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simplify your life

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Introduction

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction
—Newton's 3rd Law of Relativity

We are currently seeing a strong trend towards simplification and downsizing of our lives after years of materialistic living. Perhaps it was the downward spiral of the economy in the early 21st century that caused this equal and opposing reaction. Or, maybe it is coming about simply because we are wising up—that having a lot of stuff doesn't make us happy. In fact, it does the opposite. It jams up our happiness factor. It clutters our homes and minds.

You don't have to be invited to star on *Hoarders* to question the amount of stuff you are hanging onto. Too much stuff becomes clutter when it gets in your way—in the way of understanding your finances, in the way of locating important computer files or literally in the way, as you trip over stuff when you get up in the middle of the night.

So you'd like to simplify your life. But where should you start? Some people never get started because they are overwhelmed by all of the excess in their lives. Everywhere they turn is more stuff—in their inbox, in their computer files, in their closets... everywhere. But you have already started the process of simplifying your life by picking up this eBook! In it, you will find tons of practical suggestions of ways you can make life simpler and less cluttered.

The Power of Simplification

Most of us have started simplifying our lives and environments at one time or another but have given up because getting rid of things made us feel emotions we didn't want to feel. These feelings could include anger at ourselves for the money we wasted on products we have never used or guilt about getting rid of something because it was a gift from someone we love. Everyone feels these types of emotions when decluttering—it's not just you.

In 2012, Yale University released their findings on how purging tangible objects affects us on an emotional level, and they will no doubt surprise you. They discovered that there are two parts of the brain—the anterior cingulate cortex and the insula—that react to psychological pain and conflict but are also stimulated when the individual is told to get rid of possessions that they are emotionally connected to. These are the same parts of the brain that react when an addict has a craving, so it can truly be intense. The stronger the conflict of emotion on whether or not to trash an item, the stronger a reaction neuroscientists see in those two parts of the brain. So, if you've felt that giving up some of your stuff is painful, it truly is! However, science has also proven that it is totally worth enduring the pain of letting stuff go to refresh your life!

Physical clutter creates all types of problems for our brains. Have you ever needed to buckle down and get something done, but found that you felt the compulsion to tidy up your work area first? Although this could be seen as a way to procrastinate getting the work started, it's even more likely that your brain just couldn't deal with the clutter your eyes could see as you tried to work. This is even truer if the project was complicated or you had negative thoughts and feelings about completing the task. (Completing tax forms comes to mind.)

When we have a cluttered environment, our brain is constantly distracted by it—the bills stacked where you can remember to pay them, the overloaded trashcan waiting to be taken out or the huge to-do list that sits in front of you can all be

dividing your brain's attention and making it just that much harder to complete the task at hand.

Disorder impacts the brain in many different ways, including:

- Distracts you from the task you need to be focused on
- Keeps you thinking about future tasks that need your attention
- Causes additional stress by overwhelming your senses, causing your body to release cortisol, the stress hormone
- Constrains your brain's ability to process information
- Increases procrastinating on taking action
- Decreases performance and productivity
- Restricts your ability to be creative or think outside the box
- Decreases your memory
- Keeps you from living in the moment, which decreases happiness and life satisfaction

But if you think that it's only physical clutter that negatively impacts our life and work, think again. In our digital age, we have almost constant non-physical clutter demanding our attention. All the notifications from social media, email and text compete for our attention during every waking hour of the day. Add to that our e-Calendar sending out reminders and the thousands of computer files most of us have, and it's a wonder we get anything done at all!

But just because we live in a materialistic world, full of electronic gadgets that beep and tweet at us, doesn't mean we can't simplify our lives and declutter our living space! In fact, it's *because* of those things that we find ourselves in need of taking the leap and paring down our possessions and other external forces that distract us from living happily in the only moment we have—this one.

It's time to ask yourself if a temporary feeling of opposing emotions is worth having long-lasting contentment, better memory, more productivity, less stress

and more focus. Hopefully, you say yes! If so, keep moving through the book to glean smart, practical ways to rid yourself of the physical, mental and emotional clutter so you can simplify your life.

