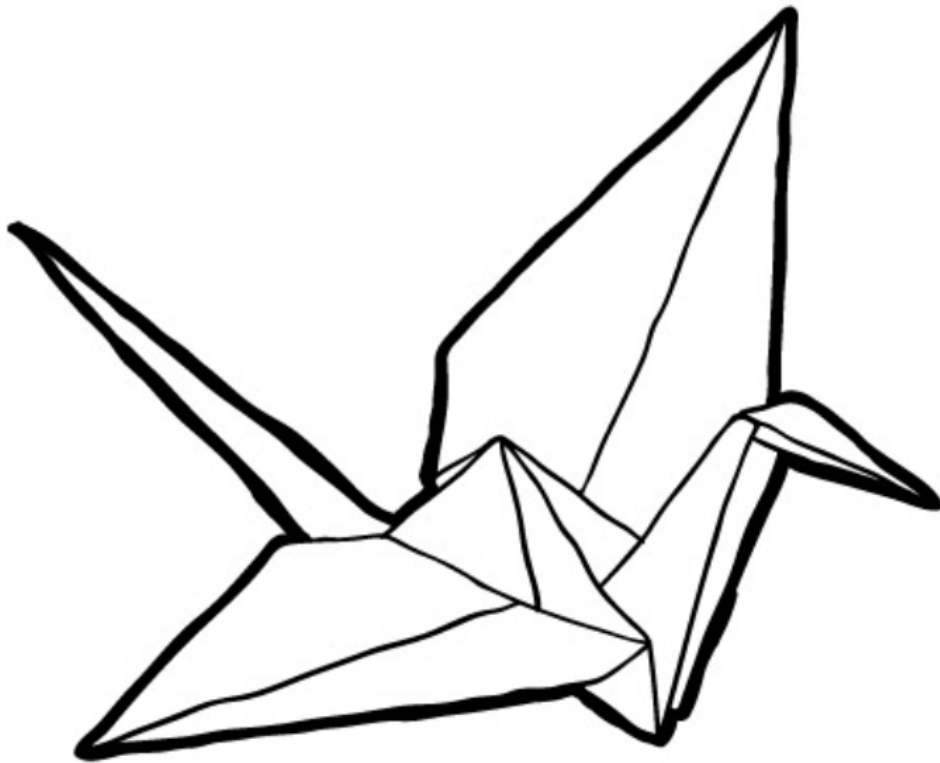


The 2015

Simple Living Handbook

Phase 2 - For those who have decluttered and are ready to move on to the next phase of living a simpler life.



-- Are you ready to let go? --

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 2015 Simple Living Handbook!

I'm so happy to have you here and can't wait to further explore what simple living can bring us this year. 2015 is the year you lock it down and really start feeling the benefits of living a simpler, slower life.

This is the first time I've split the Simple Living Handbook (previously known as the 2014 in 2014 Annual Declutter Challenge) into two separate resources. Last year I had over 4,000 people join and complete the challenge, many of whom decluttered tens of thousands of items from their homes. As 2014 drew to a close, I had many requests for a 2015 challenge that would help participants extend their efforts to simplify life.

I didn't want to simply provide the same challenge again, but I also didn't want to ignore new participants and their need to start at the beginning. So, the 2015 Simple Living Handbook - Stages 1 and 2 - were born.

Stage One was written for those who are just beginning the journey into simpler, slower living, while Stage Two - which you're reading right now - has been designed for those of us who are ready to go further in our simplifying efforts. It's been written specifically for those who already have a very good handle on the 'stuff' side of simplifying or for those who have been actively decluttering for some time and feel ready to start focusing on other areas of home and life.

In Stage Two we look at ways to simplify our:

- home - daily and weekly rhythms, simple organisational tips
- health - clean eating, meal planning, simple daily exercise
- head - mindfulness, intentional living, avoiding comparisons, social media

If you're in doubt as to which handbook you need, I suggest starting with Stage One and ensuring you have the basics of simplifying on lockdown. If there's one thing I've learnt over the past 4 years of simple living, it's that the entire process is anything but straightforward, so you really want to have your ducks in a row before moving on to the next stage.

You can grab a copy of the [Stage One Handbook right here](#).

What do you want from your home/life?

I asked myself the same question three years ago and decided I wanted a home that was calm, light, airy and full of great memories for my family and friends.

I wanted a clutter-free home that was easy to live in, easy to keep clean and easy to keep organised. I wanted a home that worked for us, rather than a home we worked constantly to keep up with.

Unfortunately I was nowhere near that becoming a reality. Over time, my family of four had collected a house full of stuff and I knew it was stuff we didn't need. Most of it was stuff we

didn't even want. But where to begin? I felt overwhelmed and stuck. I needed a challenge to kick me into action.

That's when I started the 2012 in 2012 Declutter Challenge on my [blog](#). I ran the challenge by myself, for myself, simply to see if I could do it. I wanted some measure of accountability, so I posted regular updates as I began the challenge of decluttering 2012 items in one year. (That's approximately 5.5 items a day.)

By the end of the year I had cleared out well over 2,000 items. In fact the final total was closer to 15,000 items.

At the end of 2012 our home had started to represent the kind of life we were trying to build. There was space and time for good conversations, opportunity for rest and relaxation, and so many fun times.

But it wasn't quite there, so in 2013 I embarked on another annual declutter challenge. But this time I invited blog readers along for the ride. And the results were astounding. There were readers who decluttered tens of thousands of items from their homes, while others found the numbers less important than the positive impact simplifying had on their life.

In our home, we decluttered another 3000+ items and finally arrived at a point of maintenance rather than active decluttering. Finally, our home resembled what we were aiming for - somewhere we could slow down and enjoy the important things - which turned out to not be things at all.

As 2013 drew to a close, I had many emails from people asking about 2014. I knew I wanted to continue the challenge after seeing such huge changes in so many lives, but I wanted to do something different, so I created the month-by-month guidebook of 2014.

I created a Facebook group for those of us working through the program and was astounded to find the group at 4,500 members by the end of 2014. Many of them worked through the entire guidebook, while others simply tackled the areas that required attention. To be completely truthful, I was shocked at the impact the book and the Facebook community had on so many lives.

Which brings us to 2015. I'm excited to see how this new approach continues to help and change lives, and I can't wait to dive in to 2015 with you!

How Does Stage Two Work?

Stage Two is a month-by-month handbook. Each month we explore a particular issue and look at different ways to simplify these less obvious areas of our homes and lives.

Even though it's a monthly guide, feel free to move through the contents of this handbook in a way that suits you. There will be some things that don't apply, and there will be other areas that may require more attention. Just know that however you choose to work through these pages - it's all good. Whatever works for you is perfect!

And on that note, let's dive in!

Find Your Why

The first stages of simplifying typically revolve around stuff. We have too much of it, we don't want it, we need to decide which of it to keep, we choose to sell it, donate it, throw it away.

The interesting thing about simple living as opposed to merely decluttering, is that it is not really about stuff at all. We need to work through our stuff, and establish our relationship with stuff, but life goes well beyond.

Now that you've reached a point where your stuff is pretty well under control and at a level that suits you, it's time to move in to the life stuff.

And the most important step for me when moving ahead to create a simpler life, is to answer one question:

Why am I doing this?

Ask yourself, *"What is this for? What am I making space for? What are my priorities?"*

Finding your why makes it so much easier to move forward, because it acts as a framework on which you can base your choices, decisions, purchases and strategies. You have something to refer back to when faced with indecision. It gives you confidence in the direction you choose and acts as a reminder of the Big Picture, even though your current tasks may seem small and insignificant.

Below you will find a simple worksheet designed to help you discover your Why.

