

Dossier

Simplify, declutter and breathe

DO YOU FEEL overwhelmed, exhausted and fed up of slaving to support a lifestyle that doesn't make you happy? In this Dossier, we explore our consumer habits, and creating a life based on values, not things. Anita Chaudhuri examines minimalism – talking to experts and people who've made radical decisions to declutter and streamline their lives, and asks: can living more plainly make us content? Author of *A Life Less Throwaway*, Tara Button, tells us how to shop for items that last a lifetime; we ask you to dig deep in our coaching session, to discover what's getting in the way of a simplified life; plus, take our test to find out what your 'stuff' says about you.

Inspired? Launch your own decluttering challenge with Cait Flanders, author of *The Year Of Less*. Listen to her podcast and watch her broadcasts on how to simplify your life at psychologies.co.uk/simplify-declutter-and-breathe. For more support, join our Life Leap Club, free to all subscribers, where we host masterclasses with the experts >>>



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Living with enough

Are you drowning in stuff that you don't need, overwhelmed with life admin and so busy you haven't got time to sort it all out? Perhaps minimalism, the new lifestyle trend taking the world by storm, is the answer to all your problems, says Anita Chaudhuri

Several years ago, Joshua Fields Millburn was director of operations for an American telecoms company. He had a six-figure salary, a big house and a fancy car. But, despite all that, he was surprised to discover he wasn't particularly fulfilled.

'I saw that all the people above me at work were unhappy – they were having heart attacks in their 40s. I thought, "If I work hard enough for the next 10 years, I could be just like them..." Suddenly, my future didn't seem so appealing.' At around the same time, Millburn's mother died and his marriage ended in the space of a month.

Inspired by the Exile Lifestyle blog by Colin Wright, Millburn quit his job and set up The Minimalists with his long-time friend Ryan Nicodemus. 'I had a lot of stuff. Hundreds, thousands of books, DVDs, cupboards full of clothes; all of these things I had allowed to enter my life without question.'

In time, Millburn realised that most of his stuff – about 90 per cent of it – was weighing him down, and keeping him from the freedom, happiness and fulfilment he so desperately wanted. So he let go. Over the course of eight

months, he jettisoned approximately 90 per cent of his possessions. As he did so, he began feeling freer, happier and lighter. As the external clutter was removed, so was the internal clutter: emotional clutter, mental clutter, stress and anxiety. And, in the process of letting go of so

much stuff, the duo created several bestselling books, a podcast and served as the inspiration for a hit Netflix documentary. Meanwhile, their blog now attracts up to three million readers a month.

KEEP IT TO A MINIMUM

So what exactly is the appeal of living minimally? To be honest, it sounds like a concept I might be allergic to, conjuring up an image of a chilly white loft space accessorised only with an

L-shaped sofa (white, of course) and a scary piece of signature art. Surely this has no place in my own life? However, it turns out that the minimalist trend is about a lot more than mere interior design choices, nor is it necessarily about surviving without sequined cushions and knick-knacks.

As Millburn explains: 'Minimalism is the thing that gets us past the things, so we can make room for >>>

“Over the course of eight months, he jettisoned 90 per cent of his things. As he let go, he began feeling freer, happier and lighter”



PHOTOGRAPH: POLLY WREFFORD/LOUPE IMAGES
PREVIOUS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES

>>> life's most important things – which actually aren't things at all.'

The movement for buying less and living more simply and sustainably, is particularly popular among millennials. Feeling betrayed by the housing market, Generation Rent has grown up in a far more materially transient culture than before. Items that used to take up shelf space like CDs, DVDs, books, photo albums, even televisions, have all been replaced by a single laptop. This way of thinking goes further: Why buy a car when you can book an Uber? Why purchase fancy kitchen utensils and a larder full of *Masterchef*-fy ingredients when you can order in?

BUY LESS, LIVE MORE

But it's not only the young who are embracing this trend. Figures suggest that we are all spending less of our total household budgets on physical goods – 21 per cent in 2014 compared with 26 per cent in the early part of the last decade.* The desire for sustainable zero-waste consumption has not escaped marketing departments either. It was Ikea which famously suggested that Western society had reached 'peak curtains', and the popularity of websites such as *buymeonce.com* (see our interview with founder Tara Button on page 68), specialising in products designed to last a lifetime, are proof that there's strong consumer demand.