Simplifying Your Surroundings

You've decided you want more relaxation and contentment in your life and are ready to roll up your sleeves and declutter. Great! But, where should you start? Different organizational gurus have different opinions on this, but ultimately, you need to decide what will work best for you. Some say you should plan a declutter and organization battle from start to finish, while others say just get on with it and start with the area that causes you the most stress.

Depending on your level of clutter and disorganization and the amount of time you can dedicate to the task all at once, you may not be able to have an epic decluttering race. But don't let that keep you from getting started. Just like most things in life, once you get started the biggest hurdle is over. It gets easier as you go along. In fact, decluttering feels great! As you move things out and determine a specific place to keep the items that bring you joy, you will start to feel lighter and more relaxed in your space—your mind doesn't have to work as hard because there aren't distractions in every direction. Whew, what a relief!

So first, decide when you will start and what area you will tackle first. Do you want to take a long weekend to push through it and just get it done? Or are you going to work in spurts of time that are blocked out specifically for decluttering? Next, set up stations to put items that you no longer want to keep—one for donations, one for stuff to sell and one for trash. Try to keep these piles contained and out of the way so you don't start feeling overwhelmed while weeding things out. For example, if there's a large closet you don't use much or a space in the garage you can use to house the items you are going to get rid of, clean out that area first and then put the boxes and bags labeled for the different stations in that area so you aren't tripping over them all the time.

One other quick tip: Create a "Maybe" station for those items you aren't sure about. This is a good space to keep those things which your emotions are tug-of-warring over...part of you wants to keep something out of sentimentality or

because you might use it someday, while another part of you just wants it out of the house. Give yourself the mental space to consider further by placing it in the “Maybe” pile and then ruminate over the idea as you declutter other areas. You may end up with more of a “Maybe” pile than any other, which should tell you something—that you need to get a little tougher on your criteria for keeping things. Once you’ve built up your decluttering muscle and are already feeling the positive effects of having less stuff in your environment (which happens almost immediately), you are likely to go through the “Maybe” box more ruthlessly than you would have before.

Another way to deal with this type of pile is to decide to box up all of the stuff you are unsure about and seal it up. Then write a date on the box, for 3 weeks, 3 months or a year ahead. If you haven’t needed or wanted the items in that box by that date, donate the whole box to someone *without opening it*. It’s important not to open the box because you will end up with more decisions that simply stall your organization action plan. More than likely, you won’t even remember what’s in the box once the date arrives. Even if you decide to have a marathon decluttering, it’s a good idea to choose the area that is most congested or makes you the most frustrated and take it in hand first.

Decluttering isn’t difficult, but it can seem that way because of the emotion we attach to items. Psychological studies show that we buy based on our emotions, so before we even have that new item in our home, we are emotionally attached to it. So be ruthless in getting rid of stuff you don’t need or you no longer love but be kind to yourself when you feel uncomfortable feelings, like guilt, anger or frustration. Decluttering is easier when you use common sense actions and compassion towards yourself for buying or keeping things that no longer serve you. Below is a list by room or area of your environment that you can consciously declutter. You will no doubt add to the list, but this gives you a place to start.

Declutter your Kitchen

Go through your pantry, cabinets, fridge and freezer—Throw out anything that's past its sell-by date or freezer burned. Set aside non-perishables that you don't want, but that are still good to donate to a local food pantry. Now, organize each area logically so that you can easily find things. That way, you'll be able to quickly see what you need while making your grocery list—you won't end up wasting food by double or triple purchasing what you already have.

Go through your cabinets and remove all dishware, silverware, plates, and bowls—Clean each cabinet and then replace only the items that are free of nicks, chips, and cracks and that you use regularly. Trash the damaged items. If you haven't used an item recently, add it to the donate pile or in a few cases, put items, such as fancy wine glasses, on a shelf that is out the way of the daily items. That way you will have more space and those glasses won't be in the way during your daily meal creating. Oh, and that special occasion glassware and china? Donate it. Seriously. How often do you use it? Either decide to use it for everyday use because you just love it, and it brings you joy, or get rid of it.

Take everything out from under your kitchen sink—Wash it and then replace only the items you really use. Most people keep cleaning supplies in that area, so keep the most-used supplies, such as a general cleaner, cleaning powder, trash bags, dishwashing detergent and the like, but trash anything that is almost empty or solidified and unusable. Add any products that you've purchased but not used to the donation pile. If you have extra sponges and rags, get a small container and place them in there so they stay organized. If you have more than will fit in the container, get rid of them appropriately.

