

"There is no greatness where there is not simplicity, goodness, and truth." -Leo Tolstoy



--

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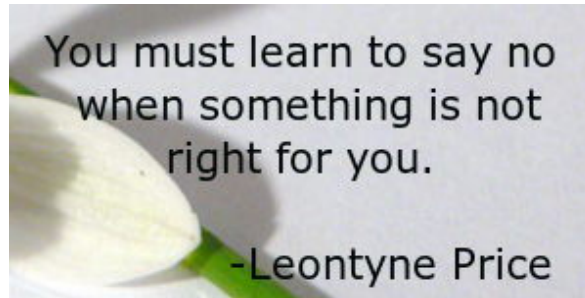
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The Day Simplicity Smacked Me in the Face

This morning the alarm went off, I got up, and though I'm a little sleepy, I feel more human than zombie-like. This is a first for the last couple of weeks.



How zombies are made

I haven't been getting enough sleep and this is why: my habit is to go to bed when I get sleepy, say, when I can't concentrate on the page I'm reading or the movie I'm watching.

Lately, I've been busy moving around, talking to people, working physically on projects.

We are remodeling our basement; every night Joe comes home and works for a couple of hours and I try to help. We've also had several meetings, both planned and spontaneous. When I'm active with work (physical) or with people (conversation), I don't get those "hey-I'm-sleepy-and-should-go-to-bed" cues.

That might have been a warning sign



I've been feeling depressed in the evenings, too. I hate being depressed, so when I start feeling it I immediately try to figure out what the cause is. Do I need some time with Joe? Am I worried about something that I haven't shared with him? Did I get my feelings hurt and not talk about it? Am I upset with someone and stuffing it instead of dealing with it? Am I overwhelmed? Have I committed to too much? This time I haven't been able to pinpoint it, though, and that bothered me. Lots.

Last night we finished dinner and Joe and I flopped down on our big cushy couch-chair to talk and play with Mara for a few minutes before starting work on the basement. As I'm leaning back, watching Joe and Mara (in a rousing game of "Get the Pen Out of Daddy's Pocket, Drop It Behind Your Head, and Pretend You Don't Know Where It Is," one of our favorites), I feel my eyes get heavy... and heavier... and I realize something...

1. I am very tired. Sleepy. Ready for bed. Past ready for bed. Desperate for sleep.
2. Depression (for me, low energy + self-pity + "hopeless" feeling + no motivation) is because I am physically weary.
3. It is barely 8pm.

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4. For the first time, it occurred to me that *maybe I'm trying to do too much*. I got up at 5, read my Bible, wrote 2 articles, exercised, cooked, cleaned, did laundry, took care of babies, ran errands, ordered a birthday gift, picked out songs for church, did website work, read books to Mara, nursed Robbie (4 times), talked to my sister on the phone (3 times), and finished reading a book I started the day before. And I was disappointed because I didn't get to planting my seeds for this year's garden.

When I'm going nonstop from 5am and only feel bad because I didn't do more, perhaps my perspective is off.

When I'm getting so low on energy by evening that it is translating to depression...

When I'm falling asleep if I sit down for five minutes...

...maybe something needs to change.

First step: Quit being stupid

My standard response has been not to sit down for five minutes. Ignore the signals, keep pushing on. Last night I decided that was stupid. So I put the kids to bed, cleaned up the kitchen, and put myself to bed. Joe told me to get some sleep, and he worked on the basement (by himself, sweet man).

Eight beautiful hours later, I actually feel good. Awake. Hopeful. Energized. And a little humbled.



Superwoman? Meet Reality.

I like to believe that I am Superwoman. Some days I can pull it off, and those days make me think I should be able to pull it off all the time. I get so caught up in the energy and accomplishment of doing things that I neglect the basics.

Sleep. Relaxation. Talking. Resting.

Life.

A to-do list, I have learned, will always *be* and it will always be infinite. Sometimes, more than we need accomplishment, we need the discipline of *not* focusing on accomplishments and check marks and productivity. We need the freedom to breathe.

...the eyes of man are never satisfied.
Proverbs 27:20

God does not judge us by the multitude of works we perform, but how well we do the work that is ours to do. The happiness of too many days is often destroyed by trying to accomplish too much in one day. We would do well to follow a common rule for our daily lives--DO LESS, AND DO IT BETTER.
-Dale Turner

He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered.
Proverbs 28:26

A Simple Version of Simple Living

Do an internet search on simple living and you'll get a host of responses, ranging from those who are committed to cutting back from five Starbucks frappuccinos per day to merely one to those who have renounced all excess, all materialism, and all technology... except for the internet.



What is simple living?