Millburn is keen to stress that: 'Minimalism is not about living with nothing, more about living with enough.' This is all well and good, but how do you even recognise when enough is enough? It's a question that blogger Cait Flanders addresses in her new book, *The Year Of Less: How I Stopped Shopping, Gave Away My Belongings, And Discovered Life Is Worth More Than Anything You Can Buy In A Store* (Hay House, £15.99).

Although she had previously documented her journey to becoming debt-free, it did not occur to her that the root of her problem might be buying too much stuff, until she was forced to move house five times during a single year. 'I was packing up and moving boxes full of stuff I never used over and over again. It was an eye-opening experience. I had a lot of

objects around my house that I'd bought because I aspired to be the kind of person who used them. When you look at the stuff you spent money on that you never use and will probably never use, you feel super guilty about it. I came to the realisation that it feels worse to hold on to it.'

So far, this feels like a familiar story and I was expecting a predictable litany of shopping sins – designer shoes, face creams, clothes, perhaps overpriced kitchen gadgets. But Flanders' experience hit closer to home. Top of her hit list were books. Followed by stationery such as notebooks. Followed by piles of random clothes of the non-designer warm and useful kind.

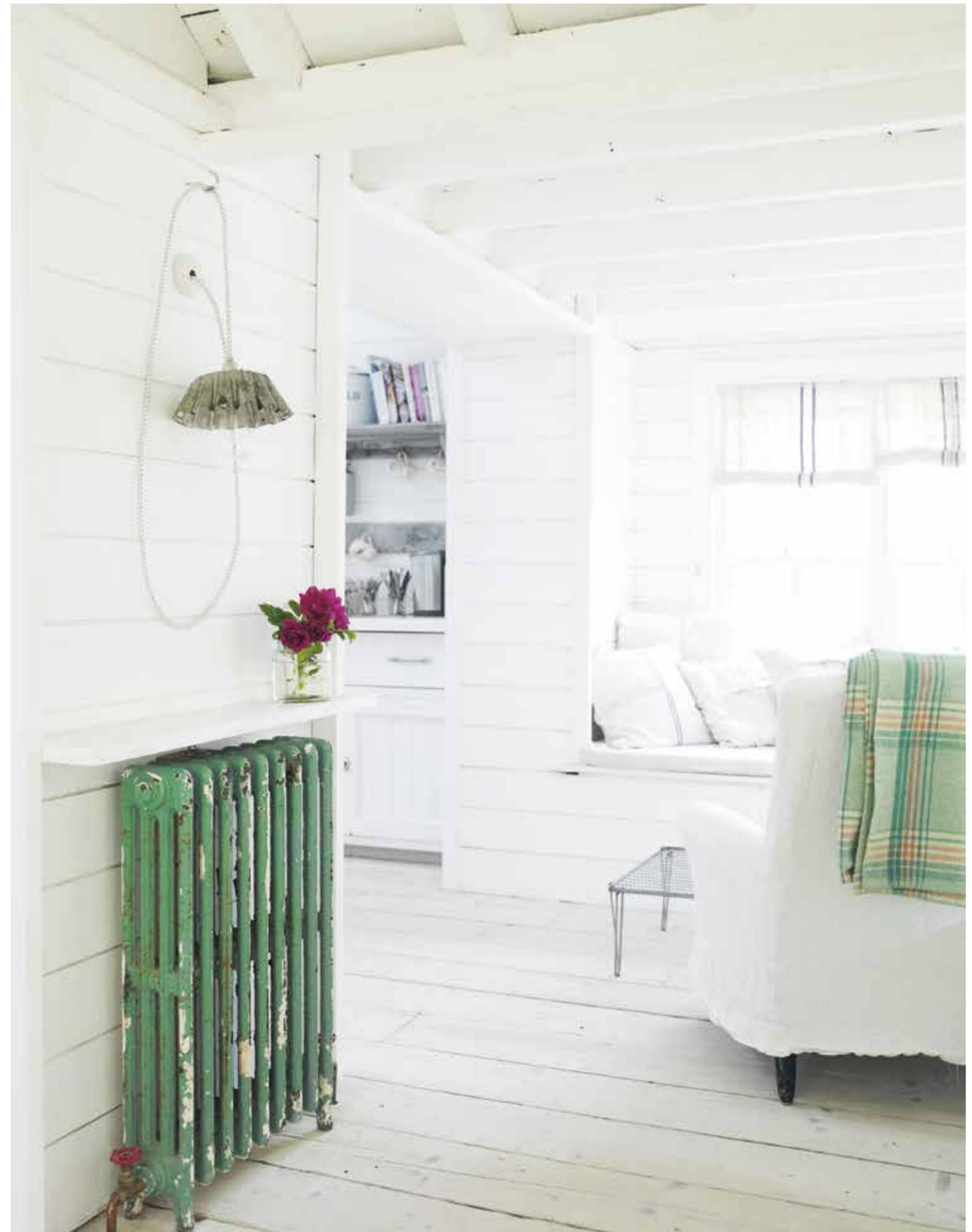
For Flanders, looking her overconsumption in the eye was a painful reckoning. 'It was all wasted. Wasted money, wasted dreams, wasted opportunities. It was almost enough to stop me from giving stuff away. But staring at the wasted money, dreams and opportunities day in and day out hurt more. It all had to go.'