Before you move in to the remainder of this handbook, take 15 minutes to complete it. Doing so will help you immeasurably as you work through the rest of this year.

7 questions to uncover your Why.

Give these questions some real thought, and spend a little time writing your answers down.

1. Who are the most important people in your life?

2. What experiences are most important to you?

3. Looking back at your life, what do you want to see? What do you want others to see?

4. Imagine a perfect day. Describe your surroundings, your feelings, your attitude. What is in common with your current life?

5. What about your current life doesn't feature at all?

6. If you had a simpler life, what positive things could you move towards?

7. What negative things could you move away from?

Based on these answers, list the 5 most important things in your life. Get as specific as you need to. (Eg. 'Spending regular quality time with each of my kids' as opposed to 'Kids')

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Consider cutting this list of five things out and keeping it somewhere prominent. You could keep it in your purse, on the fridge, or pinned up next to the computer monitor. Alternatively snap a photo on your phone and save it to your files.

Wherever you choose to keep this list, make sure to refer back to it when making big decisions or choosing what goals to pursue.

JANUARY: Revisiting Clutter

As someone who has been working on simplifying their home for a while (perhaps even a long time) you have undoubtedly come a long, long way. Your efforts to this point deserve to be acknowledged and celebrated, and you should feel really proud of all the work you've put in.

That being said, the beginning of a new year always brings an opportunity to revisit and reevaluate the projects we're working on and the goals we have, ensuring they're still in keeping with the life we want to create.

Side Note: Many people discover, after working to declutter and simplify their home, that old dreams resurface or new aspirations emerge. I think it's testament to the fact that our stuff ends up owning us if we're not careful, and that comes with a hefty price tag of overwhelm and distraction. But when we're able to let go of much of that excess, we're free to think deeper on what we want from life, what fulfills us, what dreams we have previously set aside and what goals we want to pursue. It's a really exciting benefit of simplifying and one I've seen time and time again as I've helped people through the process.

So we will take this month as an opportunity to reevaluate your home and revisit any areas that may benefit from a secondary declutter. Starting this new stage with a clean slate is the best way to move ahead.

2 Decluttering Techniques to Help Deal With Stubborn or Unseen Clutter

As you've been at this simplifying work for a long time, I'm certain you have your decluttering techniques on lockdown, but there are two strategies I still use on occasion that help me work through the fine layer of clutter that accumulates over time, as well as those areas that I'm still undecided on (or, more specifically, my kids are still undecided on).

The Clutter Bust

This is great for families and as a strategy to let go of that extra, floating clutter we become blind to over time. It's also something I still employ once every couple of weeks at home and can be a useful tool when company is coming or your home simply feels a little rough around the edges.

You need:

- An empty laundry basket
- 15-30 minutes

Simply take your empty laundry basket in to each room of the house, pick up everything that is out of place and put it in your basket. Also keep an eye out for 'everyday clutter', the kind that you walk past dozens of times each day, never really questioning it. (That basket of matchless socks, the catch-all dish on top of the dresser, empty shampoo bottles, etc.)

As you walk through each room count slowly from 30 to 0. (This is particularly helpful if you're feeling overwhelmed and need an obvious start and finish point to the exercise.) As you count, pick up every single item that is out of place. It may be rubbish, it may simply have been put there and never moved back to its original place. Whatever it is, if it's out of place, it goes in the basket as you count down.

Once you've worked through each room (or the basket is full) take the contents out and sort them on your dining table or floor. Toss or recycle the rubbish and pile up everything else in order of the rooms they belong in. As you do this, consider each item and ask whether it can be let go.

Then take items back to their rightful space and put them back correctly. This is a great step to include your kids in, and there have been times where I show my kids their pile and announce that anything not put away in the next 10 minutes will be thrown away. Always works a treat!

Packing Party

This is an idea I first came across from Ryan at The Minimalists (you can read more about it here [xx](#)). While he used it to pack up his entire home, I was immediately drawn to the potential the packing party had for smaller, trickier areas and have used it in [paring back our kids toys](#).

Other areas that lend themselves well to this technique are:

- kitchen drawers
- bookshelves
- toys and games
- hobby equipment
- makeup and toiletries
- decor
- seasonal clothes (try this just before the beginning of a season and see how many of your clothes stay in the box until season's end)
- living room (leaving just enough furniture for sitting)
- DVD or CD collection

Despite the name, you don't actually need a party of people to complete this exercise. All that's required is a little time, a little bravery (but not nearly as much as if you were getting rid of this stuff immediately), some boxes and a healthy sense of experimentation.

1. Choose the area you want to pack up.

A few brave souls in our [Facebook community](#) have packed up entire rooms (typically bedrooms or living rooms) and only unpacked the essentials as needed. If this is too overwhelming, then start by packing up a small area. Try one shelf, one drawer or one corner of a bench.

2. Deal with items individually.

Pick up each item individually and place those you wish to keep (for now) in a box. As you pack items away, feel free to create additional piles – one for donations of items you definitely do not want to keep, one for items you want to recycle and one for items that can go in the garbage. Use this as an opportunity to declutter, as there will almost certainly be things you already know you don't want to keep.

Also, if there are items you know you will need immediately (one set of cutlery per person, for example) then keep those out.

3. Pack items up and set a reminder

Pack the items away and label each box with the date and contents. It's a good idea to keep these boxes in a place where you can easily access them, as the whole idea behind the packing party is pulling out the items as needed, rather than putting them away in order to forget them.

Once packed up, put a reminder on your calendar, phone or computer for 1-3 months time. When that time comes, look at how many items have been taken out of the box, and feel free to donate what remains.

Now that you have added a couple more quivers to your decluttering bow, it's time to work through your home, looking at any accumulation, bottlenecks or potential obstacles. Below you will find an extensive checklist that will help take you through each of the main areas of your home. Part checklist, part self-guided questionnaire, it may look like a long and overwhelming list. But as you're now at the maintenance stage many of these areas are already well simplified. Most tasks here will take a few moments, as you are simply seeing if you can let go of anything else or simplify your processes any further.

The JANUARY Checklist

KITCHEN

- Benchtops
- Cupboards
- Crockery
- Glassware
- Utensils
- Junk drawer
- Plastics drawer
- Paper traps
- Fridge - inside
- Fridge - top
- Medicine cabinet

Ask yourself:

How do I currently deal with incoming mail, paperwork and school papers?
Can I improve this?

BATHROOMS

- Toiletries
- Make up
- Benchtop
- Vanity unit
- Cabinets
- Empty bottles
- Out-of-date items
- Bath toys
- Samples

LAUNDRY

- Benchtop
- Cleaning cupboard
- Mending pile
- Cleaning products
- Matchless socks

Ask yourself:

Is the laundry process working well for us?
Can I make any changes to make it more efficient?

CAR

- Floor
- Boot/trunk
- Glove compartment
- Pockets

ENTRYWAY

- Coat rack
- Hall stand
- Hall closet
- Shoe basket
- Drop zone for keys, sunglasses etc
- Mail

Ask yourself:

Is the process we use when coming home/leaving the house working for us?

PURSE/HANDBAG/WALLET

BEDROOMS

- Soft furnishings
- Artwork/photos
- Flat surfaces
- Under beds

LIVING ROOMS

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flat surfaces | <input type="checkbox"/> Artwork/photos |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Toys | <input type="checkbox"/> Bookshelves |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Media | <input type="checkbox"/> Games |

DINING ROOM

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dining table | <input type="checkbox"/> Decor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other flat surfaces | <input type="checkbox"/> Serving-ware |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Artwork | <input type="checkbox"/> Glassware |

STORAGE SPACES

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Linen cupboard | <input type="checkbox"/> Spare bedrooms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Garage | <input type="checkbox"/> Attic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Basement | <input type="checkbox"/> External storage facility |

Once you've done the work to revisit these spaces, you can rest assured that you're in a great place. From here you can start working on other parts of your home, health and head, simplifying further and making this the year you create the simple, slow life you want.

