The A-Z of Simple Living
Explore the foundations of a simpler, slower, happier life

by Brooke McAlary
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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2015 I ran a series on my blog called The A-Z of Simple Living where each day during January I posted one article that explored an aspect of what it is to create a simpler life.

Some of the topics were very practical (decluttering, meal planning, unplugging) while others dealt less with the ‘How-To’ of creating a simpler life and more of the ‘Why-To’. In those posts I explored joy, freedom and wonder.

For me, simple living is a true combination of both. We need to let go of the inessential and free ourselves from the weight of our clutter but it doesn’t stop there. Simple living extends to include how we live life from that point on too.

Because if nothing really changes, then nothing really changes.

When I first began my journey into simple living, I began with the practical. I cleaned out our wardrobes, decluttered the linen cupboard, let go of years worth of sentimental stuff that no longer held any real sentiment. We pared back our wardrobes, decreased the number of toys our kids owned and readjusted our ideas of what we truly needed.

But once the physical work of decluttering began to create impact, other things started to change too. We stressed less and compared ourselves to others less. We began to think and dream outside the box. Our weekends were relaxed and you could often find us taking naps on a Sunday afternoon. Our approach to food and exercise changed. We became healthier and more content.

For some people, decluttering their home is enough. But for me, the full benefits of simple living reach far beyond our home and deep into all areas of our life. And that’s why I wrote the A-Z of Simple Living series.

After the series wrapped up in late-January I had many people ask for the posts to be collated into an ebook, as they wanted to revisit the advice and also share it with their friends and family. So here it is!

Enjoy, and please feel free to share this with those around you.

Cheers,

Brooke

Brooke McAlary
Founder - Slow Your Home
Before you can make sweeping and lasting changes to your home and life, you need to understand where you’re coming from.

You need to accept your current circumstances, limitations, strengths and weaknesses.

If you don’t start out from a place of acceptance, all the work you put in to creating a simpler, slower life will be overshadowed by feelings of inadequacy, guilt and comparison.

1. Accept that where you are is where you are.

That may be a family with 3 young kids, a single mum with a teenager, a retired grandmother…

Until you accept the place you’re currently in, it will prove almost impossible to make meaningful changes to your life as you will be too busy feeling inadequate!

2. Accept who you are – your strengths and weaknesses.

I don’t mean you should stop improving yourself, stop learning, stop attaining new skills. But don’t try to squish your square shape into that round hole any more. Some things will prove easier for you than for others, some things will be harder. Accept it and move on.

3. Accept your limitations.

Both personal and circumstantial. Somethings are just not possible given your current situation.

Take pride in the fact that you are working with what you’ve got and doing what you can.

4. Accept that you will be making changes to your life gradually.
Deliberately, mindfully, intentionally. These changes are more likely to stick when applied intentionally – even if that means it takes longer.

5. Accept that there will always be more you can do.

Always.

So stop trying to reach the finish line in the shortest time possible. The finish line keeps moving and this is not a race.
I firmly believe that in order to create a simpler life, your ducks need to be in a row when it comes to your finances. And I don’t mean you need to be earning a certain amount of money or have a certain figure in your savings account.

But in order to create a simpler, less stressful life you do need to have an honest understanding of your financial situation. That is, all income, expenses and what (if any) debt you have.

What all that means, really, is that you need to understand where your money comes from, how much of it there is and – most importantly – where it goes.

This isn’t an easy ask. For many of us, money is a constant stress and regardless of our situation we often feel as though there is never quite enough. When you’re faced with bills, groceries, mortgages, rent, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, school books, new shoes, broken water heaters, chicken feed… it can be so tempting to simply stick our heads in the sand and our hands in our wallets.

But once you understand how much money is coming in, what your expenses really are and what financial goals you have, you can move forward and create a realistic budgeting system that works for you.

Fewer sleepless nights spent worrying about money? Sounds good!

A couple of years ago I wrote a three-part series on how to manage your household budget. Rather than re-hashing it here (there’s a lot of information – but don’t worry, it’s easy to follow) you can check out the three parts here:

How to Manage Your Household Budget: Step 1
How to Manage Your Household Budget: Step 2
How to Manage Your Household Budget: Step 3

After that, it’s just a matter of doing what works for you and your family. And sticking with it!
You want to change.

You're overwhelmed. You’re tired of clutter. You’re exhausted by the endless tug-of-war that is modern life.

But change is scary.

You may be struggling to breathe underneath your piles of clutter, or the weight of your hectic and crammed life – but at least it’s familiar. You know how it works. It’s your comfort zone. And while it may not be exactly comfortable, it’s safe.

But change doesn’t usually come overnight and it isn’t usually heralded by trumpets and fireworks and a Main Street parade.

Change is gradual and moving from clutter to simplicity is not an overnight journey.

Look at it this way: to build muscle, you need to repeat the same movement over and over and over. For weeks, months, years. And once you’ve built that muscle, you need to keep using it regularly or face seeing it atrophy and wither away, as though it never existed.

Making changes for simple living is exactly the same.

So please don’t expect huge overnight change. Don’t expect that you can walk in to your attic or garage and achieve decluttered perfection in one day. Don’t expect to start baking your own bread, making green cleaning products, growing your own vegetables and making all your clothes in the space of a week.

Reading back over that paragraph, it sounds negative and I don’t mean it to. It’s just that my experience has shown these changes take time. And when we have unrealistic expectations of ourselves and the simplifying process, we can easily get discouraged if the experience doesn’t live up to them.
Instead of diving into simplifying head-first, start with small changes.

Don’t try to declutter the basement or your wardrobe first. Instead, try cleaning out your handbag or one drawer in the kitchen. If that feels too overwhelming, choose one corner of one shelf in one room and clear it of all clutter.

Then, keep it clear.

Then move on to the next shelf, the next corner, the next drawer. Keep that clear.

As you move through your home space by space, you build those muscles and strengthen your thoughts on what is and isn’t bringing you joy. And from there, simplifying, decluttering, paring back, saying no – all these start to come easier as your muscles strengthen.

It simply takes time.

And on the days you can’t muster up the energy or the motivation to continue building those muscles, remind yourself why you’re doing this.

If you had one word to say to yourself on those days, one word that sums up the life or the feeling you’re aiming to achieve, what would it be?

Mine would be ‘peace’.

EXERCISE: Write your word on a piece of paper and stick it on the fridge or above your desk – somewhere you will see it daily. Keep it as a reminder of where you’re headed and why you’re working so hard to simplify your life. Then, go make a change.
Simple living is all about…well, simplicity.

Yet so many of us (too many of us) are weighed down by our stuff.

Belongings, possessions, accoutrements. Keepsakes, mementos, sentimental items. It doesn’t matter what shape it takes – if it’s weighing you down, it’s clutter. And you need to lose it.

Lose it so you can move forward to living the simpler, slower life you crave.

This means one thing: **DECLUTTERING**.

Yes, it’s a buzzword. (On trend.) Yes, it’s hard work. (Sorry.) Yes, you’d prefer to be sipping cocktails in the sunshine. (Who wouldn’t?) Yes, you may have to face some hard truths. (I’m not apologising for that – it’s worth the effort!)

But when you’re done – even decluttering one single surface in your home – you will feel lighter. You will feel proud. You will feel a sense of calm. You will want to do more.

**The Basics of Decluttering**

Start with one small thing. Don’t tackle the store room, the garage or the toy box[es]. They’re too big. You may get halfway through, become overwhelmed, stop, get disheartened and find yourself more discouraged than before.

So trust me, start small.

When people are trying to pay off multiple debts, they’re often told to put all their efforts into paying the biggest one first. Which seems to make sense.
But the better way is to pay off the smallest debt first. **It will take less time, and you get a victory. You win right from the start.** You beat that debt and won’t ever go back to it. This makes you hungry for more victory. So you focus on the next smallest debt. And so on. It snowballs and you build momentum.

My decluttering journey has been the same.

One day I cleaned out the kitchen drawer. You know the one – random utensils, chopsticks, some random LEGO bricks and a fine dusting of crumbs… (Come on – everyone has a drawer like this. There’s no shame in it.)

Next I tackled the medicine cabinet. Then the:

- bathroom cabinet
- hall stand
- fridge
- Tupperware drawer
- laundry shelf
- cleaning cupboard
- dry goods cupboard

None of these is a big thing on its own. Most took me between ten minutes and an hour to do. But the combined impact of having a clean, decluttered kitchen, organised bathroom cabinets and tidy wardrobes was amazing. And I hadn’t even started the big stuff.

