar to me*

*just because of what they wore. As such, it was the year my social life took off. I introduced myself to new people. I went traveling for gigs with new friends of all ages. Maybe best of all, my hiatus from shopping freed up so much time! I no longer spent hours deciding what to wear before an event or scrolling through a sale every time a retail email arrived. I learned how much time we waste making unimportant decisions and buying things that ultimately don't matter."*

*—Erin Edwards, Stockholm, Sweden*

#### **4. THINK OF YOUR "CLOSET AVERAGE"**

This concept has stuck with me ever since I heard it shared by Sherry Petersik, of the well-known "Young House Love" blog and podcast. Sherry keeps a minimal wardrobe, only owning pieces she thinks of as 10 out of 10 for fit, quality, and her personal aesthetic. When she considers buying something new, she asks herself if the new piece will keep her closet average at a 10—or bring it down. If she likes the piece but doesn't love it, rating it at a 7 or 8, it will lower her average, and her goal is to keep her closet average at a 10.

While most of us aren't currently working with a 10-out-of-10 closet average, I've found this strategy powerful no matter what kind of purchase I'm considering or where my "average" currently falls. If I want to raise the average of my closet (or my kitchen appliances or my linen collection) over time, not lower it, I'll purposefully invest in quality over quantity.

#### **5. PRIORITIZE QUALITY OVER QUANTITY**

I was getting ready to leave the country on my own for the first time when my grandma took me to a classy department store to pick out a pair of shoes.

"These?" I asked, with doubt in my voice.

"Yes!" my grandma answered, with the spark in her eye that I'd seen all my life. "*Those.*"

She was right; the pair of shoes I held in my hand offered the perfect combination of comfort and style. And the brand had a reputation for making shoes that would last. But the price printed neatly on the soles of the shoes? That was more than I was used to spending.

My grandma insisted that I shouldn't go to Europe without a pair of reliable shoes—shoes I really loved. She bought me those shoes that day and, without knowing it, forever changed the way I shopped. I slowly began buying less but buying what I loved—and pieces I trusted would last.

Would you rather own three shirts you bought on clearance but will fall apart after a few washes . . . or one well-made staple that you'll love for years? Would you rather buy makeup you can grab at any convenience store . . . or makeup you know wasn't tested on animals and is free of harmful substances? Would you rather buy a blender with mediocre reviews and end up needing to repair or replace it in a matter of months . . . or a blender with top-notch ratings and an endorsement from a knowledgeable friend, even if it means spending more up front?

Buying the best isn't right for every situation, but when your purchases align with your values, you'll find yourself gravitating to quality over quantity more often. In most cases, you'll save money, reduce waste, and free up mental space by taking this approach.

## **6. MAKE PEACE WITH NOT HAVING THE NEWEST AND BEST**

Though this strategy may seem to contradict the previous strategy, what ties them together is intention. In one area of your life, you might intentionally choose to buy the best you can afford (thereby raising your "closet average"). In

another area, you might intentionally choose to be content with what you have. Both are minimalist practices, and it's up to you when and where you apply each one.

What makes this strategy so hard to practice is that it requires us to let go of what others think. Your co-workers may misjudge your financial footing when you pull up every day in a car you've owned since 1998. Your children may, at some point, feel a little embarrassed because they live in an older neighborhood while all their friends live in the brand-new development three streets over.

A friend once told me that one of his favorite feelings is walking into a shop or a restaurant and sensing that the staff and patrons don't think he belongs there. I'm sure my jaw dropped a little when he told me this, because most of us—including me—don't particularly enjoy feeling out of place. When I asked why, he answered that each of these moments is an opportunity to practice contentment and a sense of alignment that comes from within. When you know your life matches your values, it's easier to let other people's perceptions fall to the side.

## 7. VALUE THE BASICS

When you're continually focusing on your material wants and needs, you lose touch with your ability to see beauty in the small things. The way the air smells first thing in the morning when you leave your house. The soft pink shade of the sky out the kitchen window as you do the dinner dishes. The sound of your partner rolling in the trash bins (so you don't have to) at the end of the day . . . The power of nature, the connection of human touch, the satisfaction of a meal shared with people you love . . . These are the ever-present basics that get pushed out of our attention when we're pre-occupied with the things we want to buy.

## 8. PRACTICE GRATITUDE

For those of us who have always turned to shopping—good ol' retail therapy—as a source of comfort and pleasure, I'd like to propose a deceptively powerful replacement: a regular gratitude practice. The emerging research on the effects gratitude has on the brain—from stress relief and improved sleep, to a decrease in anxiety and depression symptoms—is fascinating.

But what I find most compelling in relation to our consumption is the simple truth that both activities—shopping and practicing gratitude—release a burst of dopamine, the neurotransmitter in the brain that's activated when something good unexpectedly happens. While shoe shopping may sound a bit more appealing than sitting down with a gratitude journal, if you challenge yourself not just to do it but also to really lean into those positive feelings, the resulting flood of happiness will last much longer than the rush you'd have gotten from a new pair of shoes.

On top of that, if you keep practicing gratitude daily or even weekly, the positive effects will only multiply. For example, the brain has limited attention, so if you're focusing on what you're grateful for, you'll naturally crowd out your more negative thoughts. Additionally, the brain is constantly looking for things that prove what we already believe to be true. (It's called confirmation bias.) So, by regularly scanning your life for the good—the warmth of your heater, the shelter of your umbrella on your walk home—your mind will find even more good for you to appreciate.

Which would you rather experience the ripple effect of—a regular gratitude practice, or a frequent shopping habit?