Simple Living is the catch-phrase for those motivated to escape city life and the rat race and move out to a farm in Vermont where they can raise chickens and organic rutabagas and watch the sunset from their rocking chairs on the quaintly weathered front porch.

Simple Living is the promise of a thousand self-help books, a thousand time management books, a thousand personal development books, and ten thousand websites on the same subjects.

Simple Living can be had, purportedly, by cutting back on time spent at work, by taking longer vacations, by thinking consciously, by practicing yoga and meditation, by cooking only organic food, by eliminating the stress-inducing people in your life, and by getting rid of clutter.



The problem with the premise

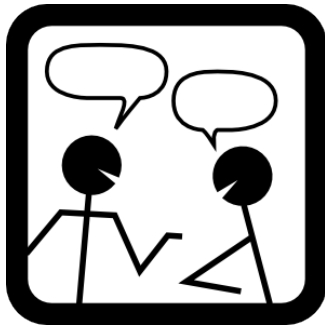
Personally, I enjoy all the time I spend "at work" and I don't really want to cut back at all. I guess longer vacations might be nice but by the end of that two-week Christmas break I'm usually rabid for a normal, productive routine again. I'm not sure of any way to really think except consciously; isn't that the very meaning of thinking?

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Yoga, meditation, organic food... great things, certainly, but if simply added to an already harried life they will only become so much more complication.



As for eliminating the stress-inducing people in my life, I've found that they are usually the ones I am related to or close friends with. It is the very closeness and depth of the relationships that creates the opportunity for stress.

I don't get stressed out about the day-to-day problems or emotional upheavals experienced by my acquaintances. It's not that I don't care, theoretically, it's just that there's not enough emotional connection to produce true empathy. But if it's my husband or sister or best friend, well, that's another story. And I'm just not willing to eliminate them for the sake of simple living. Call me crazy.

Simple Living: a life without clutter

Getting rid of clutter seems like a valid concept in the search for simple living. In fact, my personal definition of simple living is just that: a life without clutter. Clutter. Unnecessary details. Extraneous, inconsequential items. "Our life is frittered away by detail...simplify, simplify," said Thoreau, the ultimate Simple Living guru. He cut the clutter to a point a tad too extreme for most of us, but I respect his premise. I also respect the fact that he uses the word "fritter," which, frankly, I find rather hard to do in a serious sentence. I digress.

The enemy of simplicity

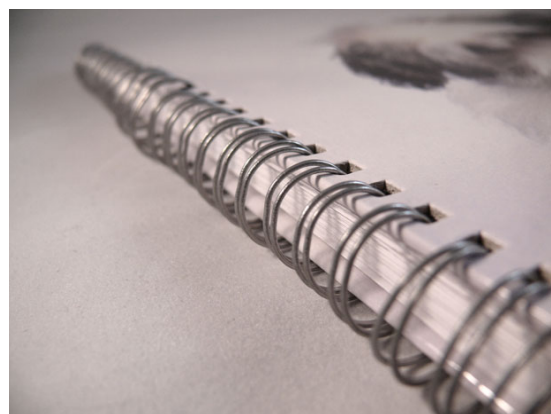
Clutter. Clutter is the natural enemy of simplicity. Clutter always creates a state of disorder which, in turn, creates a feeling of unrest and unfinished business, of urgency, of stress and anxiety and an overwhelming desire to just chuck it all and flee to the Bahamas. Few of us actually do chuck it all and flee to the Bahamas.

What happens more often, though, is that we keep slogging through the morass of clutter, hating the way we're living, dissatisfied with where we're going, frustrated by how we are forced to spend our time: on the mundane, the unimportant, the things we really don't care about.

Clutter makes your life pointless

Remember those days in school when all your homework seemed pointless? You spent a couple of hours reading the assignments, maybe drawing a map or copying equations, and the question ringing through your head the entire time was this: "How will this possibly do me any good in real life?"

Do you ever feel that way now, maybe halfway through returning a phone call about a school bake-sale or organizing papers for another board meeting? Do you hear that question again but choose to ignore it? It



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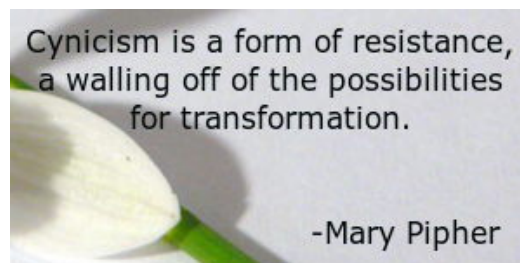
"There is no greatness where there is not simplicity, goodness, and truth." -Leo Tolstoy

scares you too much because you know this is real life. And if all this stuff you're doing isn't doing you any good, then your life must be pretty pointless.