So she got rid of the lot – the clothes that didn't fit properly, the books she was never going to read, the DVDs and videos she wasn't going to watch. 'One glance in any corner of my home showed me I had more than I needed, and I didn't appreciate any of it. I wanted to start using what was already in my possession. I wanted to feel like everything had a purpose, and that whatever I brought through my front door in the future would also have a purpose. If it didn't have that, it had to go.'

PATCH UP THE PARKA

In total, Flanders bagged up and donated 43 per cent of her belongings. As if that wasn't enough, she pledged not to spend a penny for the following year on new clothes, shoes, accessories, books, magazines, electronics, or anything for around the house. 'I could buy consumables, things like groceries, toiletries and fuel for my car. I could purchase anything I outlined on my "approved shopping list", which was a handful of items I could look into the immediate future and know I would need soon. I could also replace something >>>

“Whatever I brought through my front door in the future would also have a purpose. If it didn't have that, it had to go”



PHOTOGRAPH: POLLY WREFFORD/LOUIPE IMAGES; THE GUARDIAN, 2016

>>> that broke or wore out if I absolutely had to, but only if I got rid of the original item.' Inspired by her project, the very next day I decide to take my favourite parka with its broken zip to be mended. 'Including dry-cleaning, that will be £43,' I was told. Forty-three quid? I had seen a beautiful new parka reduced to £39 in the Monsoon sale. With a virtuous sigh, I handed over the old parka. Right here, I was confronting why living sustainably is not always as easy as it sounds.

However, the journey to simple living is not all gloomy deprivation. Eventually, Flanders was able to quit her day job because she had a cushion of savings to fall back on. She was then able to write a book, and is about to go on an extended trip to Europe for the first time. These results definitely got my attention.

I wanted similar benefits for myself. But I simply wouldn't know where to start. In desperation, I turn to Beverly Wade who runs clutterbegone.co.uk. How can someone like me live a sleek, minimalist life? Especially if she is, ahem, organisationally challenged.

Wade sets me a test. 'If I asked you, could you lay your hands on your passport, your last tax return, Sellotape, scissors, a packet of stock cubes, a cake stand and a tin opener, would you be able to do it in five minutes?' To my surprise, I can respond with a confident 'yes'. 'OK, so you probably just have a little bit too much in every place. I call it the "10 per cent house" – there's 10 per cent too much everywhere. If you want to look minimalist, you need to have enough room to put your things away. That's the choice.'

ERASE THE PAPER TRAIL

As if seeing right into my home, Wade adds: 'There's also a thing that us declutterers call "toxic paper".' I survey my living room. Piles and piles of magazines, bills, newspaper cuttings, photos and unfinished collages litter every surface. Why is it so problematic? 'Because paper is never just paper,' she advises gently. 'One chap I was helping had a pile of divorce papers in his garage. He wanted to get rid of them but was petrified of it. There was a whole set of emotions involved. I've also worked with academics, or people who have retired or changed careers, and they won't let go of papers from

their past. What these things represent is what we have achieved in life. They're reminding us, "I've been someone, I've done that, I've got evidence that I was someone." It is a physical manifestation of who you were.'