Declutter your Closets

Go through your hanging clothes—You finally got your dream walk-in closet, but it's become a jungle of unused, bulky items you aren't sure what to do with. First, pull everything out of closets that aren't clothes and put them aside. Then, pull out any clothes that don't fit, have stains or holes (you *know* you have some) and all the ones you bought but regret or don't like to wear. Add those to the appropriate station—donate or trash. Go through the stuff that was in there but isn't clothing. Some things you probably don't even recognize. Get rid of it if that's the case. Anything you need to keep will find a new home in a different, more sensible location as you declutter the rest of the house.

Now look at what's left. Lay out all the clothes on your bed and mix and match outfits. Now pare down based on a core wardrobe. Keep 1 pair of slacks or pants of each type: business, business casual and casual and color: navy, black and tan, for example. Next, match tops that go with each pair of pants, narrowing it down to only your favorite 2 or 3. Put that crazy colored ones that you can't find pants to match in the donate pile and let it be someone else's headache. Finally, rehang your clothes so that each core color and/or type of outfit is together. This will save you loads of time when you go to get dressed each morning.

- **Organizing tip:** Once you've started to gather things that need to be kept together, head to the local dollar or craft store to buy containers in varying sizes. You don't have to spend a lot of money on storage containers, especially if they aren't going to get moved around. You may want to pick up a nice basket or two to store similar items that you want to keep together and handy in the living room or bedroom. Once you have these, you'll be able to more easily organize the objects you are going to keep.

Open your utility, coat and linen closets and try not to shriek—You will probably unearth some things you forgot you even had. Not a problem. Pull out anything that is being stored in that space that doesn't really belong. For example, sweeper

attachments that you have no clue how to use in the coat closet. Put all that aside and focus first on the items that *should* be there:

- Coats—Keep only 1 coat or jacket for each season for each person in the household. Donate all others.
- Blankets—Keep only those you use or enjoy. If you have a lot of house guests, you may need to keep more, but if not, donate all the extra throws and blankets that are rarely, if ever, used. Getting rid of extra, bulky blankets and storing them in an organized way will free up a lot of additional space where important items you want to keep can be kept out of the way.
- Towels—Keep your best, favorite towels. But only keep 3 or 4 towels per household member. You are clean when you get out of the shower, so reuse towels once or twice before throwing them in the wash. This cuts down on how many you need to store. Do the same thing with hand towels and washcloths. Donate any unnecessary linen.
- Sheet sets—Keep only 2 sets of sheets per household bed, perhaps a light set for summer and a flannel set for winter. Simply wash and put the appropriate set back on the bed. To store them, fold the top sheet, fitted sheet, and one pillowcase neatly, and then put them inside the other pillowcase. This contains a lot of mess and creates extra space in the linen closet.
- Miscellaneous—Now's the time to look at the other items that you have had stored in these closets. In many cases, if you are honest, you are keeping most of them for "just in case". If you've never used an object or don't even know what it is, pitch it or donate it, depending on the case. Dump old cords to long-gone electronics, sweeper attachments that have you puzzled and mismatched gloves in the trash. No, you will never need them, figure out what they do or find the missing one. Be ruthless and brave!

Declutter your Bathrooms

Open your medicine cabinet—First, take everything out and immediately throw out anything that is out of date, sticky, messy or just plain gross. Wash the shelves off and then replace only those items that are used often and you want to keep handy, like a razor, Band-Aids, and aspirin. The stuff that you don't use that often, but need to keep on hand can be stored beneath the sink or in the cabinet above the toilet. This gets the things you rarely use out of your way so you don't have to fumble around to find what you need.

Clear out all of the stuff under your bathroom sink—Clean off all the shelves and while you are waiting for them to dry, decide what items you really want to have down there. You can throw out out-of-date medications and other products that are almost empty or are congealed to the bottom of the bottle. Get a couple of those little containers you picked up at the store and organize the things you need to keep close at hand. Make sure to put most used items, like toilet paper and washcloths towards the front, and extra bottles of shampoo and lotion in the back so they won't be in the way.