Admit you have a problem

Lest you despair at that last statement, ponder the mantra of Anonymous Organizations everywhere: The first step is admitting you've got a problem. You've got to admit you're overweight before you'll commit to a diet. You've got to admit your metabolism has slowed down before you'll commit to an exercise regimen. You've got to admit your finances are in bad shape before you'll commit to a budget. And you've got to admit you're crazy before you'll commit yourself to Shady Acres. Oops, that last one just slipped in there.

What I meant to say was this: **You've got to admit your life is cluttered before you'll commit to simplifying.**



Admit and Commit

I sense the development of a brand-new slogan here: Admit and Commit. I can just picture a crowd of women, all of us with slightly unkempt hair and slightly out-dated wardrobes, holding hands and chanting together, "Admit and Commit. Admit and Commit. Admit and Commit."



Maybe we don't need to go so far as to have a Cluttered Lives Anonymous gathering (though it's probably not such a bad idea), but we do need to quit wasting time. Quit frittering life away, as our friend Thoreau says. We are dissatisfied with cluttered lives because we know we can do more and be more.

Fear keeps us in the clutter. We fear change, we fear disapproval, we fear getting lost in a wilderness of the unfamiliar. So we stay where we are because we feel somewhat secure in a life that is predictable. It isn't enjoyable, maybe, or exciting, or fulfilling, or even close to what we dreamed about five or ten or twenty years ago, but we've learned what to expect from it and we know how to respond.

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Admit you want something better

My challenge to all of us honorary Cluttered Lives Anonymous members is this: Admit you want something better. Then commit to one action that will bring you closer to whatever that better might be.

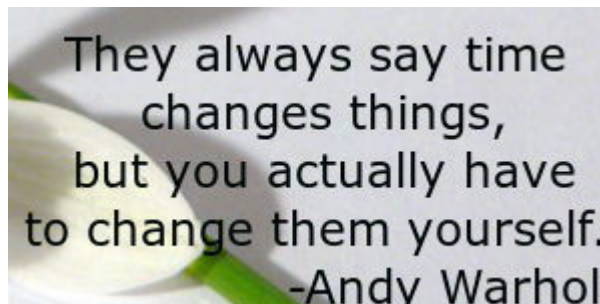
I don't think you should quit your job, end your friendships, leave your spouse, quit talking to your kids, drop all your social activities, or throw out all your material possessions. In fact, I think the worst time to make those kind of decisions is when you are frustrated, stressed, and worn out by the accumulated details of a cluttered life.

Simple Living isn't an all-or-nothing bargain. It's a series of choices that you make that takes you from spending the majority of your time on the unimportant to spending the majority of your time on the most important.

Find one small habit and change it

Think about one small habit you could change in your life. Think about one of those mundane details you find yourself constantly checking. You are the most qualified person to find a way to eliminate that detail.

Can you incorporate it into a routine so it doesn't require continual decisions and attention? Can you eliminate it altogether? Can you delegate it? Can you shoot it out of a bazooka so you never have to think about it again? Can you make it part of something you do enjoy? Start thinking and then do it. This can be the first choice you make toward a life that is simple and fulfilling.



10 Ways to Start Simplifying



1. **Everyday for a week, fill a shopping bag** with things you don't want/need. At the end of the week, take them all to your local thrift store and donate.
-

2. **Set up a basic food schedule** for your family, weekly or monthly or however works best for you. You can be as general or as specific as you like: Monday/ Chicken, Tuesday/ Pasta, Wednesday/ Sandwiches/ etc.
-

3. **Carry a "Need to Buy" list with you** - in your planner or just a note card in your purse. On it, have a list of the items you need to buy in the near future - clothing for family, supplies for projects, furniture, decorations, gifts. Then when you see a great deal you'll know if you should take it home or just take yourself home.
-

4. **Purge your bedroom.** Clean off your night tables and keep only a minimum - lamp, one book, one bottle of lotion - *your* minimum.
-

5. **Empty your laundry basket everyday** and sort the clothes into marked baskets in your laundry room. You'll know as soon as you need to do a wash, or if you have a set laundry day it will go much faster since everything is already sorted. Your bedroom or bathroom will look better when the hamper isn't overflowing.
-

6. **Install wall-hanging magazine racks anywhere you read** magazines, or books, or newspapers - in the bathroom, by your bedside, by the couch or your

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favorite chair. You can also use slim towel bars for this and just hang the magazines over the bar.