## When Your Values and Shopping Habits Align

By halfway into their year of not buying anything new, Tim and Emily had stopped shopping (even at thrift stores) as a form of stress relief. As Emily said, when you know you won't be buying anything there isn't much of a point. By the end of the year, they had decluttered every room of their house, one by one, and felt—in their own words—"a million times lighter."

Where once they had thought of themselves as frugal, they now thought of themselves as *conscious* (and a bit frugal, too, because some things never change). They could finally see the bigger picture of their consumption—the social, environmental, and emotional cost. And they certainly weren't complaining about how their personal finances had changed in that year. Their choice to purposefully under-spend, to buy only the essentials, resulted in a noticeable spike in their kids' college accounts and their own retirement funds, which has given them a much more powerful form of stress relief than going to the store ever did.

Even better, after years of feeling inexplicably "off," Tim and Emily were now experiencing the comfort and confidence that came from knowing that their spending habits were in line with their personal values. Their life as a whole had completely changed, all because of one choice: the decision to change their relationship with money.





# time and time management

It's funny what the memory chooses to keep and what it allows to slip away. I can't remember the topic of the lecture or even the name of the course; I can't picture the features of my professor's face. But I distinctly remember the way he rested one arm on a desk and leaned in when he said it. To him, and I'm sure the rest of the class, it was only a passing comment, but it stands out in my memory like a football player in a chorus line.

One of my fellow students had said something about being busy, and the professor replied, "You guys think this is busy. But just wait. This is only a *taste* of busy."

Internally, I balked at what he'd said. I was working, taking a heavy course load, applying for a grant, getting ready for a summer in Africa, and trying to make a bit of room for a social life. *This is legitimately busy*, I thought. *He just doesn't remember what it's like.*

It turns out, he wasn't wrong.

That *was* busy, but that kind of busy was almost entirely of my own creation. Since then, I've learned that the deeper we wade into adulthood, the more we have to navigate the needs of others as well as our own. We have friends and family we want to support; churches, schools, and other organizations to volunteer for; and bosses and colleagues to be responsible to. For those of us who have kids, we also have the physical, mental, and emotional needs of *each child*. Cumulatively, that is a lot of people to tend to . . . a lot of needs to meet.

It's easy to fall into autopilot as you take these needs on, one by one. Swing by the dry cleaners, pick up the groceries, fill the prescriptions? Check. Research the best acupuncturist in town? Your boss asked, so . . . Check!

Then, a few years—or decades—into doing life this way, you look around and realize you've been so consumed with meeting the needs of others and checking off all the to-do's that your time no longer feels like it's really yours. You've parceled it out to everyone and everything around you. You've started saying yes by default and stopped living your days with intention.

My purpose with this chapter is twofold: to encourage you to take back your time and to offer strategies to help you figure out how.

## Reflection

Look back at the value tree you made in chapter 2. Because "time" isn't directly one of our five life domains, read over the values you selected for all of the domains, and pull out three words that best fit with your vision for how you want to spend your time. Write them here, and use them as a guide as you implement the strategies in this chapter.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Write in a journal or reflect on the following questions before moving on: How do you want to feel about how you spend your time? What's your vision for your use of time? What's holding you back from feeling the way you want to and achieving your vision?

## Over-Committing to Others and Under-Committing to Ourselves

When your manager asks one person on your team to stay late and everyone suddenly looks out the window or at their shoes, are you the one who raises your hand? When someone asks you to lend a hand to a cause that isn't your own, do you agree even though your heart is telling you something different? Do you tend to say yes when you should say no because you're worried about what someone else will think?

Too many of us are over-committing to others and under-committing to ourselves. Let's start listening to the voice inside. Let's stop living at a frantic pace if our hearts

are pulling us toward a slower, more focused—and ultimately, more impactful—way of life. Let's start honoring our own needs for rest, self-care, and balance. Let's find the courage to live the lives we were *meant* to, not the lives others expect of us. Let's recommit to our own vision and mindfully use our time to help us get there.

## Strategies for Minimalist Time Management

No one can decide how to use your time but you. No matter how many needs you feel like you must meet each day, no matter how many to-do's you want to cross off your list, it's up to *you* to decide.

### 1. RECLAIM YOUR TIME

It's time to stop bouncing from one task to the next without first asking yourself *why* you do what you do. It's time to stop letting yourself believe that you're at the mercy of everyone else. If you're busier than you want to be, own your role in it. After all, *you* are in the driver's seat of your life. Make a commitment to take back your time.

### 2. PRIORITIZE. PRIORITIZE. PRIORITIZE.

Minimalism isn't possible without strategic prioritization. In fact, minimalism *is* strategic prioritization. We prioritize everything from how we spend our money to the relationships we invest in to the work we feel called to do. But our time might just require more prioritization than anything else, because how we spend the minutes of our days is really what shapes the trajectory of our lives.

Identify your values, keep them at the front of your mind, and give priority to the things that support them.

### 3. SAY NO

*“Only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter.”* —GREG MCKEOWN

No matter how many times I say it, I've never completely lost that sinking feeling that comes with saying no. I want to help people out, to be a team player, to contribute to the cause, and honestly, to be liked.

But what's stronger than those feelings is my desire to be true to my core. I want to live the life that feels right for me.

Think of all the times you've said yes when deep down, you knew the answer was no. Is it uncomfortable to give someone a no? Absolutely. But what I try to remember is that in the end, the dissonance I always feel when I give a yes that should have been a no is far more uncomfortable than an honest no.