Go through the bath products in your shower—Really, how many bottles of shampoo do you need in there? And how many times have you gotten irritated because you picked up every other bottle except the one you wanted? That's what I thought. Any products that you don't use because you don't like them, either pitch them or if they are completely new, donate them or give them to a friend who might enjoy them. Any that are extras that you want to keep, but don't need in the shower, dry them off and put them in the storage area under the sink. That will keep them out of the way, yet where you will have them when you need them.

Chapter Takeaways

When you start to feel overwhelmed with the decluttering project, remember that your goal is to *simplify* your life. The fewer things you have, the less time you have to spend cleaning and maintaining them. Keeping that outcome firmly in your mind can make the task easier to bear. Here are some other ideas to keep in mind as we move to the next topic:

- There will be emotional resistance once you get started. This is natural and to be expected.
- The reward for decluttering and organizing your stuff is a simplified life full of contentment and clarity.
- Start with the area of your house that causes you the most stress.
- Decide if you want to deal with clutter as a sprinter or a long-distance runner—all at once or as a process. Either is fine; choose what's best for you.
- If you have items you can't decide to keep or not, box them up and put a not-too-distance date on it. If you haven't gotten into the box to get out something you need by the date, donate it *without opening it*.
- Having too many options causes stress. Narrow down your choices by keeping only the necessities and the things that make you smile when you see them.
- Eliminate before you organize.
- Find ways to organize the things you keep so the most-used ones are easily within reach.

Simplifying Your Life

Now that you've simplified your environment, or at least started tackling it, it's time to move on to simplifying other details of your life. It's not all about possessions—there are many aspects to simplifying, as you will see. Remember to start slowly. Pick just 2 or 3 things that seem the most important to change and work through those first. If you try to implement everything at once, you'll get overwhelmed and quit. The goal is to simplify *without turning your life upside down*, so do it in stages. The most important thing is that you've started your minimalism journey, not that you get there immediately.

Pinpoint what's most important

Why do you want to simplify your life? Want to spend more time with your family? Want to enjoy less *doing*? How about having more energy for a hobby? You may have several reasons, and there's no right answer. But it is important to recognize your *why* so that once you start simplifying, you continue to do it as an ongoing process. Keep your *why* firmly in mind whenever you are asked to participate in something, desire a new gadget or are tempted to add any complication to your life... and then say no.

Track your time

Once you have a shortlist of 4 or 5 things that you want more of in your life, track how you spend your time for at least 72 hours. Write down *everything*, from checking your email to running to the post office to channel surfing. Then go through that list and see how much of your time now is spent doing those important things. You may be shocked to see how little there is, hence, your interest in simplifying your life. Go through your list and start eliminating things that aren't important to you so that you can free up time to do the things that make life enjoyable.

For example, how much time do you spend tending your yard? How important is that to you? If it's important to you to have a nicely-tended yard, hire a company

to do it. If it's not so important to you, but you've been made to feel that it *should be*, just stop doing so much of it. Heck, hire a neighborhood kid to cut it and spread some weed and feed on it a couple of times each year. Bam, you just got your Saturdays back!

Simplify your clothing

You learned how to declutter earlier, but here we take it a step further. Consider how much time and energy goes into deciding what to wear each day. Now, what could you be using that time and energy for? You might even go to the extreme and do what Steve Jobs did—buy identical shirts and pants for each day of the week. No decisions in the wardrobe department freed up his brain for other, more important decisions. Keeping only a basic, core wardrobe like classic styles and colors makes your closets and your mind less cluttered.

Allow whitespace in your planner

Time is our most precious commodity, so many of us pack in as much as we can to each day. We make our lives busier and less enjoyable than they could be by constantly underestimating how long it will take to complete tasks and by scheduling too many tasks in a day. Start scheduling more time for each task or activity each day, allowing more whitespace in your planner. This will make rushing to an appointment, finishing work tasks at the last minute and dining on fast food a rarity instead of a daily occurrence.

Schedule “you” time

Until you get more comfortable saying no to obligations and people you don't enjoy, you may need to schedule time for yourself each week. For example, sign up for that yoga class you've been putting off, and then when someone asks you to stay late at work or attend a function you wouldn't enjoy, tell them you already have a commitment. *They don't need to know that it's to yourself!*

Organize your digital life

Do you have several places where you store your computer files? Do you have years' worth of documents that are now meaningless? Are you spending precious

time searching for a document you know you have somewhere but can't find? While having the ability to go paperless is awesome, our computer files can become a muddled mess quickly. Go through each folder on your hard drive, clouds, and jump drives and delete anything that you no longer need. Then, organize what's left, making sure to rename documents so they are easy to find later.