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7. **Get into the habit of picking your outfit** for the next day the night before. Hang it in the bathroom or in a designated spot in your closet. Be complete - lingerie, socks or stockings, shoes, jewelry - everything you need. If you love having it all prepared, you could try picking the outfits a week in advance. Just line them up in the closet and pull each day's out as you go.

-
-
8. **Have 1 or 2 or 3 breakfast meals and just rotate them** through the week. If you're happy with repetition, eat the same thing everyday for breakfast. If you get bored, rotate through 3 different options. Switch the rotation when you crave more variety, but keep it simple. This method simplifies your menu planning, shopping, and breakfast preparation.

-
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9. **Plan your menu!** One week at a time works for me. Plan it, make your shopping list from it, and then do it! It's so nice to know what's for supper.

-
-
10. **Set up a mail center.** It doesn't have to be a big deal. Keep a decorative plate in the center of the table for mail that needs to be discussed with your spouse (invitations, etc.). Then toss or file as appropriate. Sort as soon as you bring it in at your mail center: into the trash, into the "Bills" folder, into the files, or into "to-do" inbox. Keep a little tray or box with stamps, envelopes, return address labels, check book and a calculator. It's all there, it's all handy, and you can get it taken care of quickly.
-
-

Simplification is not about achieving a constant state of tranquillity or foregoing all commercially produced items, even if those are noble goals. Start simplifying with simple steps.

Finding Order with a Household Rhythm

When I got married, it took me about a month to realize I didn't know that much about running a household. This was a shock to me. I had been helping my Mom for a long time. My sister and I grew up doing chores, laundry, helping with the cleaning and cooking and errands. I felt confident about this whole home maker stint. No problem.



Surprise, Suzy Q. Wanna-Be-Homemaker!

I found out that managing a household is different than doing certain jobs within the household. Much, much different. There was a certain rhythm to home, growing up, that I accepted and considered as automatic as day and night and the changing of the seasons.

Those first few months with my own home, I learned that the rhythm isn't automatic. Ours was very sporadic: bumpity bump bump bump, bumpity bump da da da da da da da zoooooom zoom collapse. The collapsing part was never pretty. I felt like a failure.

I looked for solutions. I compiled a massive household notebook, read books, made lists, and tried all sorts of methods for keeping things under control. I was still missing the main idea.

Can Suzy Q. find her groove?



Running a household is a lot like directing a group of musicians. Some of us have four-piece ensembles, some of us have entire orchestras. Regardless of scope, however, one element must be in place to keep the others in sync: rhythm. I kept retuning my strings and adding trills to the flute solo when what I needed to do was give my big bass drum a steady beat: dum dum da dum, dum dum da dum, dum dum da dum, dum dum da dum.

Daily Routines are the drumbeat of the household symphony. You can make the beat as fast or as slow as fits you, but it's got to be steady.

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How to find your rhythm

This is an example of my two daily routines. They work for me. They may not work for you. This is an important point: everyone has a different rhythm. Every household works differently. Come up with something, try it on for size, and then play around with it. You won't find any sort of comfortable simplicity when you're wearing someone else's clothes.

AM ROUTINE (after breakfast - 8:30)	PM ROUTINE (after dinner /baths - 8:00ish)
Feed dog	Finish laundry
Clean up kitchen	Clean up kitchen
Prep lunch	Prep breakfast and coffee
Sweep l.r. and kitchen	Sweep l.r. and kitchen
Mop kitchen	Straighten
Wipe down bathroom	Empty trash
Start laundry	Do paperwork/bills
One Weekly item	

- **Figure out what needs to be done in your household on a daily and weekly basis.**

What areas of your household demand the most attention? These will be different for different homes, but usually meals, laundry, and cleaning are at the top of the list. Paying bills and dealing with household paperwork, doing yardwork, returning phone calls, handling social events, running errands, taking care of pets, personal care... Which ones belong to you? Which require daily attention? Which require weekly attention? (Don't bother with monthly or seasonal tasks at this point.) Make a list, under *Daily* and *Weekly* headings, of all the things that *must be done to keep your household running*. Don't overcomplicate or add in things that you would like to do but aren't doing already. You want to keep this simple as you get started. You can always add more later.

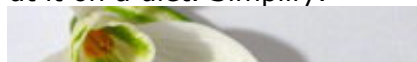
- **Divide your task list into what should be done in the morning and what should be done in the afternoon or evening.**

Think about your schedule, your energy level, and your preferences as you make your division. Most of these items just need to be done at some point during the day or week, and the minute timing doesn't really matter. So if you are working outside the home and have to rush to leave in the morning, don't give yourself a 10-item list to complete before you go. Make your evening routine the longer one.