So give yourself 15 minutes – set a timer if you need to – and tackle **one thing.**

**Your Never-Fail Decluttering Technique**

Follow these steps regardless of what part of your home you are decluttering. They will never lead you astray:

1. **Decide on which single surface you will declutter.** Once you begin, do not move on to another until this one is completely clutter-free and (preferably) well organised.

2. **Establish an area as your work space.** You need a clear flat work surface to use for sorting, organising, etc.

3. **Grab three boxes or bags.**
   - Donate box – for anything in good condition. These could be donated to charity, given as hand-me-downs to friends or family, or given away for free using Freecycle.org or hard rubbish collections.
   - Throw away box – anything that is not in good, useable condition
   - Recycle box – for any items that can be recycled, instead of simply thrown away
   - Holding box – this is an optional fourth box to keep any items you are unsure about. The holding box can keep them out of the way for six months, when you can decide (based on whether you have missed or needed the items) if you will keep or donate
the contents (preferably without opening it).

4. **Remove everything from the space you are decluttering.** Place everything on your newly cleared work surface, leaving the decluttered space completely empty. Clean it with a damp cloth.

5. **Pick up each item individually** and ask yourself the questions below. The amount of time you spend on the decision of whether to keep or toss the item will depend on what it is and how much it has meant to you in the past.

- Do I want this?
- Do I use this? (Or have I used it in the past year?)
- Do I need this?
- Do I love this?
- Is it beautiful?
- Is it meaningful?

6. **Decide to keep the item, donate it or throw it away.** Only then should you put the item you are keeping back in its place.

7. **Work through each item until all the contents have been sorted.**

8. **Box up the items for donation and recycle/throw away the things you can’t give away.**

9. **Sit back and marvel at the beautiful clutter-free surface you’ve just created.**

10. Be sure to keep it that way – because clutter attracts clutter. And you don’t want your hard work to be in vain.

I know this might seem overly prescriptive, but once you’ve found your decluttering groove and strengthened those muscles, this will become second-nature. Then the fun really begins!
If you spend any time reading my words or listening to my thoughts on simple living, you’ll understand a couple of things about me.

One: I’m a little sarcastic.

Two: I’m all about baby steps.

In fact, I see baby steps as the new giant leaps.

The key is that these baby steps need to be regular and consistent, not slap-dash and whenever the mood strikes. When we’re consistent with taking baby steps, they become the everyday actions that add up to enormous changes over time.

Because you are busy. You are tired. You are stressed. You are overwhelmed at the idea of adding another task or commitment to your life. Particularly an all-encompassing commitment like, “live simpler”. How do you include that on your to-do list?

But with baby steps, it doesn’t need to be imposing. You can make big life changes this year by choosing small actions every day that don’t feel any harder than what you’re already doing.

How?

**Baby steps, my friend. Baby steps.**

And over time, as you string together a handful of these baby steps, you will realise you are living simpler. You are less stressed. Your home is less cluttered.
Try one of these today:

1. Clear out your purse, wallet or handbag and keep it free of clutter for 1 week.
2. Instead of putting the mail on the end of the kitchen bench when you get in the door, try opening and dealing with it straight away. (Open, recycle, file, action).
3. Remove five unused items from your wardrobe.
4. Choose one flat surface in the living room (or if that’s too overwhelming, choose one corner of one flat surface) and remove all clutter. Keep it free of clutter for 7 days. Then move on to the next flat surface. Declutter that space and keep it clutter-free for another week.
5. Wake up 15 minutes earlier every day for a week, and use that time to prepare for the morning rush.
6. Go to bed 15 minutes earlier and use the time to unwind.
7. Say no to one social commitment or invitation and spend the time with your family, watching a movie or playing in the yard.

None of these is difficult, and many of them are not about decluttering at all. But add these small actions together and life starts to look calmer, your home more inviting, and life just…simpler.

The key here is not the size of the action, but the commitment to do it every day.

As you see the results, you’ll want to do more – get organised, declutter, go green, eat well. And as you string together more and more of these baby steps every day, you’ll soon realise simple living is something you are doing every day.
I am not a natural organiser. I am a procrastinator, a pile-maker, a do-it-laterer. I battle with my inner-creative – the one who wants to create and make messes and damn the consequences – on a daily basis.

In fact, part of me wishes I could outsource all my organising to someone else. Happily paying someone else to come into my life to organise everything – meals, finances, wardrobes, housework, storage, toys, photos, schedules, health.

Leaving me with the fun stuff – family time, holidays, weekends, play, afternoons on the deck drinking gin and tonic.

How’s that for freedom?

Sounds fabulous, except for one thing. Those meals, the finances, the clothes we wear, the housework, the schedules - it’s called life.

And I wouldn’t want to outsource life. As much as I battle with being organised, I sure as hell wouldn’t want to miss out on life. Or the beauty of living that life fully.

So the housework, the meals, the finances, the laundry, the schedules? They have to stay. Because the exciting, wondrous, beautiful parts wouldn’t be so exciting or beautiful or wondrous without the everyday and the mundane.

And This is Where Simple Living Comes In...

So I get organised. I simplify. I pare back. Declutter. Drop expectations. Find what works for us and go that way – not some other, socially accepted path.

Simple living is all about creating time and space.

Time to relax, spend with friends, relish the company of your loved ones, pursue a passion, do fulfilling work, help others.
And space to enjoy the things that matter, highlight what's important, dream, create, feel contentment and joy and happiness.

**In other words – freedom.**

This is the freedom we aspire to here. On this blog. In this community.

We simplify and organise so that we can experience life fully. It gives us the space, the time – the freedom – to embrace life completely. Housework, laundry, warts and all.

Choosing to live a simpler life means we are not weighed down by the clutter, the stress, the guilt, so we have the freedom to really live.

And it's beautiful.

*(A side note: I am acutely aware that this level of freedom is not afforded millions of people. For so many (too many), freedom may be the choice to vote or to attend school or live without fear. I am not being flip about their freedom.)*
Simple living is not just about decluttering our cupboards, saying no to extra commitments and learning to live with less. For me, one key element of living a simpler life is also learning to tread more lightly on our planet. To be good stewards of the earth.

This means learning to live green when and where we can.

I know a statement like that is often met with eye rolls and exasperation. Not only are we bombarded with the message that we need to be doing more to 'save our planet' every day, but you already have enough to do without adding something else to the list. Right?

But the easiest place to start living green? It's in your home. And it takes much less time and effort than you would imagine.

And starting is as simple as:

**Replacing one of your household cleaners with a homemade green cleaning alternative.**

Next time you are at the grocery shop, pick up these four things:

1. an empty spray bottle with an adjustable nozzle
2. a bottle of white vinegar
3. a box of baking soda
4. a tub of citric acid

You can then use a combination of these to clean most surfaces in your home, including:

- kitchen bench
- oven
- stovetop
- coffee machine
- kettle

*Sow Your Home*
• blocked drains
• shower – glass and tiles
• bath
• vanity
• mirrors
• glass doors
• windows
• toilets
• grout

Add some essential oils (lavender, tea tree and clove are all I use) and you have an entire green cleaning kit for your home.

The reality is, you do not need a cupboard full of expensive, dangerous chemicals to keep your home clean. A handful of natural, non-toxic alternatives is all you need.

It's all I've used for 3 years, and as far as I can tell, my house isn't a nest of filth and mould. It's simple, it's green, it's easy and it works.

For example, to clean the kitchen sink and bench-tops:

1. Sprinkle the surface lightly with bicarb soda and spray with white vinegar.
2. Leave for a few moments, then using a clean damp cloth, scrub the surfaces that require deep cleaning. The bicarb acts as a scouring agent and will lift stains off your bench-tops and stainless steel sink, while the vinegar helps to remove bacteria.
3. Rinse with a clean cloth and wipe dry.

(Of course, always test on an inconspicuous surface to ensure there are no problems.)

If you're looking for more recipes and suggestions, check out the Ultimate Guide to Green Cleaning.

Other Simple Ways to Live Green:

Reduce Household Waste:

• compost your food scraps
• buy chickens
• buy only what you need
• eat leftovers
• reduce plastic waste by buying in bulk
• purchase reusable produce bags

Buy Less:

• do you need it?
• will it last?
• have a 30-day buy list
Use Your Resources:

- line dry your laundry
- use ceiling fans instead of air con
- use window coverings to regulate heat and cold

Make Your Own:

- household cleaners
- laundry liquid
When I started this blog it really should have been called Slow Your House, because that's all I focused on. Four walls, a roof and the stuff in between.