So I work hard to think of saying no as saying a bigger yes. A yes to slow afternoons with my kids, a yes to my creative interests, a yes to weekends of exploring as a family. A yes to my values. A yes to the peace and alignment that comes when I'm living by them. A bigger yes.

### 4. PLAN LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT (BECAUSE MAYBE IT DOES)

When it comes to planning, my personality is an odd hybrid (and I'm guessing I'm not the only one). On the one hand, I thrive off structure and feel the most calm when I know

what's coming. But on the other hand, I want to ignore my calendar altogether and just be free.

Strangely, minimalism helps me satisfy both. When I prioritize the things I care about and carve out time for them, I have direction, structure, and clarity. But I also have room—in my schedule *and* in my heart—to wander, to dance, to flow, and to follow my curiosity.

Make the time to plan, and you'll have more time to be free.

The system I've settled into over the years is taking half an hour each Sunday to review my work schedule and our family calendar for the upcoming week, communicate any help I might need from my husband or babysitters, and update my ongoing to-do list. (I keep a running list of to-do's in the Reminders app in my phone, but you can keep this wherever you like.) When I've planned well (and I'm not claiming that I always do), my life flows better, and I'm able to find pockets of time to just be.

## 5. CHOOSE YOUR TOP 3 TASKS FOR EVERY DAY

Before you start each day, try choosing your top three tasks for the day. Some days they may be concrete ("schedule the plumber"), and other days they may be more transcendent ("give my family big greetings and goodbyes today").

As I mentioned, I keep an ongoing to-do list. Writing my to-do's as soon as I think of them means I don't have everything rattling around in my brain at once. But focusing on only three key tasks per day enables me to finish each day satisfied that I devoted energy to the most important things (no matter how many or how few to-do's I checked off).

## 6. PRACTICE POWER HOUR

Another way to carve out more time for your highest priorities is to consolidate tasks by regularly practicing Power Hour. (This strategy is also called “chunking.”) I find this especially useful for the tasks I always seem to procrastinate on, like scheduling dentist appointments, calling the DMV (so painful!), processing mail, signing the kids up for their activities, or cleaning out my inbox.

Set a timer for one hour and see how much you can hammer out in that Power Hour. Checking off the nagging tasks that have been taking up precious space in your mind is liberating.

## 7. IDENTIFY—AND REDUCE OR ELIMINATE—YOUR DISTRACTIONS

Interestingly, sometimes we use the very tasks I listed in step 6 as our biggest excuse for not getting our more meaningful work done. Let’s imagine you have a 2,000-word essay to write, and even though it’s on a topic you’re passionate about, you’re struggling to dive in. As we discussed in chapter 4, it takes significant willpower and focus to get into the frame of mind for cognitively demanding work. Suddenly, calling the dentist seems preferable—and obviously, still “very important” (or so we tell ourselves).

This is another reason Power Hour is so effective: When your minor to-do’s have become distractions, you can use Power Hour to clear them out and free your mind of the mental space they’re taking—leaving you with more space for the bigger task at hand. Alternatively, you can remind yourself that those nagging tasks can wait until your next Power Hour—and that your priority in this moment is your more important work.

Beyond work and to-do's, what are the things that distract you from what you really care about? Are you crashing with Netflix every night when what you really want is the energy to cuddle and talk with your partner? Are you opening a time-sucking app on your phone whenever you have a few free minutes—when what you'd really rather do is open your Kindle app and do some quality reading?

Other common distractions include using social media, playing video games, watching sports, eating or drinking, creating or spreading drama among your friends and family, shopping (online or in-store), responding to texts and email, and more. It's not that all of these are "bad" in and of themselves; it's more that minimalism means learning to choose what you want *most*, not what you want *right now*.

Next time you notice yourself turning to a mindless distraction, take a mindful pause—much like I've encouraged you to do before you buy something. Ask yourself, *Is this really something I want to prioritize, or is there something else—something better—I'd rather do with my time?*

#### **8. ASK YOURSELF, "WILL THIS MATTER IN A YEAR?"**

One way to identify whether something is a distraction is to ask yourself, "Will this matter in a year?" So many of the things we get hyper focused on—the showiness of your kid's science project, your fixation with those last five pounds, the agony of choosing the right shade of white paint—won't merit even a second thought a year from now.

When I find myself hung up on something, this question helps me see whether the issue at hand really deserves so much of my time and attention. And if I realize it doesn't, it helps me loosen my grip and redirect my energy toward something that's more in line with my values and vision.

## 9. PRODUCE, DON'T WORK

Imagine you have something you want to get done. Maybe you've been wanting to revamp your resume, figure out your family holiday card, or make a photo album. For the sake of this example, let's imagine that you have a side hustle—a passion project you work on in the fringe hours of your life.

Now notice the difference between these two mindsets:

I'm sitting down to *work on* my business.

I'm sitting down to *produce* for my business.

You could *work* endlessly on your side hustle, popping from one thing to the next. A half-written blog post here, a social media post there. But what if you sat down to *produce* something for your side hustle? If you gave yourself two hours, could you record a podcast episode, write a chapter of your e-book, or schedule your social media shares for an entire month?

Or in the case of the holiday card, can you see the difference between sitting down to "work on" your card and giving yourself one hour to "produce" a card you love?

## 10. SOLVE, DON'T FIX

Minimalists are more than willing to invest time and energy in something *now* if it will ultimately serve their long-term vision—just like they're willing to spend more money on a quality item rather than replacing a less expensive item over and over again. This is the difference between fixing a problem in the moment and solving it for the long term. A fix is quick but—too often—temporary. It's like patching a bike tire instead of replacing it altogether. A solution may take more effort up front, but it saves you in the end, because a solution lasts.