I think about the box of yellowing newspaper cuttings on top of my wardrobe, and a light bulb goes on. Time to get rid of those. Wade says we often hold on to things that aren't even ours; relics from a divorce or bereavement. 'Usually, that stuff is in miscellaneous boxes that people don't know what to do with. The thing to remember is these items now belong to you. If you don't want them, throw them out. Also, while it's good to keep things to

remember loved ones by, it needn't be the obvious things. For example, every time I use a jar opener that belonged to my mother, I remember her in a nice way. It probably only cost five quid, but that's not the point.'

DON'T SHELVE IT

My other big problem, I confide to Wade, is books. I am drowning in them. 'Do you reread all your books?' Um, some of them, but novels very rarely. 'So why do you keep them?' Because they look nice? I say this doubtfully, for

in truth a lot of them are just piled up all over the place. And I spent money on them, especially the hardbacks! 'Ah, perceived value,' diagnoses Wade. 'Ask yourself, if you really wanted to buy the book again, how much would it cost? I'll tell you: 99p or less on Amazon. From the moment you take a book out of a shop, it decreases in value. How much of your house value is being taken up storing those books by square foot?' This is a horrifying thought, because I do not merely have one bookcase, I have several, and books are spilling out of every room and in a floor-to-ceiling tower in the bedroom. 'You are chucking away money on your mortgage on space you don't use. And for what? Books that have a value of 99p.'

What advice does Wade have for someone who doesn't know where to begin? 'Start with the easy stuff, the big stuff, not the hair clips.' She cites the example of a family piano when the children have long given up on lessons. 'One decision, one phone call, one piano gone. Or take the bags to the charity shop, the recycling or tip.' What about the fiddly little things? 'For heaven's sakes, don't have a junk drawer.' Guilty as charged. 'Have a useful drawer.

“If you know exactly what you own and where it is, you'll have so much more energy for the more important things in life”



PHOTOGRAPH: STOCKSY

clutterbegone.co.uk; buymeonce.com

Inside, put scissors, a screwdriver and batteries.' Ultimately, Wade says, the benefits of living a more streamlined life aren't about aesthetics, or ethics, or ideology, but simply this: if you know exactly what you own and where it is, you will have so much more energy to expend on more important things in life.

There is a moving passage in Flanders' book which illuminates exactly why our relationship with stuff is so complicated. She is forcing herself to part with a few last treasured videos and CDs. 'These were things I'd imagined watching with my own kids one day, or listening to in my 80s and shaking my head at how silly it sounded now. But the world was a different place already, and all of these things could be found online. I'd never forget these films or these songs and trusted we would cross paths again.'

In the end, this was the thing that made the biggest impact on me – the reminder that the vast majority of stuff we own, like it or not, is replaceable. I'm not about to give up on my cushions just yet, but maybe this room could do with a lick of white paint.

The 30-Day Minimalism Game

- Find a friend or family member: someone who's willing to part with their excess stuff.
- This month, each of you must get rid of one thing on the first day. On the second, two things. Three items on the third. And so on... Anything can go! Clothes, furniture, electronics, tools and decorations. Donate, sell or trash. Whatever you do, each material possession must be out of your house – and out of your life – by midnight each day.
- It's an easy game at first. However, it starts getting challenging by week two when you're both jettisoning more than a dozen items each day. Whoever can keep it going the longest wins; you both win if you can complete the month. Bonus points if you play with more than two people.

For more inspiration, visit theminimalists.com

Q+A

A life less throwaway

How many items do you have in your home that you know you will still have in 20 years' time? Ali Roff speaks to Tara Button, founder of buymeonce.com, who shares her vision for helping us find products that are made to last a lifetime

Q

What inspired you to start the movement?

I'd been working in advertising for almost a decade and I found I was becoming more and more unhappy with how it made me feel; one of my jobs was to increase children's chocolate consumption. I was a big fan of Le Creuset, which was also one of my brands, and my sister bought me one of its beautiful pots. The feeling that the pot gave me sparked the idea. I wished that everything I owned was like this; something that was both useful and beautiful, that would last forever. So, I began searching for websites that sold things that were built to last, but I couldn't find any. I couldn't stop thinking about the impact it would have on the world if people bought things to last. I thought it would make a good business concept, but I had no idea how to monetise it.