I wasn't in a good place in myself and wasn't mentally prepared to take on the emotional clutter I was lugging around. So instead I focused solely on what was in my control – our surrounding environment.

I worked on creating an environment that was:

1. organised
2. decluttered
3. simplified
4. decorated mindfully
5. light and airy
6. eco-conscious

Looking back, I was working on our house. Not our home.

“Home Is Where the Heart Is”

If that old adage is true, I wasn't working on my home at all, because I wasn't working on my heart. My heart certainly wasn't in the stacks of papers I decluttered, or the boxes of clothes I donated. My heart was, and still is:

- family
- relationships
- memories
- health
- creativity
- spirituality
- travel
- adventure

Slow Your Home
Home is safety. Home is warmth. Home is comfort. Home is support. Yes, home is also the four walls and roof of the building we live in. Home is the kitchen, the garden and the belongings we've collected over the years.

But as long as those important things – family, relationships, health, spirituality – make up the majority of your home, then you carry that security and warmth and support with you wherever you go.

Home can't burn down. Home can't get left behind. Home is completely portable. Home is in you.

The stuff that we assign so much importance to – the house, the garden, the clothes, the television sets and pools and cars – it's not your home. And realising that simple truth is a huge part of the simple living journey.

It's also a huge part of finding happiness.
QUICK QUESTION: How many emails – both unopened and read – do you currently have sitting in your inbox?

A quick (and completely unscientific) Facebook and Twitter poll tells me the average reader of this blog has 1741 emails in their inbox.

1741 emails stressing you out
1741 emails reminding you of your inaction
1741 emails weighing you down every time you open your computer

Working to create a simpler life means reducing stress, cutting back on clutter – both emotional and physical – reducing commitments and banishing guilt.

Having an inbox crammed with 1741 emails is not going to help you create that simpler life.

Next question: Do you believe it could be zero by tomorrow?

Because it absolutely can.

Currently I have 231 emails in my inbox, which is a blowout. As soon as this post is finished, I'll be dealing with that.

But last month I had over 1000 emails sitting there, taunting me.

I was sick of feeling guilty and overwhelmed every time I checked my email, so I decided to get all ninja on my inbox. An hour later it was down to 14 – it had no idea what hit it.

Here's how to get your inbox under control, no matter how big the number that's staring back at you.

Slow Your Home
1. Set Up Your Folders

You need a simple, effective filing system that will make sense to you. When creating your folders, keep the following in mind:

- Try to limit the number of folders to under ten.
- Keep the folder names broad. Anything too specific will become cumbersome and you will be less likely to use it.
- Don't have an Action folder. These have never worked for me, so I keep any email that requires action (a reply, a bill to be paid, etc) in my inbox.
- You can always add another folder later if the need for one arises. Keep it simple until then.

For example. My mail folders are:

- Admin – bills, technical info for the website, email etc.
- Courses – login details for online courses I've attended, course materials, links to online groups, etc
- Guest Posting
- Personal – recipes etc
- Slow Home BootCamp
- Thank You Emails – for the multiple emails a week I get from readers

Keeping it broad helps me to make quick decisions when I'm sorting my inbox every day or two. (OK, every week or two.)

2. Sort by Sender

Now you're ready to delete with wild abandon.

First step – sort your inbox by sender. (There should be a tab at the top of your email provider that allows you to sort by date, sender, subject, etc.)

Sorting by sender means you're able to delete huge amounts immediately. Look for big chunks of unread or out-of-date emails from one sender at a time.

At this stage don't even worry about single emails from people, just look for the big chunks. Delete:

- Email newsletters you receive but never read
- Blog updates you receive via email but don't open
- Shopping sites and deals sites you no longer use
- Auto response emails
- Alerts
- No-reply emails

This will clear hundreds, if not thousands of unread/unwanted emails from your inbox in a matter of minutes.
3. Sort by Subject

Once you've gone through your entire inbox by sender, it's time to re-sort the remaining emails by subject.

This will help weed out the email threads you no longer need or care about.

Again, look for the big chunks of emails that share a subject line. Delete any that are out-of-date or unwanted.

Some of the prime suspects:

- Email threads you've been CC'd on but have no need for
- Organising a now passed event
- Offers you've been forwarded
- Comment threads you've subscribed to

Once you've moved through your inbox again, it will start to look much more manageable.

4. File, Delete or Action

Now it's time to wade through what remains. Depending on how many emails you've already deleted, this may take a few minutes, or significantly longer.

Regardless, just start at the top and move through the contents of your inbox as quickly as possible. Each email needs to be:

- filed in its appropriate folder – if it contains info you will need access to at a later date
- deleted – if it is out of date, unwanted, or readily available online
- actioned – if it requires action on your part (a reply or a specific action) leave it in your inbox

This will leave you with an inbox of emails requiring something of you, and working through these is the last step. Inbox Zero awaits!

5. Action

Hopefully there won't be too many unanswered emails staring back at you, but I know all too well the feeling of being overwhelmed by the state of my inbox and studiously ignoring its contents for days or weeks. Ahem…

So if there is a lot to work through, take a deep breath and just start at the top. As you go through each email, respond as needed and delete it or file it away.

Make your replies as quick as possible, and if there are any emails that need a longer response, leave them until the end.

Slow Your Home
Once you've worked through them all, pour yourself a stiff drink or a cup of tea, dance a celebratory jig and revel in the feeling of not owing anyone an email. It's a good feeling.

Staying at Zero

Some tips to make sure your inbox stays at zero (or at least under 20 – which is my personal goal):

• Unsubscribe as newsletters and updates hit your inbox – providing A) it's not the Slow Your Home newsletter and B) you no longer read it
• Unsubscribe from daily alerts and deal sites as they hit your inbox – unless you regularly find them useful
• Set aside a time each day to respond to emails – you will be more productive in 15 uninterrupted minutes than if you check emails multiple times a day but never respond
• Clear your inbox back to zero every few days – it's incredible how quickly the information can add up if left to silently multiply
If you took life to its absolute barest of essentials – food and shelter – that would qualify as a life of simplicity, wouldn’t it?

You would have all the very basics covered – food to sustain you, shelter to protect you. You could exist.

That is a simple life, isn’t it?


Where is the exploration, the happiness, the discovery of new things, the comfort of love and familiarity? Where is the creativity? The spirituality? The sharing a joke with an old friend? The generosity?

Where is the joy?

What Does Joy Have to do With Simple Living?

Joy is a hugely important part of simple living.

You can live simply with just food and shelter. But joy brings depth and warmth and excitement and happiness to our lives. It is a beautiful by-product of living a simple life.

But joy doesn’t just happen. Just like anything worthwhile, you need to work at it. You need to bring the joy.

When you’re searching for joy, start small:

• Joy is experiencing the tiny details of life – the mundane, small and insignificant.
• Joy is understanding that nothing really is small or insignificant.
• Joy is finding beauty unexpectedly. An empty room, a sunset glimpsed on a skyscraper window, dust dancing in the air, ants crawling in a perfect line across the grass. Joy is pausing to soak it up.
• Joy is laughter.
• Joy is a smile and a giggle bubbling up from deep within for no apparent reason.
• Joy is tears in your eyes as you watch your kids dance.

The big joys – giving, sharing, loving – they follow.

Simplify Your Life to Bring More Joy

If we’re buried under the weight of things – things from our past, things from a future that never happened, things we don’t care for – joy will be more difficult to find.

If we’re struggling beneath the heaviness of a life crammed full of commitments, toxic relationships, comparison and materialistic envy – how the hell can we expect to find true joy?

We’re too heavy. We’re too stuck.

But choosing to live more simply, to live more intentionally, to live with less, means we grow lighter.

We have the space and the energy to take notice more, to appreciate more, to laugh more, to love more. We have the space and energy for joy.

That is why we’re all on this path, isn’t it? To find a better way, a simpler way, a happier way. A more joyful way.

If you feel like all you are doing is stripping things away from your life, remember that you are making space for happiness, love, depth, fun, beauty.

You are making space for joy.
Creating a life of simplicity is not hard. But it is complicated.

And being surrounded by people who don't understand, people who don't agree or people who are outright derisory of the idea can make it more complicated.

As someone who is a passionate advocate for living with less, I don't often talk about decluttering and minimalism offline.

Partly because I don't think I have all the answers, nor the ego to assume my way is the best and only way to live. I also want to avoid being that person who talks incessantly about their new interest, passion or job and who you can't wait to escape from at a dinner party. You know that person?

