

## Simplify your life

High stress, high speed, high cost. Overcommitting, overspending, overstretching.

One reason that we have seen increased rates of depression since World War II may be the speed at which we live, the degree to which we commit our time, and the constant pursuit of more possessions with which to enjoy our shrinking spare time.

Some people with depression are probably *understimulated*. They have fallen into the trap of living out the same old routines day after day, watching television for their entertainment, doing little that is involving, exciting, or fulfilling. And it may be that this understimulation was a factor in the development of their depression.

Many more, however, are likely to have been chronically overstressed and *overstimulated*: scrambling from one obligation to the next, racing to keep up, buying gadgets and luxuries in a quest for happiness, and never having time for contemplation.

Both of these groups, but particularly the latter, may benefit from simplifying their lives. In recent years the voluntary simplicity movement has encouraged many people to re-examine their endless striving and how well it serves their happiness and mental health. What many have found is that by cutting back on the material pursuit of happiness they are more relaxed and enjoy life much more.

Voluntary simplicity typically has several components:

- **Reduced spending.** Expenditures are carefully examined, rated for their importance to your well-being, and trimmed. This reduces the stress of being financially strapped and of being enslaved to the task of revenue generation.
- **Reduced work.** Because there is less need for cash, striving to make a bigger income becomes less important. Although many people pursuing a simpler lifestyle work full-time, many discover that they can get by with part-time work or retire earlier. The choice of work may also change: the salary the work pays becomes somewhat less important, allowing other considerations (such as how interesting the work is, or how the work fits with your values) to rise in the priority list.
- **More free time.** Overwork, shopping, and maintaining one's possessions can take a huge amount of time. When these chores are reduced, you have more time for other activities.
- **Increased emphasis on fulfilling or meaningful activities.** More free time doesn't mean you sit longer in front of the television. An important part of voluntary simplicity is learning to manage your time so that you spend more of it on enjoyable (but low-cost) activities, on your relationships with others, and perhaps on voluntary work with your community.

- **Greater environmental awareness.** Because you are no longer tied to a high-consuming lifestyle, you are more able to emphasize sustainable or environmentally sound activities. You live a more fulfilling life while having a more positive effect on the world.

It's worthwhile also to remember what voluntary simplicity *isn't*. It isn't a retreat from the world. Indeed, because less of your time is spent in an office cubicle you actually have more time for the world.

Voluntary simplicity also isn't for those who have been defeated by "real life." It's for those who have tried the consumer-based existence and have found that for them it isn't fulfilling, so they are striking out on a new path.

It also isn't a religious or political stance. People of all faiths and all shades of the political spectrum have found that disengaging from overwork and consumerism has been helpful in their lives.

Finally, voluntary simplicity isn't all-or-nothing. You don't have to become an extremist. You can scale back your life as much or as little as you like.

Do you see your own life as being characterized by rampant consumerism and an obsessive need for income? How so?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

Does the idea of trimming back appeal to you? How would you like to simplify your life?

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### Some suggestions

- **Start watching your money.** For either one week or one month, carry pencil and paper with you and record every penny that you spend. At the end of the period you have chosen, total your expenditures into categories (e.g., "*lunches at workplace cafeteria*"). Rate each item on two 0-100 scales: necessity (How essential is this expenditure in your life?) and enjoyment (How much positive feeling does this expenditure give you?). Examine the list for items rated low on both counts, and for those that are moderately necessary or enjoyable but carry a big price tag).
- **Calculate minutes worked.** If you are employed, consider using your after-tax hourly wage as a guide to how many minutes of your work time are needed to pay for each of these expenditures. For example, if you make \$20 an hour and take home about \$15 after tax, and if a recent Sea-Doo rental cost \$150, ask yourself whether the experience was really worth having to work 10 hours in order to afford ( $10 \times \$15 = \$150$ ). If not, then perhaps you have an easy target for trimming back.
- **Read or join.** If voluntary simplicity seems like an attractive (or necessary) option for you, consider joining a group working on these issues in your community (try the community centers), or read one of the many books published on the subject (the book *Voluntary Simplicity* by Duane Elgin may be useful).