Essentially, buymeonce.com started out as a blog. Then, a journalist heard that I was running a petition to ask companies to make products that last longer. She wrote a story about it and my site went viral. I was still working in advertising, spending my mornings in the office and my afternoons writing the blog, so there was a disconnection between what I was doing at work and home. I saw it as my penance; a way of making it up to society after the work I'd done in advertising.

Q

What are the tricks that get us overspending?

There are so many, it's amazing; we don't realise quite how much effort goes into the exact wording and imagery to make ads as compelling as possible. A lot of it is word manipulation so, for example, the phrase 'as part of

a healthy breakfast' doesn't mean that the product is healthy, it just means that the rest of the breakfast might be healthy. But all you hear is 'healthy breakfast' in the context of that product. So, for people watching television who don't know how advertising works, it's misleading. A lot of advertising is about trying to persuade you that what you have is not good enough; that what your life looks like at the moment isn't up to scratch. The smiley happy people who appear so perfect are the ones having a really good time, and you could have a bit of it, too, if you buy a particular product. We have this fear of missing out that advertisers really play on. Sales are a great example. Some companies always have sales, but we don't buy for the sale itself, we buy for the end of the sale, that is, we panic buy. We don't want to be the only person who bought a sofa for the full price.

Status is another tool they use when it comes to high-end products. Take a look at some of the imagery used – usually someone looking down their nose at you with their jaw up and their eyes narrowed, as if to say, 'Who are you?' And that's how the advertisers want you to feel. They also use celebrities to 'rub their character off' on a product – for example, Jennifer Lawrence to make a handbag look cool – but we don't get the celebrity when we buy the bag. However, we're willing to spend 50 per cent more on something that someone we admire 'owns'.

Q

What is mindful curation?

Mindful curation is a lifestyle; and it's the opposite of impulsiveness and mindlessness. It's a little

“I couldn't stop thinking about the impact it would have on the world if people bought things to last”

“When we focus on material things, it isolates us, making us less interested in people”



bit like filling an art gallery – a blank space with a collection that works both as individual pieces and all together. So much of this is about getting to know yourself and waking up to the triggers and manipulations that cause you to buy objects. Then, it's about digging deep into your own priorities and purpose, and what you want to create in the short time you have on this earth. It's also about getting to know your true tastes, and not buying into what's trendy. Finally, it's about finding these products and taking care of them.

Q

What are some simple ways to combat materialism each day?

Many people's interests lie in getting us to buy more, so there's a lot of pressure; from friends who want to go shopping and out for lunch, to this culture we have of constantly giving, even when we just go over to a someone's house for dinner. The fact that materialism is bad for us is well-documented; when we focus on material things, wealth and status, it isolates us, making us less interested in people. This is highly detrimental to our happiness. Having stuff is all about competition. But the things that make us truly happy, healthy and live longer are relationships and community building – materialism is the diametrical opposite of that. Just being aware of this can help us to see the bigger picture.

Q

How do we overcome impulse buying?

It's about knowing what your triggers are. It's worthwhile having a look at your bank accounts – run through six months' worth – and see whether there are any patterns or behaviours where you didn't need to buy something. Try to create friction in those moments, so you allow yourself time to pause. Maybe you decide to give yourself 24 hours before you buy something, so you're certain you want that item.

Q

What vision do you have for the future?

The mission of buymeonce.com is to change the way the world shops. It's a bold vision, but I do believe that it can happen. I want buymeonce.com to become a symbol of longevity, so

that when people see the symbol, they know the product was made ethically, sustainably and to last. I want people to think about longevity when they go shopping. So far, we have asked companies to add fixing guarantees in case the product breaks – so we are making some progress already. We want to change the products, as well as the behaviour – it's a twofold approach of changing minds and changing matter!