That being said, making big, important changes to your life is much, much easier when you have access to a support network of like-minded people.

You have people to bounce ideas off, you learn from those who have gone before you, you impart your experiences on people following behind. You are exposed to different views, opposing perspectives and both the length and breadth of experience that each person has to offer.

The beauty of our connected, digital world is that we can meet like-minded people from all around the globe. There are over 6,500 of these like-minded folks in my Facebook group and we are from all corners of this blue planet. There we share our struggles with simplifying, our victories, our questions and our experiences, and lives are richer for it.

Having people who 'get you' can help a great deal as you move through the process of simplifying your home and life, so if you're needing support or encouragement please come and join us.
Today, I want you to meet my kindred spirits. I'm going to introduce you to a group of writers who help keep me inspired, motivated and aiming higher on my simple living journey. Some I know personally and others I admire from afar.

**Leo Babauta – Zen Habits**

The spiritual godfather of simplicity, Leo is a one-man world-changer. He writes beautifully, he motivates and he inspires. He is so generous with his experiences, both in living a very simple, beautiful life with his wife and six kids, as well as sharing how he harnessed his passion to become a super-successful entrepreneur.

[Blog] [About] | Recently: [The Art of Being my Dad]

**Joshua Becker – Becoming Minimalist**

Another passionate family man, Joshua inspires me to embrace not only living with less, but the joys and struggles that brings. He is fully aware of the challenges this lifestyle can bring our way, but his family’s story proves just how worthwhile a change it is.

As a suburban dad and husband, his journey towards simple living is so accessible – it's the story of the everyman – but his spirit and kindness have elevated that to something much greater. I am always, always inspired after reading his blog.

[Blog] [About] | Recently: [9 Important Strategies for Raising Kids in a World of Technology]

**Rachel Jonat – The Minimalist Mom**

The first of my kindred spirits who is raising a young family, I love the perspective Rachel brings in her approach to a simple life. Having young kids in the house changes your ideas of simplicity and minimalism – whether you like it or not.

Rachel and her husband have given up so much of their stuff so they can experience the world more fully. She has “two pairs of jeans, no car, no debt, more time and less stress.” She also made a sea-change to the Isle of Man and frequently travels with her family.

[Blog] [About] | Recently: [20 Minute Clutter Challenge – Task #1]

**Courtney Carver – Be More With Less**

One of the first simple living blogs I found, Courtney gives not only a woman's perspective on living with less, but a mindful, intelligent, chic and health-conscious woman. Her writing is thought-provoking and poignant, but also funny and sweet. Her minimalist fashion program – *Project333* – is a must-read for anyone looking to simplify their wardrobes to the (fashionable) essentials.

[Blog] [About] | Recently: [Minimalism is Everything]
Tsh Oxenreider – The Art of Simple

Tsh and her family of 5 are currently travelling the world. And while her thoughtful and practical posts on simplicity have seen me make dozens of massive changes to our own family life, it’s her philosophy of travel, exploration and intention that make her a true kindred spirit. Plus, her and her husband feel that a passport is one of the greatest gifts parents can share with their children. Which is something I can really get behind.

Blog | About | Recently: Coffee in my Soul

Joshua Fields Milburn and Ryan Nicodemus – The Minimalists

Late last year I had the pleasure of meeting these guys in Sydney, and was so struck by their warmth and passion for simplicity. They write essays – some short, some long – about living a simpler life with less stuff. What's more, they back it up with their actions everyday and they do it while maintaining some very impressive hair.

Blog | About | Recently: That Was Fun

Kindred spirits don't have to share exactly the same perspective as you. (Where's the fun in that?) But there will be a true connection between the way you and they see the world. You will feel like they are speaking to you. And if you're really lucky, they may just help change your life.
When we talk about creating a simpler life, the conversation often revolves around reducing our stuff. Sorting, purging, decluttering, de-owning.

And undoubtedly that is a huge part of the simple living journey. We will struggle to live simply if we are weighed down by our belongings.

But let's talk about you for a minute.

You are a person of depth and complexity. You have strengths and needs and heart and soul. You are lovely and mysterious and ever-growing. You are not just your stuff. In fact, your stuff doesn't define you at all.

So it makes sense that the simple living journey extends well beyond your stuff too.

What about your time? What about simplifying your time?

Tell me if this sounds familiar:

You feel overwhelmed by commitment, no time to stop, no time to breathe in the scent of those roses. You wish you could slow down and appreciate what you have – you know it's a lot – but you simply do not have time.

Today I want to tell you that there is time. You may not agree. You may not like to hear it. You may click away in disgust.

“What would she know? She doesn't know how busy my life is. How many commitments I have. How much responsibility weighs on my shoulders.”

And you're right – I don't. But here's the heart of the matter…

You can find more time by limiting your commitments.
Commitment and responsibility are part of adult life. And while some people resent that they are tied to these commitments, they are good for us. To a point.

Family, partner, school, work, sport, health and friendships.

Commitment and responsibility help us think outside ourselves and our own immediate needs. They help us expand our worldview and keep us from becoming entirely selfish.

But they can also rob us of precious limited time and energy.

Daily extracurricular activities for your kids, an overly-full social calendar, volunteering for multiple committees, saying yes when you should be saying no.

Too many of these commitments leave us depleted, exhausted and unable to give time and energy to the commitments that mean the most.

By choosing to limit your commitments, you will find more time to:

- **have slow weekends** – the kind where pyjamas are worn, movies are watched and coffees are lingered over
- **say yes to opportunities and last-minute plans** – like when friends call on Friday afternoon and invite you to dinner
- **take spontaneous trips and adventures** – an unexpected day at the beach when the weather is just too good to miss
- **experience downtime every day** – a ten-minute siesta or a swing in the hammock – these things shouldn't only happen on holidays.

**Your Time is Not Unlimited – So Choose Wisely**

Establishing your priorities in life will make it easy to say yes and easier to say no. (Because none of us love saying no.) In addition to the inevitable commitments of going to work, feeding your family, paying your bills and managing a household, which of the following commitments is important to you?

Write them down. Make a list. Stick it to your fridge. You need to understand what is most important in your life.

- **time with your spouse or partner**: offering your support, your time, your love
- **time with your kids**: their daily care, taking them to school, play, reading, laughing, teaching, loving
- **church/spirituality**: attending organised church, prayer, meditation, study
- **commitment to yourself**: self-care, exercise, alone time
- **time with your extended family**: time to catch up, phone calls, get-togethers, birthdays, holidays
- **time with your friends**: feeding your soul and theirs with meaningful connections and relationships
- **health**: committing to exercise, healthy eating and daily activity for both you and your family
- **volunteering**: helping others less fortunate or using our personal skills to improve an organisation

Slow Your Home
Add to that list any other commitment you value and use it as a roadmap when it comes to simplifying your time.

It's OK to Say No.

When faced with a new social event, committee invitation or extracurricular activity for your kids, ask yourself if it aligns with these priorities. If it doesn't, you will find it much easier saying no.

Ask yourself if this new commitment will:

- overload your kids' schedules?
- take you away from your family regularly?
- interfere with your relationships?
- foster resentment in yourself and/or others?

When you've got your roadmap right there, telling you where your priorities lay, it will be easier to make your choices.

Remember: your time is finite. So choose wisely.
Meal planning.

You understand the benefits. You know it’s a good idea. You can see it helps save both money and energy.

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?

But the reality is that 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.

Where to Start:

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.

6. Enjoy not having to scrounge for ideas and ingredients at 5pm.

Meal-Planning Hacks to Make Your Job 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 we have them once a week at least. I haven’t had a complaint yet.

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.
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.

All You Have to Lose is Time Spent at the Shop

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.
I am absolutely a dog person. Their playfulness, loyalty and capacity for love are characteristics that keep me firmly in the canine field.

That being said, there are certain personality traits of cats I can’t help but admire. Like their capacity for idleness – cats do nothing like it’s their job. And that’s something I dig a whole lot.

The Lost Art of Doing Nothing

Practicing nothingness is an important part of living a simpler life, and one that is overlooked constantly. Because no-one wants to be thought of as lazy and somewhere along the way – between the practice of productivity, efficiency and multi-tasking – doing nothing and laziness became one and the same.

Trust me – they’re not.

Doing nothing – for even five minutes a day – will help melt away stress, bring you back into the present and give you time to let noise and stimulus and information out rather than constantly cramming it in.