Years ago, I read about a woman who applied the “solve, don’t fix” concept to her kids’ morning routine. She worked hard to teach her kids a specific order for their before school routine (get dressed, have breakfast, pack lunches, brush teeth, etc.), so that eventually her kids could wake up, get ready, and even load themselves into the car without her help. Over time, this saved her hours and hours of corralling, coordinating, and cajoling. Her mornings ran like clockwork.

What are you continually fixing when—with a little more effort up front—you could find a more lasting solution?

## 11. ALLOW YOUR MIND TO WANDER

I know I don’t need to tell you what a monumental problem digital distraction is. I don’t have to tell you, because you *experience* it. You experience it every time you look at your phone when you’re just walking from one room to another in your house. You experience it every time you have a conversation with a friend whose attention is split between you and the notifications coming through on his watch. You experience it every time you try to get a piece of information through to your kid but are met with glazed eyes because of the tablet in her hands.

You know this. But my question is, do you know the value of allowing your mind time to wander? Have you ever thought about how much less you daydream now that you almost always have a phone in your hand, earbuds in your ears, or a laptop at your fingertips?

As we discussed under Take Purposeful Breaks in chapter 4, when we daydream, the brain shifts away from the task at hand and begins turning over the heavier problems of our lives, such as relationship issues and career direction. It’s like tossing a smooth river rock from one hand

to another and back again while you take in the scene in front of you.

By pushing back against our device addiction we give ourselves not just time—the minutes we would have lost to our screens—but also an improved ability to solve our problems.

My only caution is this: Try not to let your mind wander along those all-too-familiar negative pathways that I described as emotional clutter in chapter 1, as this only carves those thoughts deeper into your subconscious. When you find yourself thinking familiar, damaging thoughts, experiment with the meditation technique of gently guiding your thoughts (without judgment) to a more positive alternative. If the negative thoughts persist, leave daydreaming mode by finding a constructive activity that requires your full attention.

## 12. INTENTIONALLY CREATE WHITE SPACE IN YOUR DAY

Anne McOmbler watched from the car as her husband and young children crossed the yard and climbed the steps to their front door. They were inside with the groceries before she'd even made it past the sidewalk, but today she didn't mind being left behind; she wanted to do it on her own.

With a crutch in each hand and a leg often dragging behind, she slowly made her way into the house—proud, in the end, that she hadn't needed a piggyback ride up the steps.

My friend Anne hasn't always relied on crutches, a walker, or a wheelchair. But with a broken connection between her brain and body, her steps now are much slower than they used to be—and, out of necessity, her life has followed suit.

Yet as much as she wrestles with feeling discouraged by her limitations, Anne says she is uncovering something freeing.

*"While I inch along—step by step, crutch by crutch—instead of feeling left in the dust while life passes me by, I'm starting to realize that the life that's left when it's pared down to the essentials is beautiful. Not because it's glamorous to only have the energy for one outing a week, to be unable to drive, and to need help getting in and out of the shower. But because there's space to soak in the things that I've chosen to hold onto. If rushing is keeping you from this kind of savoring, maybe it doesn't have to be."*

It's amazing how often it's our bodies that first clue us in to our need to slow down. Sometimes it's as small as tension in your shoulders, ongoing exhaustion, or a one-off migraine, and other times it's as serious as a formal diagnosis or a mental health breakdown. Whatever messages your body is sending you, try to listen. Your soul needs to breathe, but how can it when you're constantly running from one thing to the next?

## Maybe You Have All the Hours You Need

If you were to open my journal right now and flip through its pages, you'd see one simple line scattered throughout the entries.

"I have all the hours I need."

It's a thought I've been practicing for more than a year now, because it feels infinitely better than my old, ugly alternative: "There's never enough time."

Because for as much as I try to eliminate nonessentials and focus on what matters most, I also know that many of my circumstances are outside of my control. But the one thing that is completely mine is the way I think.

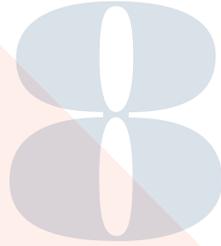
Time management strategies will take you a good distance, but a shift in your mindset will take you the farthest.

Who knows? Maybe you'll find that time stretches and expands in unexplainable ways when you stop believing there isn't enough.

## 7 Ways to Create Moments of White Space

1. The next time you stand in a line, whether waiting to use the copier at work or for a cashier at the grocery store, resist the urge to pull out your phone. Instead, take moment to be present. Take a few deep breaths; notice the sights, smells, and sounds around you; or let your mind simply wander.
2. Practice the same mindful presence while driving a familiar route in your car. Turn off the radio, the podcast, or the audio book, and simply be where you are.
3. Disable the notifications on your phone and notice how much time you get back in your day.
4. Don't schedule errands or appointments so close together that you have to rush between them and don't have time to process one thing before starting the next. Whenever possible, give yourself some breathing room in between.
5. Try waking up before your family, so you can savor a few minutes of quiet and prepare your mind for what's ahead.
6. At the end of your day, write three things you're grateful for in your journal. It's the perfect way to reflect on the day you've had and to train your mind to look for the beauty in the middle of your regular life.
7. Create a soothing wind-down routine to practice every night. Even if you're short of time, I bet you could spend a few minutes before bed rubbing lotion into your hands, diffusing an essential oil, drinking a hot cup of herbal tea, writing in your journal, or doing anything that feels like self-care to you.