If you stay at home and have more energy in the morning than the evening, then flip the two and do more in the morning and keep your evenings down to the minimum requirements. Work with what makes sense for you right now. That's all there is to creating the actual routine; here's how to get yourself to make it a habit:

1. **Don't do daily what you don't have to do!**

Keep it simple. If your morning routine takes an hour or more, you have too much going on. Put it on a diet. Simplify.



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2. **Don't clutter it up with automatic actions.**

For example, you already brush your teeth every morning; you don't need it on your list to remind you to do it. I remember one lady complaining about how long her morning routine was, and then I saw it: it included a whole section of items like "Moisturize face," "Moisturize hands," "Moisturize elbows," and "Moisturize legs." If you have trouble remembering to put lotion on, then sure, add it to your list: but make it one item, not fifteen.



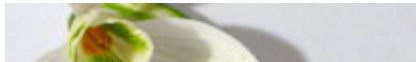
3. **Complete your routine(s) at the same time(s) every day.**

Once you get in the habit, you can be more flexible about when you complete your routine; while you're establishing it as normal, though, be a stickler for getting through it at the same time every day, or at least as close to the same time daily as you can. There will certainly be some exceptions. You can handle those. Just try to be as consistent as possible for the first 30 days.



4. **Write your routine down and keep it handy.**

It doesn't have to be fancy. Mine's written on a piece of paper from my magnetic grocery list on the fridge and stays in my pantry, beside the coffee. That's where I go first thing in the morning so it gives me an easy way to glance at it and remember where to start.



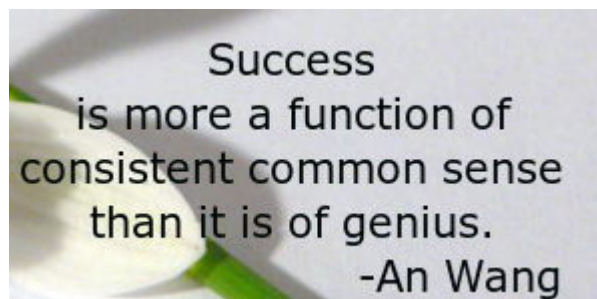
5. **Keep your supplies in a convenient place.**

Any cleaning or other supplies you need for your routine should be right where you need them. The key to making the routine a daily no-brainer is keeping it quick and easy. So put a spray bottle of cleaner and a roll of paper towels in the bathroom and keep a mop in the kitchen, or whatever you have to do to make it happen.



6. **Finally, be consistent.**

Maintain that daily, forward movement. Adjust your routine as needed - maybe you really don't need to sweep the front porch every day - but don't skip it or ignore it or forget about it. The more consistent you are, the easier it will become, and the more your household will just look like it runs itself. (We'll know that's not true, of course... it's you directing the orchestra.)



• Finding Peace with a Schedule

Some of us resist schedules because they seem restrictive, anti-creativity, control-freakish. Certainly some schedules are that way. If you're scheduling your time down to ten-minute sections, I think we might need to work on your control freak tendencies. On the other hand, if you schedule nothing and live to follow the natural flow, you not only stifle productivity but you will also end up stifling creativity as well.



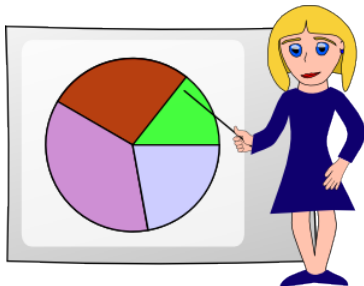
Who is scheduling your life?

You live by a schedule whether you admit it or not; a schedule is simply a matter of doing a certain thing at a certain time. When you take initiative to set your own schedule, you can do so according to your own priorities.

When you don't set your own schedule, you are not only at the mercy of your own whims (which very often do not line up with your bigger goals and priorities) but you are also at the mercy of others who will not hesitate to impose their schedules on yours... or your lack thereof.

It really comes down to whose schedule you want to follow: yours, thoughtfully laid out, or some haphazard construct of circumstances. Seems like a no-brainer to me, but take the time to think it over if you must.

A basic schedule, a basic purpose



I like to keep my schedule pretty basic. It includes 1) A Beginning and an End and 2) Time Blocks. There are multiple planning calendars in as many formats as you can dream up. I find them all too complicated for my simple living preferences.

This is not true for everyone; my husband loves his Franklin Covey planner and uses it faithfully. I feel restricted by all those boxes with lines and titles.

The perfectionist in me just can't leave well enough alone, so I spend more time scheduling in all the pretty boxes than I do actually implementing my schedule.