If you can manage to find 5-10 minutes of idle time most days, you will begin to feel the impact within a week.

How to Do Nothing

It seems ridiculous that we need instructions on how to be idle, but it truly is a lost art. We’re so afraid of being labelled lazy or unmotivated or unproductive, that we have become averse to nothingness.
1. Find time

First you need to find a block of time. Five to ten minutes is enough.

Ideally this time will be out of work hours and when you are less likely to be disrupted by the people you live with.

If you have little kids, maybe put a show on the TV or laptop or wait until they’re asleep (because we all know the capacity for interruption that little kids have.) If your kids are older, or if you live with housemates, just let them know you’d like to not be disturbed.

2. Find space

Pick a space that makes you comfortable. This could be your bedroom, the lounge, outside on the grass, the park outside your office or your front steps.

Choose an uncluttered space that won’t add to your stress. For example, if you choose to lay on your bed, make sure it’s made and free of clothes/toys/handbags.

3. Disconnect

Turn off your mobile, resolve not to answer the home phone, ensure the computer is not on (or ideally not even in the same room), switch off the TV and the radio.

You can’t truly be doing nothing if your mind is occupied by thoughts of work or friends or Facebook. So switch off. The world will not stop turning – I promise.

4. Breathe

Once you’re settled, take some deep, cleansing breaths.

Slow them down and focus on the air passing into your lungs and being pushed out again. Be mindful of the feel of your breath going in cold and coming out warmer. Make your breathing the one thing you are thinking about.

5. Stay focused

Your mind will wander. Unless you practice meditation already it will most likely wander immediately. Just keep bringing it back to your breath.

In and out. Cool and warm. Pull and push.

6. Float

As you get better at emptying your mind – and keeping it empty – you will be able to let thoughts float into your mind without really engaging them. Like noticing a butterfly in the garden, but doing no more. “There’s a butterfly. How nice.” And then it’s gone again.

7. Rest
Stay as long as you can, just soaking in the idleness, focusing on your breath, giving your mind a break from the constant flow of information and activity.

Ideas for Idleness

Once you’ve mastered the art of emptying your mind, you can start to get a little more creative with your idle time.

You could try:

- Watching clouds
- Wandering
- Wondering
- Laying on the grass watching ants crawl around
- Picking up a handful of sand or dirt and repeatedly letting it trickle out between your fingers
- Laying on your bed watching the shadows
- Studying your ceiling
- Taking inventory of your body parts
- Watching dust motes dance across the room.

Or, if you’re really stuck, there is actually an app that promotes this exact idea of embracing nothingness. Check it out – the wave sounds are truly beautiful.
So often simplifying is mentioned in the same breath as organising.

The logic goes: in order to be living a truly simple life, you must have a host of systems in place that will organise every aspect of your day.

You can schedule your hours, systematise your housework, organise your wardrobe, catalogue your paperwork, arrange your kitchen utensils, reconfigure your garage to hold more stuff and roster your down-time.

But true simplicity means many of those systems are unnecessary.

- I do have a calendar but much of my weekly schedule is in my head, because it’s really not that complicated.
- I don’t need a special shoe rack to organise my shoes – I don’t own that many.
- Filing cabinet? It has one drawer.
- Toys? They all have a place in the play room.

Living a simple life means that being organised for the sake of being organised is largely unnecessary. If you strip away what you do not need, you will find that life doesn’t need much organising at all.

But Being Organised Helps Me!

To a point, yes.

Life is busy. And some organisation helps corral the busy-ness of life into a semblance of order. So I’m not telling you to do away with your diary, bill paying system or ironing baskets. If they help you in creating a less stressful day, wonderful.

But at some point we start to organise instead of simplify.
• Do you need to organise your filing cabinet or clear it of all that is unnecessary?
• Do you need to organise your wardrobe – or remove everything that doesn’t fit and hasn’t been worn?
• Do you need to have a complicated calendar of extra activities for the family – or simplify your schedule?
• Do you need to roster in work meetings – or assess which meetings are essential?
• Do you need that new “storage solution” – or do you just need less stuff?

**Life Is Not Organised**

You need to leave space for life to happen.

**And life is messy. Life is uncertain. Life is spontaneous. Life is not organised.**

You are reading this because you want a simpler, slower life. And while being organised – to a point – means you have time and space for life to unfold peacefully, over doing it means you run the very real risk of sucking the joy from your days.

And that’s our end goal isn’t it? To rediscover the joy. The zing of doing something spontaneous. The flash of excitement when you realise, “Why the hell not? I’d love to go to the beach/play in the sun/have a nap.”

If you over-do the organising, if you schedule the guts out of your days, weeks, months, school terms, you risk losing one of the biggest joys in life – spontaneity.

So my tip:

**Be as organised as you need to be. No more.**

Organise what you really need. But don’t turn to organisation simply to store more stuff in your space or cram more commitments in your days. The key is to take away what isn’t necessary and good. There you will find your simpler life.
“Do, or do not. There is no try.” (Yoda)

Starting something new is easy.

- 2nd January at the gym
- Salad and juices on a Monday
- Alarm set for 5am tomorrow

These things are easy to do once, twice, maybe five times, because motivation and inspiration carry you along in the beginning.

But what happens when that motivation wears off? When life gets busy and suddenly that new habit you valued so highly slips by the wayside?

- The gym membership is a monthly reminder that you haven’t exercised in weeks.
- The latte and muffin for breakfast, because you didn’t have time to make something.
- The snooze button gets hit in the morning because you need just another ten minutes.

This is where perseverance comes in. A certain single-mindedness. Conviction from the very beginning that what you’re doing is important enough to keep on with, even when life gets busy.

If you have this then you have everything you need to change your life.

When Life Gets Cluttered

Somewhere along the way you made a decision to live a simpler, slower, happier life. That will prove to be one of the best decisions of your life.

But despite your best efforts, complications and clutter try to weasel their way back into your life – frequently. Part of that is just life. Sorry.
But there are ways to combat the inevitable slip in motivation. Ways to keep simplifying, to keep saying no, to keep being mindful.

There are ways to persevere, even when life is telling you to just give up.

1. **Know Your Why.**

When things get complicated, it’s important to know why you are doing this in the first place. Use your why as motivation to keep going.

Why are you creating a simpler life? Is it to:

- find happiness
- feel more in control of your life
- make time for the things that are truly important
- be active in watching your kids grow up
- make time for things you’re passionate about
- nurture your relationships
- get healthy
- live in a home that calms you
- have less cleaning
- make more time to relax, to read, to spend alone, to spend with someone else?

Once you have your why, you can refer back to it time and time again. Write it down, stick it on the fridge, tape it to your wall, make it your computer background. This is your weapon against Old Ways. Wield it whenever you need to persevere.

2. **Roll With the Punches – Sometimes**

If you battle against the world to keep your life simple and slow – at all costs – you will wind up exhausted and far more likely to fail.

Some days are crazy – there is no way around this. If you have your Why firmly in mind and are doing **most** things right **most** of the time, you will get back on track the next day.

Nothing and no-one is perfect – so roll with it.

3. **Do Something**

When you’re lacking motivation, when you’re tired, when your Why isn’t enough to keep you going – all you need is one minute. Literally 60 seconds will help you to persevere.

Pick a tiny little task that needs doing and do that.
• pack away the toaster
• remove one item from your wardrobe to donate
• pay that bill
• file that piece of paper
• make the phone call
• schedule the meeting
• make a list
• pick up the toys

Doing something will spur you into action. And even if it doesn’t, you’re one step ahead from where you were a minute ago.

Action inspires motivation.

Watch Your New Life Emerge

Eventually, if you keep your Why at the forefront of your mind and just keep doing something – a simpler, happier life will emerge. Which is what we’re looking for, isn’t it?
“Quality over quantity.”

It’s such a cliche. So much so that I nearly didn’t include it in the A-Z of Simple Living. But it is just too important to ignore.

I think we need to look for quality over quantity in all things. But today I’m not really talking about the clothes you wear or the furniture you own. I’m not discussing the house you live on or the make-up you wear, the toys your kids play with or sporting gear you exercise in. I’m not really looking at stuff at all. Because simple living is about so much more than stuff.

Hell, life is about so much more than stuff.

No. What I’m talking about are the immeasurable things. The really important things. The things that actually matter. I’m talking about the quality of those things.