# relationships

"Good morning!" I said to my friends as I nudged a cycling bike in line with theirs. "How are you guys doing?"

"Well, I haven't cried yet, so there's that!" said one.

"Me either!" said the other, laughing. I climbed onto the bike and told them our gym/therapy session was still young and that anything was possible.

For all of my adult life, I dreamed of friendship like this. I craved friendship where I could bare it all and still know without a doubt that I wouldn't—I *couldn't*—scare my friends away. There on the bikes in the gym we've supported each other through the stress and joys of marriage and parenting, the struggle to find purpose in the minutia of our lives, the mental and physical health challenges of loved ones, and more.

Have you ever wondered if your need for connection was different—deeper, maybe—than most of the people around you? The Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the longest-running studies of adult life ever done, shows us that this need is universal. Researchers with the study have tracked the lives of 724 men since 1938, regularly checking in with them to ask about their health, their work, their home lives, and more. Over time, the study has expanded to include the men's wives and children, which number up to 2,000 collectively.

Fascinatingly, this massive volume of research shows that what makes a satisfying life isn't your job title, income level, career satisfaction, religious affiliation, the number of children you have, or any combination of the above. It's the quality of your *relationships*.

In his viral TED talk, Robert Waldinger, the fourth director of this multigenerational project, shared the three main lessons the study has revealed:

1. People who are socially connected live longer, healthier lives.
2. It's not the number of relationships but the quality of those relationships that matters.
3. People who feel they have supportive friends and family stay mentally sharp longer than those who don't.

*“The clearest message that we got from this 75-year study is this: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.”* —ROBERT WALDINGER

To me, these revelations fit beautifully with the framework of minimalism, rounding out the picture we’ve painted so far in this book. Yes, applying intention to our physical and mental environments will improve our lives. But failing to devote that same level of intention to our relationships would leave us so far short of the life we’re trying to create. In this chapter, we’ll evaluate the current state of your relationships and discuss how to move away from those that aren’t serving you and how to deepen and enrich the ones that are.

## Reflection

Look back at the value tree you made in chapter 2, focusing on your top three values for both of the domains that involve relationships: (1) family, and (2) community & relationships. Write them here, and take a few minutes to think about how your relationships do or do not support your values. Use these values as a guide as you implement the strategies in this chapter.

Family:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Community & Relationships

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Write in a journal or reflect on the following questions before moving on: How do you want to feel in your community and in your relationships with others? What's your vision for your relationships and your connection with your community? What's holding you back from feeling the way you want to and achieving your vision?

## Minimalist Strategies for Relationships

A minimalist approach to relationships doesn't mean slashing your friend group in half or snubbing new friendships because you don't have room for anyone else. What it does mean is purposefully investing in relationships that will contribute meaningfully to the joy-filled life you're working so hard to build.

### 1. TAKE A RELATIONSHIPS INVENTORY

Think of the relationships that currently play a role in your life, and write them down in a notebook or journal. Write down the names of friends, co-workers and colleagues, fellow parents, and people you've connected with online but have never met in person. Include your parents or step-parents, your siblings, your in-laws, your partner or spouse, any extended family you regularly keep in touch with, and, of course, your children if you have them.

Loosely classify each of these relationships as supportive, neutral, or toxic. Granted, relationships ebb and flow

over time and don't always stay in one category forever, so to contain the scope of this exercise, focus on the current state of each relationship.

- Supportive: The people in your life who support you and receive your support in return.
- Neutral: People with whom your exchanges neither improve your emotional wellness nor take away from it.
- Toxic: People who drain your energy and continually leave you feeling worse about yourself or your life.

In my experience, one of the quickest and, surprisingly, most accurate ways to assess a relationship is to simply ask yourself how you feel after interacting with a particular person. Do you leave feeling inspired, lightened, or fed in some way? Or do you leave feeling drained, depleted, and less than?

## 2. PROTECT YOUR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING BY LETTING GO OF TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS

If you've identified a relationship that drains you, further indicators include feeling that you never do anything right, that you can't truly be yourself, and that you aren't allowed to grow and evolve as a person. This is because toxic individuals have a need to keep the people around them small and manageable, which helps the toxic person feel important, needed, and in control. I believe this stems from deeply rooted insecurity, a sense of inadequacy that they can never seem to shake. And remembering this allows me (when I'm in a good headspace) to feel compassion toward them.

But that doesn't mean any of us should be willing to sacrifice our self-worth for one of these relationships. That cost is just too high. Letting go of a toxic relationship can range from distancing yourself subtly to severing contact

altogether, depending on the severity of the toxicity and its impact on you.

My simple plea is that you don't let a toxic relationship carry on as it is. Think about it this way: If you're unwilling to keep a room full of clutter because it's not serving you, how can you allow a harmful relationship to take up space in your heart when its effects are so much more insidious? Removing yourself from a harmful relationship doesn't make you a bad person; it means you're strong. It takes incredible courage to stand up for yourself and vigilantly guard what you let in. You deserve to be treated with respect, and at the end of the day, only you can ensure that happens.