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Since the purpose of a schedule is to simplify and to increase productivity, and I find that the more complex planners accomplish neither goal for me, I stick with my basics and forego the professional leather-binder look. You might find that a combination of methods works best for you.

My advice is this: start simple and be diligent with your simple scheduling techniques. Once you know they work for you, you can tweak and add on and adjust to your heart's delight. Don't start way at the top of the complex calendar hierarchy. The very complexity is too overwhelming to keep up when you're first learning how to schedule, and you'll get discouraged and drop it all.

Define your day's beginning and end

I can't help but picture Julie Andrews in The Sound of Music, when she first attempts to teach the Captain's children how to sing: "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start..."

Of course, she drops her little Happy Beginnings song in favor of the inexplicably popular Do-Re-Mi. We, however, shall carry our Happy Beginnings all the way to Happy Endings.

What needs a beginning and an end is your *working* day. Your entire day is capped on both ends automatically by your bed. You wake up and get out of bed, your day begins. You get sleepy and get back in bed, your day ends. I see no reason to mess with that kind of perfection, unless you need some help on the waking up and getting out of bed part.

The beginning of your workday

For now, we're dealing with the workday itself, the part of the day that begins after you've been awakened by the sound of bluebirds (or the alarm clock) and, I hope, have eaten a halfway decent breakfast. Oh, also, you should get dressed. Maybe even before breakfast.

Your workday beginning may be set in stone already. You have to be at the office at 9:00 am. There you go. 9:00 am it is. For those of us who work in more flexible fields, in which the office hours dictate next to nothing, setting a Beginning is a matter of choice and convenience.

If you're a stay-at-home Mom trying to wake, dress, and feed three kids, then give yourself enough time to do that before you try to get down to the rest of your work. If you're a work-from-home small business owner who likes to start the day with a two-hour gym session, then set your workday beginning accordingly.



The end of your workday

The End of the workday is just as important as the beginning. Again, this may be dictated by office hours, or it may be a matter of choice and fitting in with what happens in the rest of your day. Perhaps it's 3:00 pm when the kids get home from school. Perhaps it's 6:00 pm when your spouse gets home from work. Perhaps it's 9:00 pm when you realize you haven't eaten anything since noon. (I don't recommend that last time option, by the way.)

Choose an End. Put a cap on your working hours. Sure, you can always choose to do "extra" work or finish up projects in the evening if you want to, but that should be something you do because you really want to, not because you have to, and it should never interfere with your family time or social obligations.

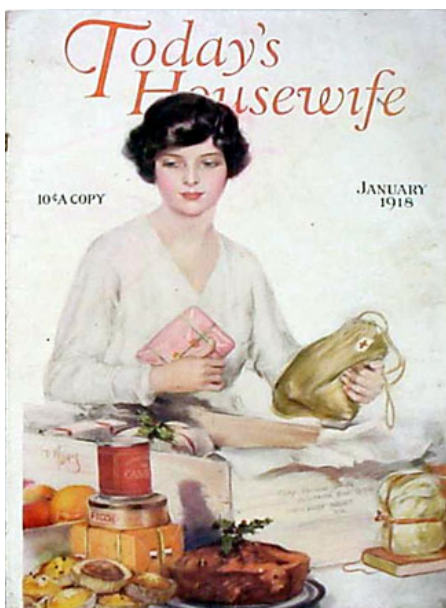
My workday beginning is 8:00 am and my workday end is 5:00 pm. Of course there is more that happens before and after those times, but it is within those times that I block out time for work and have specific goals to accomplish.

Block out your time

I learned this one from my husband, who implements the concept with his Franklin Covey planner in a way I can only admire. The idea itself is rather simple and works beautifully for helping to keep me on track without overwhelming me with details.

- Establish the basic key areas of your work.
- Note how much time you would like to spend per week on each area.
- Note your recurring obligations: errands, events, meetings, social responsibilities, etc.
- Plug in time blocks for those key areas.
- Don't worry about the details!

What are the key areas of your work?



Since I am a stay-at-home Mom and a work-from-home writer, my key areas are Household and Writing. Keep your key areas as general and broad as you can. There is always opportunity to hash out the details later.

Try to have no more than four key areas. You want to be able to remember them and you want to be able to block time for them all. If you have too many, you'll defeat yourself before you even get started.

How much time per area?

I would like to put in 15 - 20 hours per week in Writing and I know I need to put in at least 10 - 15 hours per week in Household if I am going to keep things running

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smoothly. Remember, the more key areas you have the less time you can put into each one.

What are your recurring obligations?

Note all the meetings, social events, church and school events, regular errands, or other obligations that take place within your workday. Do they occur at the same time every week? Do they vary from week to week? Approximately how much time per week is required for these obligations?