Think about the quality of these things:

• 15 minutes of good, real, honest conversation with your best friend is so much more significant than shallow small-talk with a room full of acquaintances.
• An hour reading with your kids is so much more important than a whole weekend passively watching TV.
• A morning chat over a coffee with your lover is so much more fulfilling than half a day trudging through IKEA.
• Watching a seriously great television show once a week (Walking Dead, anyone?) is so much more enjoyable than hours on the couch each night, flicking between channels.
Quality over Quantity

When you weigh up the options, it’s hard to disregard the importance of quality. But so often we float along, doing what we’ve always done and getting what we’ve always gotten.

If you adopt the idea of quality over quantity for everything in life, you will, ironically, discover more.

More time, more joy, more space, more fun, more meaning, more love, more presence, more mindfulness.

If you focus on more of these things:

• Quality relationships
• Quality time
• Quality words
• Quality play
• Quality rest
• Quality food
• Quality entertainment
• Quality friends
• Quality reading

What do you stand to lose by focusing on quality over quantity?

And, more importantly, what do you have to gain?
Despite what many people think of minimalism or simple living – namely that it’s about living in a sparse white house with few personal touches – I’m here to tell you it’s not a matter of tossing out mementoes, forsaking the past and disregarding sentimentality.

Actually, for some it might be. And that’s cool. Whatever floats your boat.

But what can’t be denied is this: simplicity is about stripping back the inessential. Promoting what you love and paying attention to what is important. So to disregard your past and cast off all photos, mementoes and markers of time is unnecessary.

Instead, we need to make time and space to mindfully remember.

**Stuff Doesn't Equal Memories**

It’s important to understand that your memories – while tied to a certain item – are not in that item. And if you give the item away, you are not forsaking the memories attached to it.

People are afraid of forgetting, I get that. You’re afraid of forgetting people, moments, feelings. So you hold on to everything that reminds you and everything that could potentially remind you. You hold on out of fear and guilt.

But instead of blindly holding on, make time to mindfully remember. Mindfully remember the past and then go live in the present.

Life is a river. You cannot, no matter how hard you try, hold on to the water that flows swiftly through your fingers. It passes straight through, regardless of whether you want it to or not.

Memories fade. It’s a truth.
And if you spend your days trying desperately to remember, to preserve feelings and thoughts and experiences that have already happened, you are not living. You aren’t engaged in the moment. You aren’t present. You aren’t paying attention to what is happening right in front of you. And what is that saying to the people you’re with?

Yes, the glory days were wonderful. You were young, beautiful, free, adventurous, untethered, needed, loved, nurtured, maternal or the life of the party.

And guess what? Today you can be beautiful, free, adventurous, needed and loved. You can be all those things. So celebrate by living it. Today.

What Does This Look Like – in Real Life?

All this might sound fine in theory.

But what about being faced with real-life decisions? What about artwork from your kids? Gifts from your loved ones? Family heirlooms? This stuff also makes up life, and to disregard it completely is to stick your head in the sand. At some point you will have to make decisions about what to do with it.

Instead of mindlessly holding on to all of it, you need to make time and space to mindfully remember.

Choose a photo of a happy time – a holiday, family reunion a particularly joyful afternoon in the garden – and display it. Give it space. Celebrate it. Remember it. Because one photo on an otherwise empty shelf tells you and those who see it that this moment, this person, this event is worth remembering.

Create one photobook each year, and include all your favourite images in it. Holidays, birthdays, sunrises, cheeky grins – all those moments worth celebrating. That one photobook of images from the past year is an act of mindfully remembering.

Pick a family heirloom and display it. Give it space and a place of importance. One crystal bowl from your grandmother displayed on your otherwise bare dining table means so much more than five of them covered in dust and packed away in the garage. Celebrating that one item speaks volumes on how you feel about her.

If it’s a memory rather than a thing, get it on paper. Write a note about how you felt when your husband proposed/your daughter was born/you got your job/bought your puppy/the plane took off on your first trip. Frame it, stick it to the fridge, include in your photobook. Celebrate it and mindfully remember.

However you decide to celebrate your memories, it’s important to give them space. They need space and light and room to breathe. And for some, the space required to celebrate these things seems like emptiness. But I believe these moments deserve space.

We absolutely need to remember.

We need to remember in order to learn. To celebrate. To appreciate where we’ve come from and how much we’ve grown. To remember who we love and how we’ve loved them.
We need to mindfully and intentionally remember. Not out of fear or guilt, but out of love and joy and respect.

The way you remember matters.
One essential part of creating a simple life is Space.

You need white space, empty space, your own space.

You need spaces that act as nothing more than a buffer, an empty spot for your eyes to rest, a safety net, an escape from the constancy of daily life.

The opposite of space and the enemy of simplicity is cramming. You cram when you try to fit:

• another commitment into your diary  
• a new book onto the shelf  
• one more t-shirt into the drawer  
• a new after-school activity into the kids’ schedules  
• an extra responsibility into your work day  
• a new ambition into your long-term goals  
• another knick-knack onto the shelf  
• another box of stuff into the garage

5 Areas of Your Life That Need Space

**White Space**

Highlight the things you want to celebrate by surrounding them with white space. A painting on an otherwise bare wall. A photo of a cherished day. A lamp on a side table. What better way to communicate the importance of the item, the person who gave it to you or the memory it evokes than give it space to be appreciated?

Use white space on your:

• walls
  
*Slow Your Home*
Mental Space

Most people I know are mentally overwhelmed. There is too much going on – too many responsibilities, too many people, too many requests, too many social commitments, too much to remember.

And yet, when given some precious downtime, so many of us can be found with our noses in a smartphone, flicking through Pinterest, mindlessly browsing Facebook, updating feeds to see what other people are up to.

But to truly simplify, you need to give yourself mental space.

You need quiet time – where you can meditate, pray, rest, read (a real book!), ponder or do absolutely nothing with that beautiful brain of yours.

And to find true quiet time, you need to unplug. Get off the phone, close the laptop, turn off the television, cut the ties of constant connection with the online world and give your brain some space.

Space in Your Days

We schedule the hell out of our days. Between work, train timetables, coffee dates, meetings, school pick ups, kids activities, social events, friends, family, visitors, birthdays, sporting events and exercise, there are huge spans of time that stretch ahead of us, booked out weeks in advance. How exhausting.

You need space in your days.

Space for flexibility and – even more fun – space for spontaneity. Space for an unplanned trip to the beach, or a movie afternoon complete with blanket fort and popcorn. Space for drop-in visitors. Space for hobbies. Space for exploring your neighbourhood.

The key to space in your days is to not overcommit. Which is easier said than done, but absolutely worth trying.

Space in Your Budget

It’s a fact that we don’t know what tomorrow will bring. Unexpected bills, medical emergencies, car and home repairs all have the uncanny knack of arriving when you are least prepared.
So while I am a big proponent of creating and sticking with a household budget, you do need space in your weekly expenses. For those things you weren’t expecting.

Ideally, you want an emergency fund to help with any surprise costs, as well as an additional amount every pay period that can go towards regular savings.

**Space in Your Long-Term Plans**

Having plans and goals is wonderful. Sparky and I have plans for this year, next year and five years time. Having an idea of where you’re headed gives you something to look forward to and something to work towards. It’s exciting and motivational.

On the flip side though, it’s important you don’t lock the details in too early.

You need to leave space in your long-term plans for:

- changes in circumstance
- opportunities that arise
- shift in direction
- changing priorities

Leaving this space doesn’t make you indecisive. It means you’re open to life and all of its possibility.

At some stage, yes, you have to lock it in, bite the bullet and commit. But when you’re still looking at long-term goals and plans, remain open. You avoid unnecessary stress and anxiety, and your imagination will flourish in the space you’ve gifted it with.
Tilting isn’t normally seen as a good thing. It’s something strange and off-putting. It’s even something to be feared, because anything that’s tilting is surely unstable. Think the Tower of Pisa or a rickety bridge.

The reason we think tilting is bad is that we’ve been fed the myth of balance for too long. We think that to be in control means to be balanced across all areas. No leaning. No wavering. No tilting.

To me, and those of you who have read my book, ‘Destination: Simple’ have heard this already, tilting is a positive. And it’s definitely preferable to being balanced.

Essentially it’s denying the idea that everything needs to be perfectly balanced. That we need to perfectly manage the needs of everyone and everything in our life, every day. And that anything less is a failure.

But What About Finding Balance?

If you look at balance as something you need to achieve every day – keeping the scales evenly weighted between your partner, your kids, your family, friends, yourself, your spirituality, health, keeping the home, your work – you simply won’t be able to do it. Because each day brings different challenges, different tasks and different needs from your life.

