

Living

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What can you do without?

MINIMALIST PLAN

Our craving for material wealth is no longer driven by hardship, but by discontent. Suja Natarajan suggests the most effective way to break free of the vicious cycle



Simple take

■ Minimalism is not about denying yourself pleasures. It's about finding happiness in simplicity.

■ Get rid of things that you haven't used for over 12 months. Less stuff is less clutter and less stress. De-cluttering is known to help one de-stress.

■ Digitise as much as possible and back it up securely.

■ Schedule time for meditation and solitude; it will help turn your focus on what truly matters.

■ Give yourself time to simplify your thoughts and home as it takes a while to escape from the clutches of materialism.

My riches consist not in the extent of my possessions, but in the fewness of my wants.

— JBrotherton

Can money buy happiness? If it could, our generation would be way happier than our grandparents. We live in a culture that encourages accumulation of material things as status symbols; our homes are filled with gadgets, while our wardrobes struggle to hold all our trendy possessions. Ours is, essentially, a problem of abundance.

While it may be true that people with buying power are happier than those who struggle to get by, latest studies on the psychology of materialism suggest that excessive possessions are likely to reduce the quality of our wellbeing and life. Once our basic needs are met, the things we possess make little difference to our happiness. Of course, there's that thrill of buying something new, but it doesn't last for long; it only generates more discontent and desire, letting us into an endless, vicious cycle.

India's spending power is estimated to touch over 154 billion rupees in the coming years. Nevertheless, we are still considered an 'unhappy nation', taking the 117th spot among 158 countries in the World Happiness Index.

Back to the essentials
One of the many principles of Zen is living a minimalist life. It marks the distinctive difference between needs and wants. While needs are essential and fundamental, our wants are endless. It suggests the philosophy of "less is more" to create better value and progress in life. The trick is to keep materialistic desires in balance and thereby achieve happiness and calm from within.

Material possessions attract clutter, confusion, anxiety and discontentment. Minimalism stems from the belief that

letting go of materialistic attachments is necessary because everything is constantly changing. Life is too valuable to waste it in chasing possessions and letting them define your happiness. Minimalism takes us back to the essentials — happiness, simplicity, mindfulness and compassion.

"The moment you decide to simplify your life, you feel a new defining energy running within you. Once you see beyond the lies of consumerism, you take that leap of faith," says Hardik Nagar, a writer who makes a conscious effort to practise minimalism. "I realised that I was trying to buy emotions. I associated products with security, comfort and love. That is what most people are doing, albeit, unconsciously," he adds.

Tim Kasser in his book, *The High Price of Materialism*, says, "The more materialistic values are at the centre of our lives, the more our quality of life is diminished."

Minimalism is not about emptying out rooms, but focusing on things that are important to you. It gives you the opportunity to find the time, energy and money to focus on values and passions that are close to your heart. "I quit my full-time job and took up photography, which was something I wanted to do for long. With a decrease in income, I have become more responsible with the way I spend, and I have realised that I can be happy even without the indulgences. The satisfaction that I get from doing what I love is invaluable," says Itishree Palan.

Becoming a minimalist

Commit: Write down why you want to embrace minimalism and what changes you would like to see once you set the plan in motion. Writing down often helps when you feel that the going is getting tough. Your reasons and the purpose will serve as reminders through the journey.

Physical factor: With several years of hoarding, you may feel that you need sentimental keepsakes, things you may not even have looked at for years. So, go

through all the rooms of your living space and ask yourself if you need each one of your possessions. If not, sell, give them away, donate or simply discard them. "I started by de-cluttering my wardrobe," shares Hardik. "I took out every single piece of cloth that I did not like or wear and gave them to an orphanage. Every month decide on taking on one aspect of minimalism, and at the end of the month, check your progress. It is not easy and it is not a one-time thing; it is a lifestyle choice. It takes time. It has been three years for me, and I still slip at times. It is okay to fail or make that impulse purchase, as long as you keep moving towards embracing minimalism gradually."

Mental challenges: Minimalism is not just about the physical clutter, but also those that fill your mind and crave for your attention, eventually sapping you of energy. And clearing the mental clutter is

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tougher than getting rid of the physical mess. Reflect on what stresses, distracts, frustrates, or worries you. Identify and write down on what energises you, or makes you tick. Choose the ones that matter and let go of thoughts that fog your mental vision. "Simplifying your material things is crucial. However, focus on mental, emotional and spiritual simplifying as well. What is the point of external simplicity if you're not in harmony with it," asks Hardik.

Conscious choice: Before you set out to shop, make a list of things you need. Focus on what you already have, to control your buying compulsions. Get rid of the old before you buy something new. How many times have you shopped for something that was on sale, only to realise that you didn't need it anyway? If the item is not on your shopping list, then you may not need it. Unsubscribe to mailers that you don't

need, because ignorance is often bliss. **Experience it:** Experiences are likely to make you happier than possessions — they provide memories, better satisfaction and make you feel alive. Being with nature, bonding with people you love, learning a skill, indulging in intellectual pursuits, these are all experiences that make life more meaningful.

In the present: Living in the past or future robs you of the opportunity of enjoying the present. The emphasis must be on living fully in the moment. It makes you a better time manager, reduces stress and makes you more effective. Learn to focus and pay attention to one thing at a time.

As Alan W Watts, philosopher, writer and speaker, so succinctly put it, "Zen does not confuse spirituality with thinking about God while one is peeling potatoes. Zen spirituality is just to peel the potatoes."

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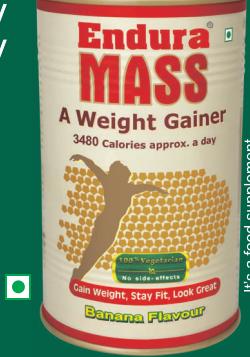
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