If your workday lasts for 7 hours, 5 days a week, and your recurring obligations take up about 2 hours per day, 5 days a week, then you need to subtract 10 hours from your 35 working hours to get your actual working total: 25 hours.

Plug in your time blocks

If you have 4 key areas and you would like to spend 6 hours per week on each one, you've got a total of 24 hours available. With your total of 25 working hours, you're within your boundaries but haven't left yourself much room for padding. It's a good start and you can tweak it as you go.

Now it's your choice as to where you place those time blocks. You can spend six hours in a row on one of your key areas, then switch to another the next day. Or you can divide it up: 2 hours for Area 1, then 2 hours for Area 2, etc.

It's much, much better if these blocks can be a standard, repeated schedule. Repetition will result in unconscious mental training and you'll be much more productive during your working time.



No worrying over details

Don't waste your time on 10-minute blocks for every little event that makes a demand on your time. You want to get a big picture that is simple enough to carry with you even if you're not carrying a planner or calendar.

An example of my daily schedule

Here's what my daily schedule looks like. It's pretty simple, and even though I still write it down almost every day just to keep myself on track, I can remember it without my notebook.

- 8-10 HOUSEHOLD
- 10-12 WRITING
- 12 Lunch, etc.
- 1-3 HOUSEHOLD
- 3-5 WRITING/Rest

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While I can set aside my writing, the household obligations don't automatically shut off at 5pm. That'd be nice, but I have never gotten it to work that way. There's that pesky problem of supper and needing to bathe children and little things like that. So I do what needs to be done for my household work after the official workday ends, but I keep it to a minimum. The bulk of my cooking and cleaning I try to get done in those scheduled hours.

Flexibility is your friend

That's my standard schedule, but it isn't etched in stone or even written in Sharpie. I'm often behind or ahead by half an hour or so. If I have a big household project I want to complete, I'll commit a couple of writing blocks to it.



No guilt.

It's my schedule, after all, and the point of it is to keep my life simple and productive and to help me accomplish my goals.

A schedule is a fluid thing and will change with every season of your life. That's okay. Work with it. Tweak it. Be open to change. But have that basic structure in place so you don't end up just floating around

aimlessly, wondering at 6pm where the last 8 hours went and why you didn't get anything done.

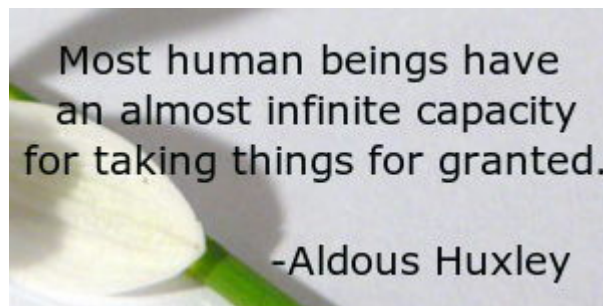
Having a schedule gives you a plan, a starting point, an agenda so you can say NO to the unnecessary because you have already committed to the necessary. It also gives you freedom and flexibility so you can allocate time the way you want to without feeling guilty about it.

• A little guide to common scheduling problems

Cramming

You are a mere human, after all. Eating, sleeping, and bathroom breaks are a necessary part of life. You can't schedule them out. And you are surrounded by a lot of other mere humans, who may call you on the phone or stop by your desk or need help with an important presentation or with tying their shoes.

Don't cram so much into your schedule that losing ten minutes of it sets you hopelessly behind. Keep your time blocks big. It's okay if you give a few minutes away here and there. Give yourself some padding.

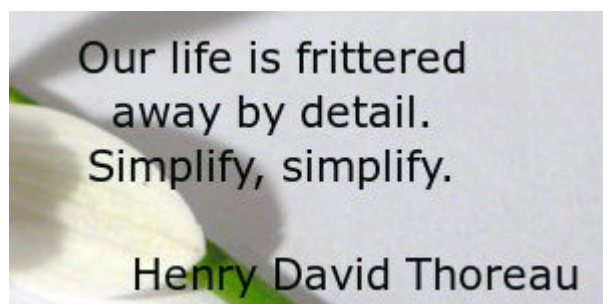


Detailing

Detailing your car, good idea. Detailing your schedule, not so much. If you came up with 15 key areas that you're trying to block time for, you have complicated your life far more than any human should. This practice keeps you from seeing a big picture.

Details will only allow you to see chopped-up tidbits and you will never feel like you're making any big progress. Compare. Does it sound better to say, "I just spend 15 minutes on cleaning and then 10 minutes on decorating and then 15 minutes on meal preparation and then 10 minutes on cleaning out the refrigerator and then 5 minutes on checking email and then 20 minutes on laundry and then 10 minutes on sorting the mail..." or to say, "I just spent two hours managing the household."