### 3. STAND CONFIDENTLY IN WHO YOU ARE (AND ALLOW OTHERS TO BE WHO THEY ARE)

One of the phrases I say most to my kids is, "We can't control others; we can only control ourselves." As hard as it is, we are the gatekeepers of what we let in. When my son tells me what another boy said to him during school lunch, or when my daughter breaks down in tears because a friend put down her cartwheel skills (I'm grateful our problems are still small!), I often remind them of what water looks like when it beads and rolls off a duck's back. *What others do and say, I tell them, has everything to do with them—and nothing to do with us. We can let it roll off; we can choose what we want to make it mean.*

The beauty is that each time I reiterate this message to my children, I internalize it a bit more. And I need it as much as they do, if not more. I've had a wide open heart my entire life; my mom always says that even as a toddler, I'd break into tears if either of my parents raised their voice with my older siblings. For the sensitives and the intuitives, it can take a lifetime to put a filter in place. But it's worth the

effort, and the moments when we manage to stand securely in who we are teach us why.

*“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”* —ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

This lesson is especially powerful in the relationships that aren't serving us but are difficult to cut out. Maybe you have a sister-in-law who passively aggressively puts you down. Or maybe your director at work seems to want to keep you in a box. Even if you limit your contact with these people, chances are they will still be in your life in some way. If this applies to you, consider these steps for interacting with difficult people:

1. Instead of continually dwelling on how you wish this person would change, drop the drama and allow. It's amazing how much smaller a problem can feel when we stop resisting it. (I hope it goes without saying that this applies to difficult people—not abusive people.)
2. Make a genuine effort to see the best in this person, and stop making their behavior mean something that it may not. A reader named Jill once told me that her mom was continually making religious comments meant to imply that Jill should be practicing the family's faith. But what if instead of attaching an implication to her mom's comments, Jill decided to assume they were pure and simply reflected her mom's devotion to her faith? What if Jill stopped making these comments mean something about *her*? Imagine how their relationship could change.

3. Stay centered by practicing excellent self-care. If you're not actively caring for yourself, you won't have the presence of mind to do any of the previous steps. Practice yoga, take a long bath, meditate, write in a journal, get good sleep, live in the spirit of mindfulness. You'll be better equipped to deal with the challenging people in your life.

#### 4. DON'T CARRY WHAT ISN'T YOURS

While most of us recognize the influence difficult people have on our lives, I think we're slower to notice when we're carrying the negative feelings of people we love. Growing up, if my parents felt tense about money, I felt tense. In my married life, when my husband has been stressed, I've been stressed. As a mom, when my kids have felt nervous about a new situation, I've been nervous with them. I've allowed myself to mirror the feelings of those around me.

But there's freedom in accepting that we're all on earth to have our own experiences. When our loved ones are hurting, we can climb into the trench with them; we can remember our darkest moments in order to be with them in theirs. But we don't have to stay in the trench for so long that we forget why we climbed in in the first place. We don't have to carry another's feelings as if they're our own. In the end, who benefits if you're both stuck in the trench with no way out?

I believe that part of a minimalist's journey is learning to recognize what's yours to carry. Imagine the relief of accepting that you can be who you're meant to be, and everyone around you—from your partner and your in-laws to your children and your boss—can be who *they* are meant to be. In my own life, this helps me stop judging others or expecting things of them. It helps me take responsibility for my own alignment and joy. My story intersects with many others,

but it's still my own to write. And the same goes for the people around me.

## 5. PRACTICE QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Imagine it's the last day of your life. You've had a good run, and you feel proud of the legacy you're about to leave behind. If you were to look in the eyes of the people surrounding your bed, who would you see?

This is a question I once heard posed by Bob Goff—former U.S. diplomat, loving husband and father, believer in whimsy and delight, and best-selling author of the book *Love Does*. Bob figures that in those last moments, you could fit eight people around you, give or take. Not 20. Not 50. Not the 600 friends you have on Facebook. *Eight*.

Who are your eight? The exact number may be different for everyone, but take a moment now to write down in your journal the names of the people you could imagine around your bedside in the last moments of your life. Reflect on how much these relationships mean to you.

While I still have time, my eight are the people I want to invest in. I want to love them well and trust that they'll love me well in return. In the end, I can't think of anything that matters more than that. *Quality over quantity*.

## 6. DECLUTTER YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA

Take the principles we've discussed so far, and apply them to the people you follow on social media. It's not another person's responsibility to post content that makes you feel good about yourself; it's *your* responsibility to filter what you view. Ask yourself if each person you follow is supporting your values and your sense of self, or if their content is neutral or even damaging for you. You have no obligation to follow anyone, even someone you know and care about in real life, if what he or she posts takes a toll on you.

I was possibly the last generation to go through high school without social media. Facebook was coming onto the scene in my last couple years of college, but Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest were still years away from becoming mainstream. There was no such thing as being an “influencer” or a YouTube celeb. Maybe it was because I grew up without it or maybe it’s just my nature, but I’ve always been extremely (if we’re being honest, ruthlessly) selective about the people I follow on social media.

A couple of years ago, though, I was following a woman whose message and mission resonated with me. I enjoyed watching her Instagram stories and appreciated the fact that she cared about authenticity and didn’t try to paint herself as perfect. For every styled-out photo she posted of herself holding a cup of coffee with beautifully manicured hands, she shared one of herself with a toddler on her hip and not a hint of makeup on her face.

But gradually her profile became more and more stylized, and her message of self-acceptance evolved to a message of hustling for your dreams. *If you want something*, she taught, *don’t let anything stand in your way*.

I still enjoyed following her, and in the strange way that only social media can foster, I’d become invested in her family’s success and happiness, even though I’d never met them and most likely never will. Unfollowing her would feel like stopping a movie in the middle; I needed to know the ending.

But I knew I was comparing myself to her. I was comparing my sweatpants on a Tuesday to her designer denim on a Saturday night—my quiet, slow-burning desire to make a difference in the world to her spirited determination to knock on every door and break through any ceiling, no matter how high.