FEBRUARY: Sticky Clutter

Do you still have some difficult clutter hanging around, despite all the work you've put in up to this point?

Things like:

- wedding gifts that go unused
- sentimental items from your childhood
- items passed down to you from a friend or family member who has passed away

These sticky items can be really difficult to let go of because they're usually heavy with emotion: grief, guilt or perhaps obligation.

And what about aspirational clutter?

- equipment for hobbies you thought you would embrace
- clothes you always planned on fitting back in to
- books you thought you should read
- items from interests you no longer pursue

This month we will tackle both of these types of clutter and see if we can't free up some more space in both your home and your mind.

First, let's look at the difficult, emotional clutter. Here we're looking for things that have been in storage for a long time, weighing you down and avoiding all of your previous decluttering efforts.

Things like:

- memory boxes
- expensive gifts that have barely been used
- heirlooms
- hand-me-downs
- photo albums
- school papers and art from your children or your own childhood
- birthday, wedding, anniversary cards

Basically anything that tugs at the heart strings should be included in this category of clutter.

(And please know that this exercise is not about heartlessly and needlessly throwing away things of value. The philosophy behind Slow Your Home and this handbook is that of mindfully creating a home and life that reflects your priorities. For many this includes keeping certain items. I think creating a home for these things is important, but I also believe most of us hold on to far too much of this stuff, when only a small number of mindfully chosen items would serve the purpose of remembering.

Here's an excerpt from a post I wrote in 2014 about sentimental clutter, why we have it and how to let it go...

A few weeks ago I had a documentary crew out to our house. They were filming a short piece on the emergence of minimalism in Australia and asked me to be involved.

I was really excited to be asked, but I won't lie: I was terrified. Terrified of being on camera. Terrified of sounding like a privileged douchebag. Terrified of being found a fraud when people exclaimed, "That's not minimalism!"

Part of the shoot was done in the small garden shed we use as secondary storage. In it we keep things like our lawn-mower, my gardening gear, house paints, camping equipment, outdoor toys, a couple of boxes of Christmas decorations and one memory box per person.

I was asked to open each of the memory boxes to show how I manage to keep a balance between sentimentality and clutter. I was happy to do this until I was asked to open a plastic crate down on the bottom shelf.

I had no idea what was in there. I knew it was my stuff, but it could have been anything.

Upon opening it I realised it was old marketing materials, catalogues, business cards, order forms, inspiration boards, design sketches and press clippings from my jewellery label. I had not thought about this stuff in over two years, and it's been more than four years since I closed down the business. The question wasn't, "What is it?" but rather, "Why do I still have it?!"

I muttered some kind of excuse as to why I still had this clutter, and swiftly moved on.

But over the following days I really thought about it a lot.

I remember having gone through all this stuff during one of my biggest purges, and going back to look at the contents now I can see I did keep only what was interesting or had some sentimentality attached to it.

It's fascinating to go back and trace your journey towards simplicity by looking at what you've held on to during various purges. By looking at the contents of this box I could see the process of becoming less attached to my business (and the goals, successes and stories tied to it) but hadn't been ready to let go. I could, however, see a big shift, and the good news was that I had been intentional about it rather than blindly keeping everything related to my business.

And, when it comes to dealing with sentimental items, I think that is the key: Be intentional.

We need to be intentional about what to keep and what to let go of. Instead of looking at the box of trinkets or childhood items and saying, "Argh! I can't decide so I'll keep it all," we need to make a decision.

If that decision is, "I love this thing and want to keep it," then that's perfect. If that decision is, "I don't know yet," that's OK. It might be the best answer for now. But you need to ask the question. You need to be intentional about keeping things. Otherwise it will continue to be just clutter.

So last week, I headed out to the shed and opened that last remaining box of deferred decisions.

It was interesting to look through the contents and see what I had thought was important. I didn't feel bad for having kept it, but upon inspection more than 2 years later, I realised it had changed from stuff I had intentionally chosen to keep, to clutter.

And I realised that the transformation from clutter to sentimental works both ways.

When we are initially faced with the idea of simplifying our home, we balk at the idea. "But this isn't clutter! All this stuff is sentimental!"

Then we move a little further into our journey and we realise that much of that sentimental stuff is, in fact, just clutter. Deferred decisions, guilt and a lack of time.

We move through that clutter slowly, methodically, keeping what we believe to be important. It becomes sentimental again.

It gets packed away, saved for posterity. Then we rediscover it, hiding in a dusty box in the shed, and we realise that it's no longer sentimental. It's changed back to being just clutter. Much of it is stuff that we were simply afraid to be without, but with the passage of time has come the realisation that it's OK.

And so it was that I found myself looking through the contents of that box in the shed. It was interesting, but I was ready and happy to let it all go. So I did. Every single piece.

I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a (brief) moment of fear as I picked up each of these items and put them in the recycling box. But, quite literally, the second I let the item drop from my hands, I felt a lightness. A relief. A release. And I knew I was making the right decision.

How to Tackle Sticky, Emotional Clutter

1. Decide on categories.

You might want to decide on categories based on who the items belong to, what type of things you're dealing with, where they come from or where you want them to go. Think about categorising items such as:

- photos
- souvenirs
- glassware
- serving-ware
- heirlooms/hand-me-downs
- family items being stored at your home
- childhood items - per person
- wedding/birthday/anniversary cards
- items that were gifted to you but remain unused or unwanted

However you decide to categorise this sticky clutter, decide on a system and stick with it. The process isn't the point here and as long as it works for you, there's no need to overthink it.

2. Pull out all of one category.

I am usually a proponent of small steps when it comes to simplifying, but in this instance it really is better if you are able to pull out all of one category and work through everything before moving on. Even if you can't face all of one category, only work through one at a time, not moving on until it's done or you're happy with the level of stuff left.

3. Recognise that this might be difficult, but the power is with you.

There's a reason this stuff is amongst the last of your clutter. It's hard and it's heavy and it is rarely about the item itself. But you are the one who gets to choose what happens here, it's simply a matter of deciding and being OK with your choices.

4. As you pull each item out, ask yourself these questions:

Does this item mean something to me?

Often we keep things because we think we "should". Or because it is representative of good times, fun holidays, our now-grown children, or people we love. But does the actual item, the thing you're holding in your hand mean something to you?

If not (and you may be surprised by how many of these things do not mean anything on close inspection) then the decision to remove it from your home should be simple. Decide whether to donate it or throw it away.

What emotion does this item bring out?

If you've decided the item does mean something to you, then ask yourself what emotion you feel upon holding it.

Study that emotion for a moment.

What is it? Why do you feel it?

Would you still feel that emotion without the physical item? (If yes, then your decision has again been made. Decide to donate or throw away.)

Do you have multiple items that rouse the same emotion? What if you kept one or two that are truly meaningful, instead of keeping everything as a blanket reaction?

If there is no strong emotional attachment, then again, you can more easily decide to remove it from your home.

Would I display the item in my home?

We all keep things that we wouldn't display in our home. And it's not my intention to have you remove everything that you wouldn't hang on the wall. But asking yourself this

question forces you again to really examine why you're holding on to the item and what the item itself means to you.

If you wouldn't display it, then really examine your reasons for keeping it. (Remember, there is no right or wrong here. But the intention is to pare down and simplify these sentimental things.)

5. Decide, then do.

Once you've asked yourself these questions and decided whether to keep the item, donate it or throw it away – you can let go and be proud.