I am here to tell you that this balancing act is a complete myth. And you should forget about achieving it, because you won’t.

Instead, you need to learn to tilt. To willingly throw things out of balance. And, importantly, to be OK with that.

Actually, you need to embrace it.
A Definition of Tilting

‘Tilting’ is an idea I discovered on Sarah Wilson’s blog and it struck me as wholly sensible, simple, beautiful, flexible and forgiving.

A 2009 study by Marcus Birmingham asked the question “What are happy women doing differently?” And the response was not – as you may imagine – somehow striking the perfect balance between work/life/health/family/passions/spirituality.

“These happy women… realised that balance was impossible (and therefore stressful) to achieve, but also rather boring. Instead, they “tilted” towards activities and commitments they liked and found meaningful.

I love this idea. Tilting.

And here’s why: tilting doesn’t require putting the brakes on.

Braking constantly is exhausting. Saying “no” is exhausting and doing things for balance, rather than because it matters to you is, frankly, martyrish.

Tilting on the other hand is a positive flow forward, a moving “with” life.

Essentially it’s about being aware of the changing pressures of life and being flexible.

Some days:

• Your kids are happy to play independently – tilt towards catching up on tasks around the house.
• Your kids are sick, or needy, or plain grumpy, meaning you can’t get anything done except the very basics. Tilt towards supporting the kids and being extra mindful of what’s going on for them.
• Your partner is under added pressure at work. Tilt towards lessening the load on them at home.
• You need to recharge. Tilt towards being kind to yourself and letting go of the things that don’t help with that.
• You need to regain order at home. Tilt away from social engagements and towards time at home.
• You have a busy time at work. Tilt towards simple meals, light home duties and simple rhythms.

See what I mean?

Tilting allows you to focus on what is important in the moment.

If this idea still makes you feel uncomfortably off-kilter, it can help to take a longer view of things. That is, instead of battling to find balance every day, it’s more important to create it over a month. Or a year.
How Do You Tilt?

It’s not a matter of learning a step-by-step approach. It’s more about adopting the mindset of tilting and keeping the idea in the back of your mind.

It’s about understanding – and accepting – the fact that you can not and will not ever achieve perfect balance. And what’s more, you probably wouldn’t want to.

Achieving and then maintaining a state of balanced perfection would be incredibly stressful and unfulfilling. Instead you need to understand that your time is limited and valuable. And you can choose where to place your energies, depending upon where they need to be.

Ask yourself, what are your priorities in life?

• caring for your kids, physically and emotionally?
• supporting your partner?
• being there for your family when they need you?
• maintaining social relationships with friends?
• working or creating to nourish yourself?
• looking after your own health and well being?
• finding contentment in life?
• creating a home that is calm, warm and open to all those you love?

Then, one-by-one, think about how you have given each of those priorities time, effort and attention over the past six months.

Do they stack up? Do you feel confident that, over this period of time, you are giving them the attention they deserve? Are there any areas that don’t get enough from you? Can you see times where you consistently tilt the wrong way?

Keep in mind, you are the only one who can decide what this balance looks and feels like for you.

But if you keep your priorities in mind, you will find that tilting and adjusting your time and efforts will help you find a much better overall balance, than if you constantly battle to keep things even.
In 2015, we are receiving an average amount of information – per day – far greater than anything our ancestors received in a lifetime.

Isn’t that just… nuts?

Is it little wonder we feel stressed? Strained? Overwhelmed?

What we need is more time to ourselves. More time to just be. More time to engage – really engage – with life.

We need to unplug.

Our constantly connected world has so many advantages. We can communicate across vast distances, virtually experience incredible places, learn from masters and discover anything imaginable with a few clicks of a mouse button or swipe of a finger.

But we are also constantly connected. We carry our smartphones in our pockets, using them as cameras, calendars, notebooks and alarm clocks. We feel naked without at least one source of connection – be it an tablet, a smartphone, a laptop – or all three.

We forget how to simply be. How to immerse ourselves in whatever is in front of us. How to truly engage in face-to-face conversation, personal connections and true down-time. And we are burning out. We are addicted to this digital connection. We are afraid that if we unplug we will miss out on something.

There is a price to pay for this constant level of connection and it is steep unless we learn to offset it with periods of disconnection.
The Power of the Off Switch

Disconnection from the online world allows us to reconnect or fully connect with the physical world in front of us. Fully connect with our kids, our partner, our family, our friends, our work, our environment, our imagination.

Unplugging sounds like such a simple idea. And it really is.

Only once you start to think about how you spend your down time it becomes apparent that while it is simple, it may not be easy.

Think about it:

**How do you like to unwind?**

A glass of wine at the end of the day? Reading a book? Flicking through a magazine? Spending time in the garden? Wonderful.

What about reading blogs? Or ebooks? Watching TV while you enjoy that glass of wine? Flicking through a digital version of your magazine? Not to mention Facebook? Twitter? Pinterest?

The second list may be ways you like to relax, but you are still connected. The virtual world is still there, pulling you in 32 opposing directions, tempting you to learn more, see more, know more.

**Powering Down – Daily**

This involves taking time every day and unplugging from the constantly connected world.

It means unplugging from your:

- laptop
- email
- smartphone
- TV

Switch them all off and do something in the physical world.

You could try:

- sitting quietly
- reading
- walking
- playing with your kids
- writing
- talking with your partner or spouse
- prayer
- meditation

*Slow Your Home*
• yoga
• simple stretching exercises
• sipping a coffee outside, watching the sky, hearing the birds.

The important thing is that you connect with the real world, or allow your mind to access a different virtual one – the world of your imagination.

If You’re Having Trouble Unplugging...

If it’s proving difficult to find time for this ritual, you could try:

• unplugging on the bus or train on your way to and from work
• getting up earlier and enjoy the early morning quiet without plugging in to your computer or phone – the emails can wait fifteen minutes
• leaving for the gym 15 minutes earlier and find a quiet spot to sit
• watching one less television show at night or DVR it and come back to it later
• making a real effort to cut back on social media – I’m looking at you, Facebook and Twitter. Cut it in half and use that time to be fully in the offline world. How many Twitter updates do you really need to scroll through anyway?

However you choose to do it, make it a priority to get downtime each and every day.
In this case I’m not talking about things of monetary value (although that could be part of it) and I’m not talking about moral and ethical values. Instead, I’m asking what regular, everyday things do you value? What people, relationships, experiences, feelings, rituals and belongings do you hold dear?

Or put another way, if you removed everything that didn’t matter – the clutter, the complications, the drama, the ‘shoulds’, the guilt – to get to the very core of what is essential to you, what would remain?

Perhaps, like me, you value:

- chatting over a coffee with your partner?
- quality time spent with your kids – as opposed to ‘busy’ time?
- reading good books?
- travelling – locally and abroad?
- listening to good music?
- afternoon naps?
- work that satisfies you?
- helping people?
- the din of a house full of family and friends?
- time spent on your health?
- time spent alone?

Whatever your answers, I want you to know that these things matter.

Yes, they may seem trivial when viewed as part of the Big Picture. Frivolous. Selfish even. And I can tell you they certainly don’t make up the majority of my day. That privilege goes to…housework.

But I think these little sparkles are the jewels in life.
• Embracing afternoon naps will not change the world – but will change your day.
• Listening to music will not stop climate change – but it does refill your creative fuel tank.
• Travelling does not cure disease – but it opens your mind and heart.

If we’re simplifying in order to find a better way of life, don’t you think we should try and include more of these things we value? What are we doing it for if not to have at least the opportunity for more of these moments?

Life is, after all, for living.
"The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper."
(W.B. Yeats)

Simple living is many things. It's:

- a commitment
- decluttering
- making green choices
- tilting, rather than balancing
- unplugging

But it's also beauty and wonder and joy. Because if not for beauty; for unexpected moments of joy or delight; creativity and wonderment, then what are we working for?

It goes against the grain of our 'efficiency and productivity at all costs' society, but taking time to wonder and making space for wonder is one of the keys to a simpler, happier, more satisfied life.

Wonder of Curiosity

Take time to think and question, to be curious and to ask how? Why? Who?

Albert Einstein once said, “The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.” And it’s when we stop questioning that we lose the beauty of discovery.

If we didn’t question, we would not have the opportunity to marvel at exactly why the sky is blue, or how a bird’s skeleton is hollow, or the fact that children laugh over 300 times a day while adults manage around 15.