So I unfollowed. I let go of her outcome and refocused on my own. I didn't blame her for the unfavorable comparisons I was making in my own mind. I know her message will influence many people for good, and that is a beautiful thing. But it wasn't for me anymore, and it's my responsibility (not hers) to monitor what I let inside.

Like my relationship with this influencer, digital relationships can affect us just as much as the relationships we have in real life. Take a good look at who you're following online, and make sure that the messages you're taking in are in line with your values and your vision for your life.

## 7. NOTICE THE GROWING SPACE IN YOUR HEART

Have you ever cleaned out a closet and then felt like you could take on the world? That rush of accomplishment is so powerful that it can't help but spill over into other parts of your life. You may find yourself suddenly applying for a promotion, planning a trip, starting a book club, or finally going to that meet-up you've had your eye on for ages.

That energy is a beautiful thing. But I think that after the rush settles, after the newness of each cleared space wears off and you adjust to your new (minimalist) normal, something even more profound may unfold: You might just find more space in your heart.

I know that the times when I'm living closest to my values are the times when I'm most able to look into my children's eyes while they tell me their stories, to see my husband's intentions instead of looking for his faults, and to sense a friend's pain before she's even opened her mouth. As you continue your minimalist journey, watch for the space it frees up in your heart, and use it to further strengthen your closest relationships.

## 8. OFFER THE WORLD YOUR TRUEST SELF

A woman recently emailed me saying she struggles to make friends. She feels like she's on the periphery of a few different friend groups and knows she's been excluded from some text threads and get-togethers in the past. She said she's friendly with many but close to no one.

I don't know this woman; I don't know her age, her job, her family situation, or even what country she lives in, so I can't presume to know anything about her ability to connect with others. But the question for her that immediately popped into my mind was this: Do you let the people in your life see the real you? Do you share more about yourself than favorite restaurants and surface-level interests?

Because the thing that takes any relationship to a deeper level is one person's willingness to share an element of vulnerability. The pang of shame you feel when you miss something at home because you've chosen to be at work . . . The hopelessness you felt when your last relationship ended in heartbreak . . . Your fear that your colleagues are going to realize you're not cut out for the job.

It's a risk, of course, because there's always the possibility that the other person won't return your emotional bid and share something of their own—as well as the smaller potential that this person could hurtfully use what you shared. But going deeper in a relationship isn't possible without it, and in my opinion, the risk of living your whole life without close relationships is far scarier than the risk of one small rejection.

At its root, minimalism is about authenticity—authenticity over image. When the majority of our actions are in line with our values, we develop an inner assuredness that transcends the ego's concern with appearance. Simply put,

when we feel good about how we're living, we can bring that peace and confidence to our relationships. As you apply the strategies in this book and take on a minimalist's perspective, I hope you'll find it progressively easier to share your truest self with the world and to nurture relationships that are built on authenticity.

## People Are Not the Same as Things

The problem with applying minimalism to relationships is that relationships are complex and the work of tending to them is lifelong. You can clear clutter once and potentially never have to clear that same thing again. But relationships? Relationships are never finished.

Another difference is that where it's perfectly justifiable to get rid of your unused things, it's so rarely justifiable to rid your life of a person. Aside from truly toxic people, as we discussed, the vast majority of the people in our lives deserve so much more patience and so many more second chances than our things. After all, love wouldn't really be love if it were always easy to come by. Love challenges us.

We've all had friends who don't offer us as much as we offer them. In my early twenties I met a woman named Catherine who was new to my area. I introduced her to my friends, convinced her to join my gym, and picked her up for social events. I listened to her talk about her upbringing, her job, and the end of a difficult relationship—and supported her, as best I could, as she got back on her feet and set up her own apartment.

Catherine slowly found her stride and created a friend group different than my own, but we stayed in touch through the following years. When we finally moved apart, I realized

that in our years of friendship, the relationship had never swung the other way. It had never been *her* picking *me* up for a girls' night or even just a Target run in our pajamas. It had never been me talking while she listened. I'd always expected that one day it would happen, but it just . . . didn't.

But even if I didn't get what I might have wanted out of that relationship, in a way, I got something better. I got the chance to practice love and kindness when it wasn't returned in quite the way I thought it would be.

The overall philosophy of minimalism—intentionally investing in things that contribute meaningfully to your vision for your life—applies to relationships just as it does to the things we buy and the way we spend our time. But while the philosophy is the same, the *practice* is different, because people deserve to be treated differently than our things.

In the end, what we gain from our relationships might not be what we want or expect, but the lessons shape us—and our lives—in powerful ways.







# continuing your minimalism journey

I am so proud of you for coming this far with me on the journey to a minimalist way of life. Together we've tackled your home, your career, your family life, your finances, your use of time, and your relationships. That's a lot of ground, and I hope you'll celebrate the internal shifts you've made by reading—and I hope, by living—this material. Congratulations!

In this chapter, I offer a handful of strategies to help you stick with this practice. But even more than that, I hope to send you off with the essence of what a minimalist life is—and the knowledge that this lifestyle is yours to claim, no matter where you are in the journey.

## Tips for Staying the Course

As passionate as you might be in this moment about adopting a minimalist lifestyle, that fire will sometimes flicker and lose its strength. And that's okay. It doesn't mean you've failed—not even close. When you anticipate that setbacks are part of the process, you're less likely to abandon your vision and resume the cluttered, frenzied lifestyle you've tried so hard to escape. Obstacles are normal. Discouragement is a part of the process.