Let go of the guilt of removing it from your home.

Let go of the weight of the thing you are keeping.

Be proud that you are surrounding yourself and your loved ones with things that are truly meaningful.

6. Continue to work on this emotionally heavy clutter, one item and one category at a time, knowing that whatever you choose is OK.

7. Display, preserve, use, enjoy.

If you've decided to keep things, then use them! Enjoy them. Display them and tell stories about the people who gave them to you. If the goal of creating a slower, more mindful home is surrounding yourself with good memories and emotions, then do that.

And if you have an 'everyday' version and a 'special occasion' version of the same thing, consider using the 'special occasion' version every day, and letting the everyday version go. After all, every day **is** a special occasion - you're alive, after all!

- use the good China
- drink from the expensive wine glasses
- wear the beautiful perfume
- enjoy the fancy lipstick
- display the crystal bowl
- frame the old photographs
- create a memory book and put it on the bookshelf - read it sometimes
- scan the artwork from your kids
- digitise the old pictures
- make photobooks of holidays
- wear the silk scarf
- paint your fingernails
- drink the expensive tea
- burn the pretty candles
- sew with the sentimental fabric
- make tea with the delicate cups and saucers
- wrap your children in the handmade quilts

The people who have given these items to you would almost certainly prefer you used them, rather than put them in a box, collect dust and feel guilty about it. They would almost

certainly prefer a chipped teacup that has been used and loved, rather than a dusty box shoved into a corner of the basement.

Honour these items by using them, enjoying them for what they are, and gaining the pleasure of using a beautiful thing.

Aspirational Clutter

Aspirational clutter may not have the same heavy emotions attached to it, but it still weighs significantly on us.

It may not be the weight of obligation or familial expectation. It may not be grief at losing a loved one or sadness at the passing of time, but aspirational clutter is still a heavy load to bear.

There is obligation because of money spent. Grief of a life that didn't turn out the way you'd planned. Or sadness of an ambition now abandoned.

But now, as your life continues to become simpler and more intentional, you have the strength and ability to let go of this clutter, and that's exactly what we're here to do.

1. Identify your aspirational clutter

As you move through your home, you will know aspirational clutter when you see it. It has survived all other purges and decluttering efforts because it's still something you hold out hope for:

- clothes that might fit again one day
- equipment for hobbies you no longer partake in, or never really embraced
- books you thought you should read
- abandoned projects from years ago
- music you no longer listen to but take some identity from

Similar to emotional clutter above, work out a system of categories for this aspirational clutter and work through one category at a time.

2. Look at your priorities.

Based on your priorities from the introduction to this book, take a moment to look at the items with fresh eyes and clarity of purpose. Ask yourself:

Does this item serve those priorities?

Even if I fit in to those clothes again, will I ever wear them? Are they even fashionable?

What am I afraid of if I let go of that interest/hobby/goal/dream?

3. Understand none of this is about failure.

This clutter does not equate to failure and it is not about monetary value. It's about making room for the things that matter now. Not the things you thought mattered last year, or ten years ago.

4. Appraise and decide.

Based on your answers, choose to keep the item and make use of it, or let it go and lose the weight of obligation, guilt or failure.

Aspiration is wonderful - dreams and goals and passions are incredibly important - but when those dreams and goals no longer serve you, aspirations become weights around your neck.

It's OK to change, it's OK to let go of the person you thought you should be. You owe it to yourself to be honest and to be free of the guilt tied up in this stuff. So appraise it, be honest, and let go of what needs to be let go of.

I know it sounds simple - and it is - but these decisions aren't easy. You're at the end of the decluttering journey and the reason this stuff is still in your home is because it's tough to excavate. Be gentle with yourself, but also understand that this is all part of the process.

You got this. I know.

The FEBRUARY Checklist

- Move through your home, taking note of areas of:
 - Emotionally heavy clutter
 - Aspirational clutter
- Establish categories for this clutter and prepare a space to work through them individually.
- Pull out all of one category and work through each item, deciding what to keep, what to donate, what to sell, what to pass on to other family members, what to use, what to display, etc.

MARCH: Establishing Rhythm

Over the past months and years, you've done all the hard work of decluttering your home. That process usually leaks into other parts of your home too and you may have already noticed things like:

- having more time to relax
- the regular household chores taking less time
- not being anxious at the state of your home in case of unexpected visitors
- time to do other, enjoyable things

This month we're exploring rhythms - specifically daily and weekly - and how doing the work of establishing good, effective, positive rhythms will mean you start to see even more of the good stuff I listed above.

Rhythm or Routine - Opposite Sides of the Same Coin?

Routine. It's the domain of the successful, the organised, the on-time. It's what You Should Be Doing. Right?

But do you know what else routine is? It's restrictive, it's unfriendly, it's regimented.

Rhythm, on the other hand, speaks to you. It moves you, it moves with you, it feels good.

On the face of it there isn't much difference between the two. Both help you get things done, both deliver guidelines on what needs to happen and when.

The differences though, are really important. And if you're looking to create a simpler life with less stress, then...you gotta have rhythm, baby.

After our daughter was born a few years ago, my husband and I were determined to establish a routine, get her sleeping pattern regulated, and create comfort and predictability for everyone involved.

As it turns out, babies don't really work like that.

In fact, life doesn't really work like that.

It took us well over 12 months to learn that routine – a strict, sequential approach to our days – was less than helpful. It made us feel we were failing if we missed a step or fell behind.

Rhythm, however, was a much friendlier notion. It spoke of order, but also flexibility and movement and fluidity. It even sounded friendlier.

“Rhythm.”

Rhythm moves you. You dance to it, find your groove, let go a little, enjoy the moment and see where it takes you.

Routine? Not so much.

You march to routine. It's a steady metronome keeping time. And if you sway, if you linger, if you move out of order or miss a step, then you fail. You're out of time. You're lagging behind.

Rhythm allows change and flexibility for different seasons in life. Which is why rhythm wins out over routine every day.

How to Establish Your Rhythms

[Click here to download your rhythm worksheets](#) and print these off before beginning. (Link: <http://www.slowyourhome.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/creating-a-weekly-rhythm.pdf>)

1. The first worksheet asks you to write down all the jobs that you need to get done in any given week. Include things like cleaning the bathroom, doing the laundry, ironing, vacuuming, mopping floors etc. Break the bigger jobs down into smaller ones if you need to (for example, I clean toilets on a separate day to the rest of the bathroom).
2. Include all the tasks you like to get done on any given day. Things like making the beds, cleaning the kitchen benches, wiping down the vanities, doing a load of laundry, etc. Don't forget you may not get every one of these done every day, but if you get the majority done the majority of the time, you'll be golden.
3. List all the extra activities or regular appointments you have during the week. Include your work hours, school or preschool times, dance classes, sporting matches and training, regular catchups with friends, play group, church, etc.
4. Take some time to look over the list you've just created and give some thought to how you like to structure your week. For example, do you feel better if you can clean the bathrooms and floors just before the weekend? Then think about scheduling those tasks for Thursday or Friday. Are the kids at preschool on a Monday? Use that time to do the grocery shopping or do the ironing.
5. Using the second worksheet, list your Dailies and then plot out every day, listing 1-3 tasks for both housework and activities.

Stick the list on your fridge and refer to it every morning. Even if you know what's on for the day, having a point of reference and a short list of tasks makes your day seem much more manageable. Plus, I find it helpful to be able to explain to the kids that I have to clean the bathroom, then I can play with them.

My Personal Rhythms

If you're looking for an example of how this works in real life, I've included the outline of my daily and weekly rhythms below.