Examine your systems

We all have systems at home and at work, even if we don't realize it. Now's the perfect time to examine each one to see if they could be more efficient. How do mail, paperwork, housework and homework get done in your house? What about email, meetings, and project planning at work? Most of them can probably be streamlined so each task gets done quicker and easier.

Hire out

A great many people have trouble paying someone else to do stuff they know they could do themselves. But at what cost? Do you really want to spend all your weekend downtime cleaning your gutters and landscaping your yard? What about doing housework and shopping? Your time is valuable, so take a brave step and look into finding someone who can take over some of these tasks that suck up your time and you hate or aren't good at. It's easier than ever to find low-cost solutions online through places like Craig's List and Task Rabbit.

Check email only 2 times a day

Unless you are waiting for an important email from someone, keep your email closed. Check it only 2 times a day, at specific times. And don't check it first thing in the morning. This will definitely take some getting used to because we are so addicted to it, wondering what we are missing if we don't peek. But resist! You'll be amazed at how much time and energy you save each day. What will you do with yours?

Unsubscribe from email lists

Take a second to unsubscribe from any email lists that you always delete when they pop up in your inbox. Or use a program like [Unroll.me](#) to do it all at once. This will keep your inbox cleaner and be one less thing you have to continuously declutter.

Create out-the-door basket

Designate an area right beside the door you use to leave for work and school each morning. Put a basket there for each family member and have them put each item they will need to take with them the next day there. Kids can put homework in their backpack after completing it, and then the backpack goes in their basket, for example. This keeps things tidy, makes mornings less hectic and ensures you don't forget something you will need.

Plan meals

Planning a menu for the week or even the month is a great way to simplify life. You make the choice once, and then you don't have to think about it again, which frees up brain storage. You will avoid making last-minute trips to the grocery store too. Besides which you'll save money by not impulse buying food stuff that you don't end up using.

Autopay bills

This makes sense for a couple of reasons. First of all, you won't have to worry about forgetting to pay a recurring bill. Next, you won't have to do it more than once so you save yourself time. Finally, you save yourself brain space for things that are important. A lot of mental energy gets wasted when we have to remember a lot of due dates and deadlines, and it's really unnecessary.

Minimalize your budget

Everyone knows that they should have a budget and stick to it, but most people don't. Or, they *have* a budget but never look at it because it is so complicated they end up wasting precious time messing with it each month, so they give up. Most of us don't need a fancy budget program to keep our finances on track. A

simple spreadsheet will do the trick, and though it may not be flashy, who cares? No one but you even sees it!

Simplify digital systems

We often get sucked into a program that has all the bells and whistles or the latest and greatest (which usually has all the bells and whistles). But how often do you really use these systems that are supposed to save you time and energy? For example, look at your e-Calendar, budgeting apps, digital filing systems and digital productivity program. You may find that you bought it or downloaded it, but haven't even started using it because you don't have the time to learn the complicated system. Or, you managed to find the time to input your information, but now never use it because it's such a pain in the neck. What good is it doing you?

And even worse, it's making you feel like a loser every time you see it. It starts the negative self-talk like, "Everyone else is so organized. Why can't I get my stuff together?" Who needs that? Find a free, basic system and stick with it. Then delete or remove the old, cumbersome program from your computer or phone.

Empty your email

Do you dread opening your email because you are going to see a big, fat number flashing beside "inbox"? If so, you aren't alone. But you can do something about it. Take a little time to create filters and folders to organize your email. For example, email recipes are great, but they don't need to go to your inbox—you just want to save them. Set up a filter so that all e-receipts go automatically to your receipts email folder. You'll have them when you need them, but they won't waste your time and energy on a daily basis.

Plan your day the night before

You can do this in many different ways. Some ideas include laying out your clothes, making your lunch and writing down your to-do tasks and meetings in your planner all before bed. Mornings tend to be hectic for everyone, and it seems like unexpected things happen then too (you hit snooze one too many

times or the bus is late). Knowing you have everything in place for the next day can help you sleep better and have more peaceful mornings.