'A Life Less Throwaway: The Lost Art Of Buying For Life' by Tara Button (Thorsons, £12.99) is available now. To watch a broadcast from Tara Button, go to psychologies.co.uk/simplify-declutter-and-breathe

“Less is so much more”

Three readers tell us how letting go of their possessions enabled them to grab hold of life

INTERVIEWS RIN HAMBURGH PHOTOGRAPH CLAIRE WOOD

“Life is far easier with fewer things”

JESSICA ROSE WILLIAMS, 30, WRITER, PHOTOGRAPHER AND MINIMALIST BLOGGER

Five years ago, I went for my first smear test – actually, I was about six months late for it because I had been too busy to go – and they found abnormal cells. It was stage 1 cervical cancer, which is easily treatable and I got the all-clear after a small procedure, but there’s nothing like being told that you have cancer to remind you of your mortality.

At around the same time, I read *The Life-Changing Magic Of Tidying* by Marie Kondo (Ebury, £12.99), and it made me look at everything differently. I had always thought that the answer to feeling happier and calmer was ‘stuff’: ‘If only I had more money; if I had this or that I’d feel better.’ Kondo turned my thinking on its head: try having *less* stuff. So, I gave it a go, and it worked. It made me feel calm; more in control. It’s quite a secure feeling knowing that everything around you is something you want to have there – and it definitely gave me a greater sense of self.

When people visit my house, they are taken aback by its simplicity. In my living room, I have one sofa and one chair, rather than a three-piece suite. There is no other furniture other than a TV stand, a side

table and a lamp. There is no rug on the floor. In the kitchen, I don’t have any top cupboards. My bed doesn’t have a headboard. All the walls in the house are white. I don’t have lampshades and I have very few things mounted on the walls. The colour scheme for my home is white, green and grey. I have 32 items of clothing in my wardrobe – that’s it. I don’t have any stuff that I don’t use. I only have what I think is useful, or objects I really love.

Life is far easier with fewer things. I only have to do one load of washing every week, and the house takes less than an hour to deep clean, from top to bottom. This way of life is not a discipline – it’s not that I want to be doing things in a different way and I am being restricted by having less.

My surroundings are not bland: you can have minimalist homes that are full of colour; it’s about having only what is right for you and, if that’s colour – great, go for it! Personally, I prefer the minimalist palette. I’ve actually found the constraints breed creativity. If I’m struggling to write, I’ll put on the egg timer for 30 minutes and get on with it – and that’s when I produce some of my best stuff. jessicarosewilliams.com >>>





“I constantly challenge myself, and am very intentional about what I allow into my life”

Consumer culture was bogging me down in the past. I had a high-pressure job and, like many women, I was fed the idea that I could make myself feel better by buying new stuff. It was about instant gratification and quick fixes. I was also working long hours and not eating well: again, I would go for quick fixes instead of healthy choices. Five years ago, I had my twins and life got more complicated: one of my children has a serious medical condition called MCADD deficiency, which means that her blood sugar isn't stable, so we have to do a lot every day just to keep her safe.

I felt like I was on a rollercoaster – there had to be a way to simplify matters. I looked at my environment first and thought, ‘My home is utterly overwhelming.’ If you wake up and don't feel calm and organised, you're starting the day on the back foot. I used the Marie Kondo method and got rid of 70 per cent of my stuff – like the bread maker I was never going to use, which I had bought for the fantasy

version of myself. I also applied the minimalist philosophy to my relationships and diary. I was filling time with stuff because I felt that I should, like a Zumba class I didn't enjoy. During my minimalism journey, I realised that all I needed to do to feel good was go for a walk on the Yorkshire moors and take in the view.

I believe minimalism has helped me tackle the low-level anxiety I'd suffered unknowingly all my life. Decluttering helped me feel secure. If you've only got important things in your life, you're much more likely to feel in control. Now, I work as a professional declutterer to help others achieve the same transformation. It's not always an easy path in this consumer society, but I constantly challenge myself, and am very intentional about what I allow into my life. The effort is well worth it and I've seen an impact in my children's lives, too. The fewer toys they have, the more intentionally they play and the better their behaviour. It's been an important experience for the family. atidymind.co.uk



“I was feeling quite constrained by the relentless repetition of daily living”

BLAIRE PALMER, 47, LIFE COACH

The amount of stuff in my life increased after the birth of my daughter a decade ago. I'm not especially sentimental but my daughter is, so we've accumulated many possessions. Last year, my parents moved to a retirement home, taking little with them, and we moved into their house. Suddenly, we had two of everything: two blenders; two sets of scales; towels in every nook and cranny. On top of that, I decided to homeschool my child, so we were creating a lot of paper: notebooks, art and printouts. It became overwhelming.