Keep in mind that this happens in a real, unscripted life and many days it doesn't resemble exactly this order. But that is one of the main joys and benefits of rhythm as opposed to

routine - flexibility and adaptability are built in to this framework. So rather than me feeling like I'm not utilising my routine very well, I instead feel the guidelines of my rhythm keeping me on track.

It's a much more relaxed way to live an organised life, and suits us right down to the sometimes-unswept ground. It's also more results-oriented rather than process specific. If things happen "out of order" some days but we still get to school on time and everyone's happy, then it's still a successful day. If I were living by a strict routine I might be tempted to feel as though the day was not a success when I didn't stick to the prescribed order of things.

My Dailies and Weeklies

I have a list of household chores that I do daily, and a list to do once a week. These are integrated into my daily rhythm and include:

Dailies:

- make beds
- 1-2 loads of laundry (wash, hang, bring in, fold and put away)
- wipe down kitchen benches
- wipe down bathroom vanities
- sweep kitchen and dining room

On top of that are things like feed the chickens and the dog, and take out the food scraps. But they're all obvious and don't ever make it on to a list, they simply get done. If you're new to the idea of dailies and weeklies, it can help to include everything on your list to start with though.

Weeklies:

Monday:

- Clean kitchen
- Ironing

Tuesday:

- Vacuuming
- Clean glass
- Admin/Bills

Wednesday:

- Errands
- Clean toilets
- Dusting
- Mop floors

Thursday:

- Clean bathrooms

Friday:

- Ironing

- Vacuuming

Saturday:

- Catch up if needed
- Gardening

Sunday:

- Catch up if needed
- Gardening

My Weekday Rhythm

This applies to every regular weekday. It doesn't apply to school holiday time or vacation. In fact, during those times, I try to go without any guidelines at all.

You might also notice that the first 2-3 hours are the most regimented. This is completely on purpose as it's the time I get much of my creative work done and while I embrace the early start, I don't always bound out of bed with huge amounts of energy. For me to know exactly what comes next is key to getting stuff done before everyone else in my home is awake. Again, this is what works for me and will definitely not suit everyone.

It also means, because I still have the kids home some days, I'm free to be flexible and spontaneous as well as volunteer my time at school when needed. Once both our kids are in school full-time it will change considerably, I'm sure.

- 4:00am: Alarm goes off. Get up, shower, get dressed, put kettle on to boil, 5-10 minutes stretching or Sun Salutations. Pour tea and head to the office.
- 4:30am-6:30am: Work. This might involve writing a blog post or working on a project. I usually have a to-do list ready to go the night before with no more than 3 items on it. I also don't access the internet during this time, as I found I would waste so much of my time jumping between Facebook, email, Twitter, news websites and other sites that the 2 hours would be gone with nothing to show for it except a feeling of being behind already.
- 6:30am: Stop work and get the rest of the morning underway. This includes many of my dailies, as well as the following:
- make lunches
 - pack school bags
 - make breakfast
 - get kids dressed
 - make bed/help kids make their beds
 - kids do morning chores
 - unpack dishwasher and repack
 - put on a load of laundry
 - tidy kitchen
 - sweep floors
- 8:30am: Out the door.

After that, my days differ considerably, depending on who is home and what needs doing. But typically I will either go to the gym or take the kids to an activity, then head home to do some work, play, or have lunch and read some books.

My weekly chores also get done during this time, which means the after-school hours are typically set aside for activities, helping with homework, baking, dinner prep or playing.

The only other regimented time I have in my day is after the kids go to bed. For one hour I spend time online, answering emails, participating in the Facebook group and other work-related tasks. I don't have a lot of energy left by this time of the evening, so I have purposefully left the less-intense tasks until now, when my creative energy is at its lowest.

After that I'm into bed quite early (usually before 9:30pm) and read a book or occasionally watch a TV show on the laptop.

To be honest I feel weird writing about all this stuff in such depth, but the reality is that getting clear on what needs to be done and when has helped me immensely. It means that my home is always in a decent state and I never get overwhelmed at needing to do a massive clean. Plus, it removes any question or doubt about what I need to do and when I need to do it. I simply follow my list and my rhythm and don't think about it any further.

Even though it seems like a lot of effort upfront (and it is) working out your rhythm actually reduces the mental clutter associated with running your home and running your days.

The MARCH Checklist

Download the [Rhythms Worksheet](#) and use it to work through the following rhythms for you, your family and your home:

- Morning Rhythm
- List of Daily Tasks
- List of Weekly Tasks
- Weekly Rhythm

At the end of the month, take some time to re-evaluate the rhythms you put in place.

- Are they working for you?
- What would you change?
- What could you improve upon?
- How do you feel with these in place?
- How does your family feel with the rhythms in place?
- Is anything consistently not working?

Re-visit rhythm worksheet based on the answers above

APRIL - Creating Simple Systems for your Home

To be honest, I'm not really an organiser. I don't have folders or binders or extensive filing systems. I keep both my digital and physical stuff in order by keeping it simple, and it works for me.

There are literally thousands of resources for those of you looking for in-depth organisation strategies, particularly when it comes to paperwork, housekeeping, school papers and the like. You just won't find them here.

Again, not all of these will apply to you, your home or your life so just run through the information featured in this chapter and pick out what applies.

Entryway/Landing Strip

Creating an effective and welcoming entryway to your home is a big part of creating a slow home. (You can read more about it in [this post](#)) but essentially it means creating an area for keys, handbags, purses, sunglasses and phones, as well as a space that welcomes people in to your home.

It can also incorporate mail, incoming and outgoing items, school bags, coats, boots and shoes, sporting gear, umbrellas, hats and gumboots. So how your entryway looks and the way it functions will be specific to your home and your needs.

A simple, functional entryway is one of the key elements to a Slow Home. The entryway (or landing strip) is more than simply the door to your home.

The beauty of this idea is that every home can have an effective entryway. It doesn't matter if you live in a sprawling 6-bedroom home in the country or a studio apartment in the city, every home can incorporate – and benefit from – a landing strip.

And it doesn't have to be complicated or imposing. Something as simple as a shelf or some hooks can be enough to get your entryway organised. Add in a seat of some sort and you have everything you need.

An effective and lovely entryway:

- stops clutter from entering your home
- saves you time – no more looking for lost keys, phone or handbag
- allows you to prepare for the following day, by having your handbag, gym gear or school bags ready for the morning rush
- can incorporate your exit drawer (see below), meaning you're far less likely to forget things that need to leave the house when you do
- can also incorporate a donations box, making it easy to continue decluttering and donating your unused belongings

For an entryway to function effectively, there are a few elements that should be incorporated. But the keyest of key elements? It needs to work for you and your home.

That being said, most lovely and useful entryways will incorporate the following:

- somewhere specific and neat to drop your keys/purse/wallet
- a place to hang your bag/jacket/scarf/umbrella/dog leash
- a seat or a bench where you can sit and put on/take off shoes
- somewhere to put incoming mail
- somewhere to open mail and recycle the junk, action and file any bills immediately
- be inviting, but highly usable

Once you have an idea of where this space will be in your home and what it will look like, then decide how you're going to use this space each time you come home or leave.

For example, when we come home from the school pickup, (ideally) the kids hang their schoolbags on hooks behind the front door and remove their lunch boxes and any notes that need to come home. These go in to the kitchen where I will deal with them when I can. At the same time I also bring in the mail and take it straight to the kitchen, where I open it as soon as possible.

The key is to train yourself to actually use the system - whatever it is. Chances are it will take some time and some readjusting, but over time these should become second nature and stop you from having any big bottlenecks in this area of your home.