But this lifestyle—with so much potential to open you up to joy—is worth fighting for, so let's choose a few concrete things you can focus on *today*.

### 1. CHOOSE 1 TO 3 HABITS YOU WANT TO PERMANENTLY CHANGE

Having a clear vision is essential, but it's really your daily actions—your habits—that determine your ability to bring that vision to life. There's power in breaking old habits that weren't serving you and forming new ones that will reinforce your minimalist way of life. To affect small and hopefully long-term change, choose one to three minimalist habits right now that you want to zero in on. Here are a few examples:

- Enjoy a screen-free period of time before bed (60 minutes, 30 minutes, 15 minutes—whatever suits), to give yourself more white space.

- Stop your practice of shopping whenever you feel a negative emotion.
- Only check email twice a day, at designated times.
- Only use social media between certain hours. For example, 8 to 9 p.m.
- Invest in your relationship with your mom (or any other loved one) by calling or visiting her once a week.
- Leave your phone in another room during a certain part of your workday.
- Require yourself to wait at least five minutes before making any nonessential purchase.
- Choose your top three tasks before starting every day.
- Only buy pieces for your wardrobe that you consider a 10 out of 10. Pass on everything else.
- At the same time every weekend, plan your meals and do some food prep for the upcoming week.
- Every time someone asks you to do something, if your gut doesn't offer an immediate and enthusiastic yes, answer with this: "Thanks for asking! Let me think about it and get back to you." (This will give you some time to process the request and decide if it aligns with your values, before you give a firm answer.)

## 2. FOCUS ON REPETITIONS

There's no magic number—no number of days it takes to officially form a habit. But there are repetitions. In his book *Atomic Habits*, James Clear argues that it's our repetitions that change us. He says:

*"When you think about your goals, don't just consider the outcome you want. Focus on the repetitions that lead to that place. Focus on the piles of work that come before the success. Focus on the hundreds of ceramic pots that come before the masterpiece."*

Whatever habits you've chosen to focus on, each time you do one "rep," imagine yourself adding a tally mark to a chart in your mind. (Or better yet, track those repetitions on paper so you can see your progress.)

Every time you call a friend instead of logging onto your favorite retailer's website, add a tally mark. Every time you have a Sunday evening planning session for the upcoming week, add a tally mark. Every time you put an item you no longer use into your give-away bin, add a tally mark. With repetition, our actions become habit. And intentional habits—habits that work *for* you—drive you further into a minimalist lifestyle and free up the bandwidth for you to tackle your higher priorities.

### 3. WHEN YOU FALTER, PUT ALL YOUR ENERGY INTO YOUR NEXT ACTION

Setbacks are inevitable, but it's what you do next that matters most. Sure, you hit a stressful season of your life and coped by quitting your decluttering efforts and continually prowling Amazon deals—or whatever your particular situation may be. Let yourself feel the disappointment, but then you have a choice to make. You can choose shame and self-loathing; you can allow yourself to believe you've failed. Or you can recognize the setback, accept yourself as human, and direct your thoughts and energy to your next steps. For most of us, the second option is much harder, because it goes against the way we've trained our minds, but it's also the quickest, surest—and healthiest—way to get back on track.

### 4. CELEBRATE SMALL MILESTONES

I know a family that celebrates *everything*. They treat every milestone, big or small, like it's just as deserving of a

celebration as anything else. In the dozen years I've known these parents and their growing kids, I've seen them celebrate the end of final exams, the first college acceptance letter that came in the mail, the first day of a new job and the last day of an old one. In the midst of their celebrating, I've also seen them experience loss and heartache, like all of us do. But I've noticed that the way they mark time, no matter what they're going through, makes life feel that much more special—even precious.

What have been the milestones so far on your minimalism journey? Have you blocked your favorite retailer's website? Have you started waking up half an hour before the rest of your household? Did you make a shift in your career to a role that's more in line with your values? Life is meant to be celebrated. And when we take satisfaction in our progress, it motivates us to keep it up.

#### 5. CONTINUALLY RETURN TO YOUR WHY

Every time you feel your willpower waning, return to your *why* to bolster it again. Document your progress by taking photos or making a small photo book. Talk through your vision with your spouse or a friend. Write in your journal about the moment that first started you on this path. Write about why you want to live this way—to remind yourself that you really do.

## To Change Your Behavior, Change Your Identity

Confession: Before writing this book, I thought of myself as an "aspiring minimalist." I joked with friends or family about how my "minimalist ways were showing," when I refused to

let my kids do two sports at once or when I got caught with yet another load of donation items in my trunk. But I would never have called myself a true minimalist because the term felt too black and white.

I didn't think I qualified.

But while writing this book—and thinking about this topic so much that it has started to consume even my dreams—I decided that minimalism isn't a diet that you're either on or you're off. It isn't a white room with nothing inside it but a potted succulent and a piece of art. It isn't a capsule wardrobe or a clutter-free junk drawer or a tidy toy collection made only of hand-carved wood. It isn't a club with a rigorous screening process and a secret handshake once you're in.

Instead, minimalism is a frame of mind. It's a decision to slowly, over the course of months and years, work toward a life that fits. A life that matches who you are inside—and somehow makes you even *more*.

And most importantly, minimalism is an identity that is yours (and mine) for the taking.

At the deepest level, to really change your behavior—from your spending habits to how you manage your time to the state of your relationships—you must change your *identity*. Choose today to take on the identity of a minimalist, instead of always aspiring to be one. Claim this identity as your own, celebrate the highs and accept the inevitable lows, and watch your life change from the inside out.





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