These things, and the world around us, hold such incredible beauty and wonder. If we stop being curious though, we miss out.
The Wonder of Tiny Moments

Dewdrops on a spiderweb, the rise and fall of a sleeping child’s chest, the lacework of shadows on the lawn, the way you and your partner can share a joke and just feel love, the plant flowering in the middle of a 4-lane freeway, the sky’s precise shade of lavender as the sun sets, the ridges and peaks of a knuckle, the warmth of your breath as it passes out your nose.

Take time to notice them.

The Wonder of Enormous Ideas

The sheer size of the night sky, the way music can bring an arena of ten thousand people together, the ocean, unconditional love, the way the least fortunate among us can be the most giving, Earth’s rotation, forgiveness from a child, wisdom.

Let your mind go there.

Wonder brings awareness. It brings gratitude for what we have and where we are right now. It allows us to bask in a very real beauty, even just for a moment. And best of all – it’s not reliant on how much you earn, where you live, what you wear or how many friends you have. Wonder and beauty are everywhere.

And the fact that you can find it in Tel Aviv, Chicago, Bangkok or Wellington is one of the greatest levellers there is. We all have capacity for wonder.
Firstly, let me apologise for the ‘x’. Turns out it’s difficult to come up with a word beginning with ‘x’ that made sense for this series (xylophone? x-ray?) If you can think of a good one, let me know!

Fear holds us back in our efforts to simplify – don’t you think?

- “What if I need this one day?”
- “What if I offend someone by getting rid of their gift?”
- “What if people judge me for wearing the same clothes regularly?”
- “What if someone doesn’t like me after I say no to a commitment?”

I am as guilty as anyone of these fear-based responses. But in the search for a simpler life, I think we should begin to ask, “Why not?”

Why not try? Why not see how this goes? Why not experiment?

**ex·per·i·ment**

[n. ik-sper-uh-muhnt; v. ek-sper-uh-ment]

noun

1. a test, trial, or tentative procedure; an act for the purpose of discovering something unknown or testing a principle.

   *a chemical experiment; a teaching experiment; an experiment in living.*

If we approach change as an experiment rather than a permanent lifestyle shift, there is really nothing to lose by trying something new.

But the key is to actually try something new. Because if nothing changes, then… nothing changes. Simplifying may not be the answer, but we won’t know until we try.
Start With a No-Lose Experiment

Just nudge yourself out of your comfort zone by experimenting with a small change, and ensure you can undo the experiment if it turns out not to work for you.

- Follow the minimalist wardrobe challenge, Project 333. Courtney asks you to live for three months with only 33 items of clothing. Whatever extra clothes you own are put into storage while you see how far a minimal wardrobe can stretch. At the end of the three months, you’ve lost nothing and gained a whole new understanding of what clothes you really need, and what you can let go of.

- Choose a flat surface in your home – a shelf, the top of a chest of drawers, a coffee table or the kitchen bench-top – and clear it of everything. All the stuff that was previously there can be packed away in a box. Live with the empty space for a month and see if you enjoy having somewhere empty to rest your eyes and the calming feeling of a decluttered space. After the month is up you can choose to keep the contents of the box or donate it.

- If you use a smartphone, try removing your email app from it for a week. Use your desktop/laptop for email instead and see how you feel when you’re not constantly on-call. You lose nothing except time, stress and anxiety.

Try a Low-Risk Experiment

- Say no. If you really don’t think you should join another committee or spend another night babysitting, then simply say no. You may be surprised to see the world continues to turn and your friends do not disown you. The small risk, of course, is putting noses out of joint.

- Box up all that beautiful but unused glassware, silverware or home decor. (Weddings gifts, hand-me-downs from family and out-dated items are ripe with this kind of clutter). If it all remains in the box for 3 months and you do not miss it, commit to selling or donating it.

- Scan all your old photos and store them on an external hard-drive and/or on the cloud. Place all the physical photos back in their box and commit to getting rid of the box in months time if you haven’t needed to look at the contents. The small risk is a catastrophic tech fail, where all data is lost and your images can’t be retrieved. Not likely to happen, particularly if you store your images in two separate places.

- Choose one room in your home, or one category of stuff (toys, sporting gear, collectables, books) and hold a packing party. Put all of it away in boxes and only pull items out as needed. Then, after a set amount of time, commit to donating the stuff still in boxes.

Of course you could also opt to go all-in and give away your possessions, move to a tiny home, go travelling for a year or shift your family from the city to a rural property. (Sounds fun!) But in the interests of making steady, small changes, the no-risk and low-risk experiments would be a good place to start. You have nothing to lose, but so much to gain.

Slow Your Home
Embracing simple living feels like saying no a lot.

- No, I won’t buy that dress.
- No, I don’t need to fill that space.
- No, I won’t overcommit my time.
- No, I won’t buy into the drama.

And quite often, we need to say no.

But simple living isn’t about withholding pleasures, going without joy or embracing a life of scarcity. It’s about setting yourself free. Specifically, setting yourself free to say yes more often, yes to the things that are important, yes to actually **living** life.

We can be free to say yes to:

- **space** – both mental and physical
- your kids when they ask you to **play**
- engaging more
- **enjoying** a cup of coffee with your partner – even if there is still work to be done
- finding your passions
- **peace and quiet** – sitting in the stillness is OK
- spontaneous adventures and travel
- getting up earlier

Some of these things you may be already doing, and some you may have no interest in doing. The difference here is choice. We’re making room in our lives – by simplifying – to say yes to more of the things we want to, when we want to.

ASK YOURSELF: What do I want to say yes to? What’s stopping me?
Zero. We equate it with nought, nothing, emptiness.

But in the final installment of the A-Z of Simple Living series (we made it!) zero has two other, far more positive implications.

First, Zero Impact

First, we want to leave zero impact on those who come after us (or as close as possible to it). We want to minimise the burden for our kids, our grandkids and their grandkids.

Simplicity is many things to many people. But one of the common factors in simplifying is our desire to not leave the earth worse than we found it.

Yes, that definitely includes environmental impact, but it doesn’t stop there.

We can ensure, through creating a simpler life, that our zero impact stretches out to include:

1. **Debt** – we do not want to keep spending more than we earn – both as individuals and countries. It’s not sustainable and it’s not fair to expect those who come after us to pay for our lack of foresight.

2. **Stuff** – our legacy reaches far beyond the values and memories we leave behind. It includes the house full of stuff, the storage unit, the clutter, the crap, the heirlooms and the keepsakes. Do we want our legacy to include our loved ones sifting through our belongings for weeks after we’re gone?

3. **Self-worth** – if we spend our days disengaged from family and friends, what does that say to them? It tells them they aren’t as important as our smartphone/email/Twitter/more important people. If we really engage – or, at the risk of sounding cliched, be present – in our interactions with people, we will leave them feeling important. That they matter.

4. **Environment** – excess consumption, mindless buying, keeping up with the Joneses and buying food that has travelled thousands of kilometres to get to your kitchen –
these all add up to impact greatly on our environment. Some view simplifying as having the world at their fingertips by way of streamlining, but I disagree.

These four areas of life sum up so much of what simple living is about. Living sustainably, living simply, living mindfully and living responsibly.

Second, Zero In on What Matters

Creating a life of simplicity is complicated. This we know.

But what we need to do, to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the task of simplifying life, is zero in on what’s important.

Find your why, and keep it at the forefront of your mind as you work through life. Remember, simplifying is a step-by-step process. But if you know what is important from the beginning, then you can make your choices based on those priorities.

Ask yourself to list the following things in order of importance:

- friends
- partner/spouse
- family
- spirituality
- health
- work
- leisure

Add to the list any other priorities you may have, and use these – along with the idea of zero impact – to guide you through the process of simplifying.

When it comes to simplifying, there’s almost as much head-work involved as physical work, but as someone who is finally starting to reap the benefits of a simpler life, I can tell you it is absolutely worthwhile.

It’s one of the biggest and best changes I’ve made to my life.
Thanks so much for reading! I hope this series on some of the foundations of simple living had helped stoke the fire and get you excited for what’s ahead.

**Moving Ahead**

If you haven’t already joined, you can sign up to the Slow Your Home mailing list here, and receive the 7-day Slow Home BootCamp direct to your inbox, as well as new posts and a fortnightly newsletter.

If you’re looking for encouragement and accountability, you can also join our Facebook group. There we talk about our current situations, difficulties and obstacles in creating a simpler, slower life as well as offer support and positive advice. Honestly, it’s the kindest group on the internet and we’d love to have you!