Consolidate bank and savings accounts

Many people have a little bit of money here, there and everywhere. They have a 401K fund from an old employer they haven't transferred, for example. Simplifying your financial life is a great energy saver. You probably don't realize all the mental energy it takes to keep track of all those little things, but they are always humming in the back of your mind. So when you consolidate and automate, mental energy is conserved. Plus, think of all the time it will save to maintain only one account. You may even have more money than you thought.

Downsize your stuff

You might not be up for downsizing your house or car yet, but how about these things: a storage unit, purse, wallet, keychain, suitcases, glove box, CD, and DVD collection and desk drawers? We carry around so much stuff we don't need! It's been scientifically proven that the less room we have, like storage, the less stuff we buy or hang onto. So start small—get a smaller wallet or purse and only carry the bare essentials.

Take all the keys that you rarely use (or don't remember what they are for) off your daily keyring and put them on one that stays in the house. Buy some paper or thin plastic CD holders and transfer all your CD's, DVD's and video games into those, then trash the big bulky plastic things they come in. They will all fit in a shoe box now. Find little ways like these to make a big difference.

Notice the difference between “want” and “need”

We live in a society that has bred into us that what we want is needed or necessary. Add to that the fact that we are a people who love instant gratification. Just stop and take a second to look at all the stuff right now in your immediate environment that is a necessity. You might not see anything at all. When you are out and about, notice your impulse to buy something. Really question whether it is something you need. If you have a hard time saying no to

purchasing, decide that you will not impulse buy anything. Instead, keep a running list of what you've seen that you want. Put the date next to it. If you still want it after a month, then go ahead and buy it. But you'll be surprised how many things you don't even remember, let alone want to get now. Don't forget that when you buy something, you need to get rid of something too. Between implementing those two habits, your spending on unnecessary items will drop drastically.

Unplug

We multitask all the time, even when we don't mean to. We check email while we are shopping, search the net while waiting for the movie to start and stalk people on Facebook during our lunch breaks. Schedule some time each week when you totally unplug. If you find you are still being interrupted, tell friends and family that you aren't answering texts or phone calls on Sunday mornings, for example. Even a few hours away from any screen can give your brain a real break.

Pitch the ads

It's fun to look through all the ads to see who has what on sale. But what you'll notice when you do that is that you end up spending more money on stuff you don't really need. When ads come in the mail, just throw them immediately in the trash to avoid the temptation.

Kill your TV

Okay, you don't have to get rid of it if you really don't want to, but at least kill your cable. We are constantly being sold to. And as we are sold to, we are made to feel *less than* if we don't use this product or have that newest gadget. It's easier to not have that continual temptation and weighing down of your self-esteem. There's ad-free streaming for every type of entertainment you enjoy. Besides saving you money by cutting your entertainment budget to nothing, you won't spend on items you *aren't* being sold.

Chapter Takeaways

- Decide what's most important in your life—the reason why you want to simplify. Measure all new things, people, and opportunities against that.
- Automate everything possible in your life so you have more mental energy and time to be creative.
- Decide what groups, activities, and people enrich your life and which ones don't. Start politely turning down offers to things that you don't want to do.
- Don't forget to declutter your digital life. Email, files, cloud sites and systems can all be streamlined to make life simpler.
- Take away some of the many choices you have each day, like what to wear, what to eat, etc. This will save brain power for important decisions.
- Don't ignore your financial situation. Get a handle on where you stand financially to reduce stress. Eliminate, automate and simplify your money systems.
- Reconsider how you spend your down time. Once you have less stress via simplifying, you will have more energy to enjoy hobbies.

Conclusion

More people are reducing the stressors and complications of their daily life to make way for more fun, contentment, and fulfillment. Simplifying your life doesn't have to be overwhelming. Focus on tackling one area of your life at a time. Start with the things that bother you the most. If you are tired of wasting time looking for important documents in the mess of computer files you have, deal with your digital life first. If you are sick of coming home to a cluttered house, work through each room to declutter. Everyone's idea of simplifying is a little different, so make it work for you and your family. You don't have to do everything at once... just make a start. Simplifying your life will give you back your time, money and peace of mind.