An Exit Drawer

The exit drawer acts as a place to keep all the things that don't belong to you and that need to leave your home: all the items that need to be returned to their owner, all the outgoing mail, library books and items to return to the store.

The exit drawer could literally be a drawer in your hallway. It could be a basket inside your coat closet. It could be a calico bag hung up on your hat stand.

Whatever/wherever it is, just nominate it and commit to using it as another filter in your home.

Then – and this is the really easy part – put things in it that don't belong to you. Those jackets, socks, toys, plates etc. Put them right in your drawer.

Add to that anything you need to take on an upcoming errand or to an upcoming appointment. Your referral, that bill you need to pay or the letters that need posting.

Then – and this is the tricky part – remember to look in that drawer every time you leave the house. And every time you have visitors.

You will be amazed at how much more quickly you clear your home of clutter that's not yours. And how much more quickly you clear your mind of the clutter of "things I need to remember".

Incoming Mail, Papers, School Notes etc

Our recycling bin is in the kitchen, so I bring the mail in, open and recycle everything that can be recycled immediately. Any bills that need to be paid or papers that need to be

actioned go in to the office, where I process them on my admin/bills day. From there they are either recycled, actioned or filed.

The kids' school papers, newsletters and notes are also a big source of incoming paperwork and there are many ways of dealing with it. The key is to choose a way and consistently do it.

We have two magnetic-backed clear plastic envelopes stuck to the side of the fridge. Into this goes any artwork that comes home, unless it's considered special enough by the kids to make it on to the "art wall" (more on that below), as well as any notes that need to be returned to school.

As soon as a note comes home I process it, sign it, add money to it, put it in an envelope - whatever is required - and put it back in the plastic sleeve. I then check the sleeve every morning when packing the bags, remembering to put the notes in to return to school.

If there are any dates that need to be noted, I put them straight in to the calendar (on my phone with a reminder and on the family paper calendar that hangs in the kitchen) and recycle the notes immediately.

I have found that dealing with this stuff as quickly as possible makes it much more likely that I remember them, and stops the clutter build-up that used to happen on the end of my kitchen benches.

Again, choose a system - ideally following the incoming/process/file steps - and stick to it. In the case of this kind of clutter, the process really is secondary to consistency.

Kids Artwork

With one child in preschool and another in kindergarten, we see a lot of very *beautiful*, very *special* artwork at our place. My kids aren't strictly 'keepers' but they do love seeing their creations around the house and get a sense of pride from showing people things they've made.

So I try to strike a balance between keeping and letting go the kids artwork by following this system:

1. Any artwork that comes home (and is flat/small enough to fit) goes in to one of two magnetic-backed plastic sleeves that are stuck on the fridge.
2. Anything larger or anything that is particularly special gets put on our art wall (simply a piece of twine and wooden pegs strung between two hooks in our main living area).
3. Both the plastic envelopes and the art wall get cleared every school holidays. At this time we choose which pieces the kids want to put in their memory box (we each have one plastic tub in the shed that houses anything sentimental or special) and the rest we can either photograph/scan for digital safekeeping or simply recycle.

You can tweak this system in a number of different ways (using a digital photo frame, making memory books each year) but again, consistency is the most important part of this system. Consistency and communication with your kids. You are the one who knows them and their reactions best, so work out an arrangement they can understand and accept, and then involve them in the process as best as you can.

Housework and Chores

See Rhythms (March) chapter

Paperwork/Office Admin

Here you need to start with a relatively clean slate, but now that you're at Stage 2 it should be relatively well-tamed already. If not though, or if you've got a little more paper decluttering to do, this [3-part series on the blog](#) will help you work through the papers and allow you to start from an organised, simple place.

Then opt for a day per week, fortnight or month (whatever works in your home) and use it to process and file any paperwork. Most bills don't need to be kept once they've been paid, and insurance papers and the like can always be accessed online.

Minimise what remains of your physical paperwork where possible by opting for digital statements and bills, and what is left can be filed in whatever system works for you.

For example, we have a one-drawer filing cabinet with about 15 cardboard inserts. Here we keep personal papers, mortgage papers and tax records.

Keep papers for as long as needed (particularly if related to business or taxation purposes) and ensure you check with appropriate local agencies as to what needs to be kept and for how long.

Nominate a regular time in your calendar every 3 months to work through the filing drawer/digital files, shredding or recycling what you no longer need. Put a reminder in your phone or calendar and spend a short amount of time working through this each quarter. It means you will never get to a point of overwhelm in the office and bills, notices, invoices etc. will not slip through the cracks.

Meal Planning and Grocery Shopping

For an in-depth meal planning how-to, see Simplify Your Food (June).

When it comes to grocery shopping, I discuss the majority in the June chapter. But for the occasional needs or those things that run out during the week, I recommend keeping a running list.

Any time you or those you live with notice something has run out or will run out soon, ask them to add it to your list (keep it on the fridge or close to hand to make sure this gets done). Then, before finishing your grocery/meal plan, consult the list and add what's needed.

Budgeting and Bill Paying

There are entire books written about how best to create an effective and positive family budget, so I won't try to delve in to each of the many possible solutions here.

I do believe in keeping it as simple and low tech as possible, and have written a series of posts on establishing and managing a household budget. [Head here to read the series.](#)

When it comes to bill-paying and banking, my suggestion is to automate what you can and ensure you are signed up to use online banking with your financial institution. This is where the idea of having one admin day per week keeps managing your finances very simple.

When a bill comes in, keep it aside in a predetermined place. This 'action' pile (either a physical pile or an email folder on your computer) can hold any bills that need paying, paperwork that needs completing or other items that need actioning.

Then, on your admin day, simply grab the pile and head in to your online banking portal. Schedule your bills to be paid on their due date, ensuring you will have enough funds in your bills/expenses account to cover the outgoing amount. Once the payment has been scheduled, note the total amount, receipt number (if provided) and the date of payment. Keep this information until the payment has cleared, and then recycle, delete or file as needed.

For bills that remain consistent every payment cycle, consider setting up an automatic debit or a regular deposit transaction, meaning you will not need to worry about paying these bills at all.

Laundry

The unending and thankless task of family laundry is a bugbear for many of us. Below is one system you can employ to make it less of an issue. I understand each of us has different circumstances and preferences when it comes to doing laundry, but the system below has been the most effective and hassle-free I've tried, and I've tried a few.

It involves doing one or two loads of laundry most days, and is designed to help minimise the sorting/folding/putting away process.

Each evening, collect or ask for dirty clothes to be taken to the laundry. Take five minutes to sort the clothes and linen into piles based on what will be washed together. (Linens, lights, darks, delicates). Based on how much there is to wash, choose which loads will go on and put the remaining items back in the dirty clothes hamper.

Laundry Hack: Unless there is a lot of laundry or anything particularly fancy to wash, I typically don't separate my lights from my darks, nor my delicates from my everyday. I use mesh laundry bags for delicate items and lingerie bags for underwear and throw all of it in together more often than not. (Woollens, silks and the like do get special treatment, but there is usually only one small load of these each week or two.)

Spray any clothes that require spraying and put one load in the washing machine. If you leave for work early, you might want to run a load overnight. But if you prefer not to, simply let the pre-wash spray take effect over night.

In the morning add any newly dirty clothes to the washing machine and put it on. Again, depending on your schedule, the weather and the facilities available to you, either hang the washing outside immediately (this is my personal preference for both the energy savings and the smell of laundry brought in fresh from the clothesline) or put it in the dryer.

Once it's dry, it's time to sort and fold. If you line-dry your clothes, this can all happen outside while you're taking the clothes off the line. It only adds a few minutes to the

process but removes two steps in the system. Grab your empty laundry baskets (try having one per member of the household) and your dry laundry and get to folding.