I wanted to simplify life but also test the limits of how it's possible to live. I was feeling constrained by the relentless repetition of daily living. I thought: ‘Is there a way to live that's not like *this*; where we don't just do what everyone else does?’ That's when we decided to travel for a year. As far as my daughter's education goes, there's nothing better than going to the places you're learning about. If you're learning about ancient Rome, go to Rome. If you're learning

about cooking and culture, go to Paris, for example.

We'll be living in a VW T25 camper van, so we're getting rid of a lot of stuff. Objects like furniture will go into storage for when we get back, but most of it is going. My daughter is enthusiastic, but leaving things behind is difficult. She has a massive collection of cuddly toys and for weeks she's been shortlisting which ones are going to come, and feels sad about the ones that will ‘miss out’!

I hope it will make us more appreciative of the things we have, and more suspicious of the things that are being sold to us. Because we've only got a small amount of space, every bit of storage is being measured precisely. In this big house where we live, there's never enough room for anything. In the van, we'll have a spot for each item. It's not only about getting rid of things, it's also about really thinking about where you're going to put stuff. I actually feel like we're going to have more space, because everything is so well thought through! abriliantgamble.com



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Simplify your life

Journal around these coaching questions to help you get into a minimalist mindset, by imagining what a clutter-free life could look like, and identifying the things that might get in the way of creating it

1 ASSESSING YOUR PRESENT SITUATION

- Where are you now?
- What does your physical environment look like in your life at this moment?
- How does it make you feel?
- In what ways do your material possessions hold you back?
- How does your material environment create positivity, ease or happiness in your life?

2 LOOKING INTO YOUR FUTURE

- Where could you be?
- If you could let go of one thing in your life that would make you feel lighter, what would that be?
- How would you feel if you could be released from it right now?
- What would your life look, smell, and sound like?
- How could you take one step today towards making it happen in real life?

3 FINDING WAYS TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES

- What might get in your way?
- What has stopped you in the past from simplifying your life?
- What might prevent you from letting go of the things in your environment that are holding you back now?
- How will you navigate around these things that are stopping you?
- What can you do to make sure that you don't get stuck?

PHOTOGRAPH: STOCKSY



Download our decluttering workbook!

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Test

What does your stuff say about you?

If you can't seem to get on top of your clutter, don't assume you are simply disorganised. Take our test to find out why you hang onto the things that you do, and what it reveals about your state of mind

1 When you open your wardrobe, you see:

- ♥ Clothes you'd like to fit into again
- ◆ Impulse or sale items that aren't quite right
- Piles of stuff shoved out of the way
- Old clothes you can't seem to part with

2 If you lost all your things in a house fire, you'd feel:

- Rootless and disconnected from your memories
- ♥ Like you had lost a part of yourself
- ◆ As though a burden had been lifted
- Overwhelmed by the task ahead

3 You would get rid of more stuff if only:

- ♥ You found it less of a wrench
- You had more time to sort through it
- ◆ It didn't make you feel so anxious
- It didn't hold so many memories

4 People living in immaculate, minimalist homes:

- Must be less emotional than you
- Either have help or a lot of time on their hands
- ◆ Must feel calm and in control
- ♥ Are probably not the sort of people you'd get on with

5 Inviting someone around to your place is:

- ♥ A way you move a friendship forward
- ◆ Fine, but you warn them first about the mess
- Out of the question unless you've had time to tidy up
- Is usually fun and leads to some interesting conversations

6 You find it easiest to get rid of clutter:

- That doesn't hold special memories
- ♥ That doesn't belong to you
- ◆ If a friend helps you sort through it
- When you finally get around to a big spring clean

7 Which of these clothes would you find it hardest to throw away?

- ♥ A signature outfit you no longer fit into
- ◆ A sale bargain you haven't yet worn
- Anything in a pile you need to sort
- A bridesmaid's dress