If you're able to fold straight away, simply give the clothing a shake as you pull it out, fold it and place in to the basket of the owner. Folding and sorting in one step make it easier to put the clothes away, and even easier for kids, teenagers and partners to help.

(A note on folding: If you can get to folding the clothes straight after they've dried, you will negate the need for most ironing. T-shirts, jeans, sweats, most school uniforms, polo shirts, pyjamas, etc will fold well while still warm or soft. I typically only iron cotton collared shirts and a handful of delicate items).

Once the sorting is done, try to get the clothes put back in their rightful place rather than letting it pile up on the dining table or the laundry bench. This is a task most young kids can help with too, and having their own laundry basket may, or may not, entice them in to helping with this task.

The APRIL Checklist

- Work through each of the following areas of your home, asking yourself if things are working well or if there needs to be a more effective, efficient system in place:
 - Entryway/Landing Strip
 - Exit Drawer
 - Incoming Mail and School Papers
 - Kids Artwork
 - Housework and Chores
 - Admin
 - Meal Planning and Grocery Shopping
 - Budgeting and Bill Paying
 - Laundry

- Establish systems for each of these areas and take note of their effectiveness throughout this month.

- Look at any other areas of your home or life that would benefit from systems. Think about how you might want to apply them.

- Revisit and readjust as needed.

MAY: Adding, Not Subtracting

So much of simplifying life is about taking things out. Saying no. Choosing to let go. So much of it is about subtraction. And up to this point, this has been necessary because you were overwhelmed and struggling. Things needed to be taken out in order to make room for change.

But now that the majority of your clutter has gone, now that you've let go and pared back, now that you have the space you so craved, we need to ask ourselves why.

What are we making room for? What is this extra time, space, energy, freedom for?

I've recognised a pattern with many people working to declutter their lives, and it goes something like this:

They become overwhelmed and anxious at the cluttered state of their lives and decide to make a change. They begin to declutter in earnest and throw themselves wholeheartedly in to the challenge of creating a simpler life and a slower home.

Because of this, they make incredible progress over a relatively short period of time, and act as an inspiration to others. They continue to declutter and simplify their home, and it begins to resemble what it is they've been working so hard for - a slower, simpler, clutter-free place to live.

But then something unexpected happens - they get afraid. Or feel depressed. Or get anxious at what life is going to look like as their simplifying begins to wind down.

They've gotten so caught up in the positive change of simplifying, that they've forgotten the reasons for simplifying in the first place.

Some people are able to make the switch from active decluttering to maintenance without any problems - they know what they want to add back in to life now there's room for it. While others find the transition more difficult.

If this is you, or you feel as though you may find it difficult to move in to this new phase as you continue to approach maintenance mode, then this chapter is specifically for you. It holds guidance for anyone at the maintenance end of the simplifying journey though too, so please read on and let's look at addition, not just subtraction.

The Good News

Only once you've done the hard work is it possible to really add positive new things to your life. It's not easy working over your home one space at a time, paring back to those things that are important, and you've done it! So take a moment, a day, whatever, and just soak up the vibe of a simplified home.

You have your home in, or close to, maintenance mode. You've got your systems in place. You've arrived at the goal you set out to achieve and that deserves congratulations!

Side note: Please don't think this means your home needs to be perfect in order to move forward. I can tell you it's not and except for perhaps one or two fleeting moments, it won't ever be. Because life. So if you're in maintenance mode, if your home is working for you rather than you working for it, if things feel simple, it's OK to move forward. Don't wait for perfection because you might be waiting a long while.

Now is the exciting time where you can start to fill what has previously been decluttering time with other things. Passions, naps, exercise, family time, a new venture, thrift shopping (just kidding.) This is easier said than done though, and often takes some soul searching.

Essentially though, it's now time to think about your priorities in life, and to pull together a plan that helps bring those priorities to light in your everyday life.

If you haven't already, it's now time to complete the priorities worksheet on page 6 of this handbook. Or even if you did complete the questions in the beginning, it might be a good time to re-visit your thoughts on priorities now that you've spent more time simplifying and excavating the important things in life. Take the time to answer each of the questions well, thinking on your responses deeply.

Use the answers to these questions to look at what you want to change about life as it stands, and start to pull together a plan that allows you to introduce some of these things, while maintaining a simpler, slower life.

And that last point is key - maintaining a simpler, slower life. The last thing we want is to replace old clutter with new, or old busy-ness with new commitments. This is about mindfully and intentionally adding in to life the things that will make it wonderful. And if the answer for you is more down-time, afternoon naps, weekends with nothing on the agenda at all, then that is what you should add.

Which brings me to my third point: The entire philosophy behind Slow Your Home and the slow/simple living movement is a focus on the 'living' part rather than the 'stuff' part. Decluttering is absolutely an element of that, but it really is only one step to enable a slower, more positive, more intentional and more mindful life.

It's not about a home that is perfectly decluttered, but rather a home that works for you and yours, instead of a home you need to work for. It's not about perfection at all, but rather the ability to create a wonderful life.

So I'd urge anyone who is currently (and understandably) struggling with the question of what's next, to think about life moving forward. Consider your priorities. Ask yourself why it's difficult to let go of this stage. Ask yourself what is holding you back. Ask yourself what you want life to look like. And ask yourself if there is other clutter (perhaps not necessarily physical clutter, but maybe emotional clutter) that is stopping you from moving forward.

EXERCISE

Look at your five priorities, as listed on the worksheet on page 7, and make a list of the things you might want to add back in to your life now that you have the space, energy and mental capacity to do so.

Just a word of caution though - only list things if you're genuinely driven to add them to your life. Please don't simply add things because you think you should. It's perfectly wonderful if you don't want to add anything else, and the last thing you want is unnecessary complication.

Some ideas:

- Study - formal or personal.
- Creative pursuit - write a book, learn an instrument.
- A new habit - journalling, getting up early, reading a book every night.
- Exercise - try a daily walk or visit the gym more often. Start practicing yoga or join a roller derby club.
- Getting outside - bushwalk, garden, go hiking, find a lovely spot to walk the dog.
- Travel more - locally or abroad.
- More time with family.
- More time with friends.
- More time alone.
- Meditate.
- Learn a new language.
- Volunteer your time for a charity, animal shelter, refuge or other volunteer organisation.

Once you've listed the things you'd like to add to your life, go through and rank them in terms of importance (as decided by you).

Choose **one** item on the list and commit to adding it to your life this month.

The reason for adding only one is simple - I'm all about baby steps, as you probably recall from the Stage 1 Handbook. So often we get enthusiastic about making positive changes and we try to make them all at once. Typically it works really well for a week, but when motivation wanes or life gets busy, we all too often find ourselves giving up on all the new habits.

So instead, mindfully add one thing to your life and enjoy the heck out of it. This is what you've been working towards. This is what it looks like to create a newer, more positive life. This is what simple living is all about - the living.

As you settle in to your newly simplified life it's OK to feel strange for a while. It's OK to feel guilty for not decluttering more, or not working on your home. The good news is, it's now time to work on and enjoy living your life.

JUNE: Simplify your Food

This month we look at both simplifying the food you and your family eat, as well as the meal planning process.

The ideas outlined in the following pages have the potential to change many parts of your day to day life.

Firstly, eating fewer processed foods, fewer preservatives and less fast food can only be positive for you, your health and that of your family. You will gain energy, your tastes will evolve over time, and you will be fuelling your body with real food.

Less obviously but just as importantly, meal planning will impact your mental capacity, the way your home runs during the week and mean you have fewer decisions to make during the hectic evening hours.