8 You are drawn to a simpler way of living when you:

- Feel overwhelmed
- Crave a fresh start
- ♥ Meet a person with the right balance
- ◆ Feel stuck in repeated patterns

9 Rifling through a car boot sale is:

- ♥ How you uncover a lot of your treasures and favourite things
- ◆ Fun in theory, but you find it hard to decide whether to buy something
- Enjoyable, if you're in the right frame of mind
- Not something you'd choose to do

10 Living out of just a suitcase on holiday is:

- ◆ Good when you're there, although choosing what to pack can be a nightmare
- Totally blissful! Life feels so much simpler
- Fine for a short period, but you soon miss your things at home
- ♥ OK if you have packed key outfits that reflect your personality

Circle the answers that most closely apply to you, then add up the symbols. Read the section (or sections, as sometimes there is more than one) that you circled most, to find out what your stuff says about you.

WORDS: SALLY BROWN. PHOTOGRAPHS: POLLY WREFORD/LOUPE IMAGES

>>>



What your possessions reveal about you?

IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ♥

Nurture your self-image

You have an emotional attachment to many of the things that you own – the items that you have bought and collected reflect a part of you. Perhaps you gain a sense of self from your possessions; a collection of vintage clothes, original prints or jewellery could be a conduit for a passion or interest. But you also have moments when being surrounded by your stuff feels suffocating, and you yearn for some space and order.

You might have made attempts to contain your clutter, but it's only a temporary fix and, deep down, you know the answer in creating the calm, ordered environment that you crave lies in being more ruthless about what you hang onto. It's clear that the objects you are drawn to and collect are a way of expressing who you are. But as you grow and change, don't be afraid to let go of things that no longer feel 'core' to who you are. Sometimes, we have to create space for new creative ideas and thinking to flourish.

IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ●

Allow space in your life

The clutter in your home reflects your state of mind. Your overscheduled work and social life leaves you with little time for organisation, and you often feel overwhelmed. Having a good sort-out is a constant unfinished task on your to-do list. Every time you see those piles of papers, or that heap of clothes in the corner of the bedroom, you are subconsciously giving yourself the message that your life is slipping out of your control. Even if you're not naturally minimalist, when you are too busy to pay proper attention to your home environment, it's easy to reach a tipping point, where your living space is no longer a relaxing place to spend time in.

On some level, you know that you need to declutter your daily routine before you can clear out your living space. But you're holding on to all the 'busyness' for a reason. Perhaps being busy, stressed and tired has become associated with success? Or is it a way of steering clear of tougher decisions? Ask yourself, what am I avoiding by filling up all the space in my life?

IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ◆

Trust your decisions

Much of your clutter represents a deferred decision – items that you've kept because you don't know what to do with them. Any attempt to have a clear-out is inevitably hampered by a doubting voice that asks, 'Are you sure you won't regret giving that away?' The more you defer decisions, the harder it gets to make them, and it may start to impact on other areas of your life, keeping you stuck. Others may attribute your clutter to disorganisation, but it's more complex than that. Your dread of making a 'wrong' decision comes from lack of confidence in your ability to cope with adverse emotions.

Ask yourself, even if you did at some point have a moment of regret at getting rid of any particular item, would it really be that unbearable? Or would you be able to cope? Living with too much stuff can create a low level of daily irritation and ramp up stress levels. Is it really worth tolerating it every single day, simply to avoid a hypothetical moment of regret in the future?

IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ■

Let go of the past

Much of your stuff represents someone you used to be; the clothes you wore when you were at your thinnest, paperwork from a former job or photographs from an old relationship. Perhaps you keep piles of old drawings and exercise books from your own childhood, or your children's early years? You may rarely look at them and, on some level, resent the space they take up, but the thought of getting rid of them feels like a wrench.

It's a question of balance. Old photographs and other possessions allow us to reminisce, which can generate a sense of wellbeing, particularly when shared with loved ones. So, if holding onto your stuff is your way of keeping the past alive, can you find a way to make it work for you, so that it doesn't impinge on the present? Choose key possessions and put them on display, then get rid of those that will never see the light of day. If that feels too hard, ask yourself, why is holding onto the past so important to me right now? You may be going through a period of transition or uncertainty, and reminiscing helps you feel grounded.