Simplify Your Food

It's important to know this is a process that will take time. Changing life-long eating habits is not often a quick fix, but by following the guidelines suggested below, you will begin the process on the right note.

Also please be aware that I am not a nutritionist, and the advice included below is of a general nature. I advocate eating as many real, whole foods as possible, avoiding preservative-laden convenience foods and preparing simple meals. I don't advocate a specific lifestyle (paleo, low GI, intermittent fasting etc) and I am not trained in offering specific dietary advice. If you or anyone in your family has health concerns or is allergic/sensitive to particular foods, additives or preservatives, please seek advice from your doctor.

If I could sum up my personal approach to food it would be this:

Just eat real food most of the time.

Real food typically looks like food (fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds, meat) or contains ingredients you can pronounce and pick out of a line-up.

There are many reasons why we eat processed foods and convenience foods:

- **Price:** Sadly, processed foods are often more affordable than fresh alternatives. So many of us live with budgetary restrictions that we can't always make the freshest, best choice for our health.
- **Convenience:** So many of us are so busy and it's undoubtedly easier in the short-term to open a box and heat your dinner up in the microwave. Even easier to grab it from the drive-through on the way home.
- **Habit:** We tell ourselves that this is simply what we do, what we've been brought up to do, what our kids are used to.
- **Fear:** What if we don't like the new food? Better stick with what we know.

Understanding these reasons means it's easier to change. When you understand where your hesitancy is coming from it's simpler to talk yourself around.

I could take you through the entire process of cutting out preservatives and processed food. I could write a checklist outlining the process of adding more fresh foods to your meals. I could offer a long list of reasons why you should try a juice fast or detox.

But the premise here is very simple and as I said earlier, it will take longer than a month to make these changes stick. So instead, spend this month challenging yourself and establishing what works for you and what doesn't.

On page 42 you will find a checklist of food challenges. Throughout the next few weeks, work through this list, completing or trying as many as you can.

And once the month comes to a close, answer the questions on page 42 to gauge how the challenges have impacted your health, well-being and foods you and your family have been eating.

This is a gradual process (made even more so when you are preparing meals for your family, partner or other housemates) and one that deserves time. Over the following months, try referring back to this list of challenges and adding one in to your meal-planning rhythm. It will keep your approach fresh and stop you from preparing the same foods over and over. It will also ensure you don't slip back in to habits of convenience when life gets busy.

Meal Planning

The second part of simplifying the food we eat is breaking down the process of planning those meals. But aside from the benefits of eating a wider range of real foods, meal planning also makes day to day life so much simpler.

I'm sure you've heard this all before (possibly from me) but, honestly...

Thinking of endless new recipes? Keeping everyone's preferences in mind? Finding good, seasonal produce? Remembering what you have on hand already? Shopping for specific ingredients?

Who has the energy?

The reality is however, without meal-planning you have to do this each and every day.

Simple living is all about reducing unnecessary stress, and focusing on the good stuff. And a good meal plan will set you up for a week or more, meaning you only have to think about the dreaded question, "What's for dinner?" once.

The trick? Think of meal planning like a good, hard work out – when you're in the midst of it you curse the decision to ever start, but once you've finished and are benefiting from the results, you can see that the short-term pain was worth the long-term gain.

How to Meal Plan

1. Decide how often you will write out your meal plan.

Weekly? Fortnightly? I have a friend who plans her family meals 10 weeks at a time. It's just important to establish what works best for you.

2. How will you write the plan itself?

I use the age-old method of pen and paper, but there are multiple apps, beautiful printables and online programs you can use if you prefer a more high-tech solution. Just make sure it doesn't distract more than help you.

3. Write out the plan.

Take a piece of paper, write out the menu for the coming fortnight on the bottom half. Make sure to include lunches too, as well as any baking you plan to do.

4. Write out the grocery list.

On the top half of the paper write your shopping list for the week/fortnight. It's easiest to do this at the same time as the meal plan – to ensure no ingredients are missed – and reduce the need for last-minute trips to the shop.

5. Go shopping.

Ensure you take your shopping list with you and try to stick closely to the items listed, minimising impulse purchases of, say, chocolate. Come home and pack it all away, freezing any meats that aren't going to be consumed within a day or two. Stick your meal plan on the fridge.

6. Each day, look at your meal plan.

It's then important to look at your meal plan each morning to see what needs to be done for dinner that night. You might need to pull some meat or leftovers out of the freezer, chop vegetables or put the slow cooker on. Just know what needs to happen ahead of time so you're not left with a slab of frozen beef at 5:30pm.

Meal-Planning Hacks to Make Your Job Even Easier:

It's a relatively straightforward exercise once you get used to it, and meal planning will become second nature over time. But there are some tips and tricks I've used over the years that have made the process even easier.

Hack #1: It's Perfectly Fine to Cook the Same Meal – Frequently.

If you have a family favourite there is no problem in repeating it consistently. My kids love these salmon patties (bonus Mum Points for their incredible vegetable-hiding ninja-skills) and have them once a week at least.

Hack #2: Have the same ‘type’ of food on particular days of the week.

For example:

Monday: Pasta
Tuesday: Slow cooker meal
Wednesday: Left overs
Thursday: Seafood
Friday: Homemade pizza
Saturday: BBQ
Sunday: Soup

This simply reduces the stress of what to choose for each day when writing your plan. Obviously you can find a huge variety when it comes to each type of food, meaning you're not locked in to the same seven meals every week.

Hack #3: Know your schedule.

You know your family's work, play and school schedule better than anyone. Do yourself a kindness and use this knowledge to plan quick and simple meals for your busy days. We do leftovers on the night my daughter has dance class, and homemade pizza on Fridays because we're all spent once the weekend rolls around.

Hack #4: Try new things.

Set yourself a goal of trying one new recipe per plan. You're certain to discover some new favourites, some not-so-favourites and to keep growing your repertoire over time.

Meal planning really doesn't have to be difficult or complicated. After all, the reason we do things like this is to make life simpler, not harder. We want to free up time for what is important: like drinking cocktails and chasing unicorns.

If you're looking for additional resources for very simple, easy, affordable, family-friendly meals that include real food, check out some of these links:

The Slow Kitchen series
Courtney Carver simplify kitchen
Pinterest board

The JUNE Checklist

Try one of the following challenges each week throughout the month:

- Eat one meat-free meal per week (or one additional meat-free meal). Be sure to replace the meat with another protein rather than adding more pasta, rice or other carbs.
- Replace your breakfast cereal with porridge (rolled oats or quinoa flakes) every day for a week. Add some dried dates or cranberries to your porridge and top with chia seeds and honey.
- Make a smoothie a day for a week.
- Replace one soft drink with mineral water every day.
- Add one extra cup of veggies (per person) to every meal for a week.
- Make one meal per week using no boxed, tinned or packaged convenience foods at all. Just real, whole foods such as meat/fish/protein paired with salad or steamed vegetables. If you're already doing this, add another real foods meal to your week.
- When grocery shopping, look for healthier alternatives to five of your regular purchases. For example, choose a pasta sauce made with all natural ingredients, or a piece of fresh fish rather than crumbed fillets from the freezer.

At the end of the month check in and ask yourself:

- Are there any differences in your health?
- Are you and your family feeling different/better/happier?
- Are you enjoying the increase in real foods?
- Are there things you'd like to try more of?
- What didn't work?
- What did work?
- What is next in the process of simplifying your food?
- What is your goal?

Work through the Meal Planning exercise and use it to plan your meals for one month.

- Has it worked for you?
- What would you change?

Revise your meal planning system (if needed) and try it for another month.

Please note, this is the first half of the 2015 Simple Living Handbook. The remainder will be made available shortly, via our [Facebook group](#) and on Slow Your Home.