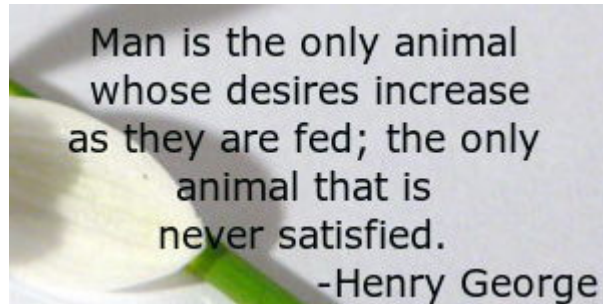
Don't feel that you have to have a 100-item list of things you've done at the end of the day. A short list of a few good, solid, big ones is far more satisfying.



Varying

If you have to spend 15 minutes every morning planning out how to block your time, you're making it too complicated. Obviously there are things you can't control and can't plan for ahead of time. But to the extent that your life and obligations have repeating, weekly patterns, you can block time in a repeating pattern.

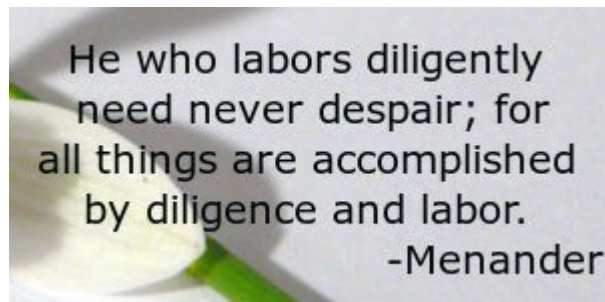
If you've kept your key areas broad enough, you can focus on a variety of different items within each time block to keep yourself from feeling bored.



Forgetting

I say forgetting, but the real problem is Failing to Implement. Once you've made your schedule, use it! If you're not sure you'll like it, try it for a week or a month. You can adjust all the parts that don't work for you.

Just commit to it. Be diligent. Make it a foundational part of your life, and you'll streamline about 30 decisions that you currently have to make every day into one easily remembered plan of action.



• Finding Peace with Your Budget

I just wrote a couple of articles on budget-planning, but it occurs to me that the budget planning isn't really the difficult part. It's the sticking-to-the-planned-budget that is difficult.



What do you do when your \$50/week grocery budget is gone and you have no meat in your freezer? What about if you spend your household money over the weekend and then realize that you only have 10 diapers left for the week? I speak from experience... And here's how I deal with those experiences.

Don't take it personally.

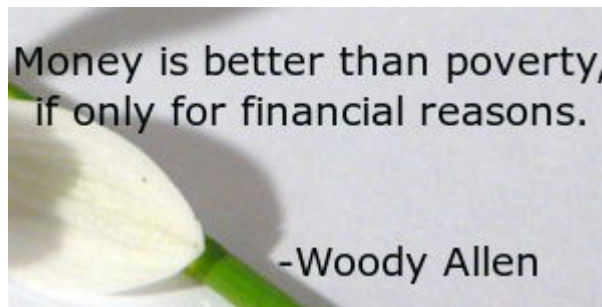
- The world, the supermarket, the economy, the gas prices, the empty refrigerator, and the neighbor's new car are not about you and not meant to be a personal affront. This is part of life. We have ups and downs. We all like the ups better, but just being in a down time financially doesn't mean that a) there is something fundamentally wrong with you or b) the universe is out to get you via your bank account. So don't add a burden of guilt or the powerlessness of victimization to your budget. Deep breath, now. You can do it.

Quit comparing.

- Other people will always have more stuff than you. Some other people will have less stuff than you. If you're going to compare about the comfort level of your life and the frugality of your budget, then compare with third world countries and you'll start feeling pretty darn rich. Don't let the shiny new SUVs on the highway and the stuffed shopping bags exiting the mall via better-dressed soccer moms get you down. You don't know the entirety of another person's life. You don't know who is in debt up to their eyeballs, who has a horrible marriage but lots of money, and who would trade anything (including their shiny car) for your simpler life. And yes, there are some people who are happy and rich. You may not be one of the happy AND rich, but you can be happy.

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Think about what you actually need, rather than what you expect to have.

- A few mission trips to Honduras really opened my eyes about our material expectations. I've never been really into material things, or so I thought. Not much of a shopper, don't care about shiny new stuff or well-known brands. But I have expectations about the stuff I should have. Then I got to know the Honduran women who live in two-room huts with their husbands and five children, who cook in one pan over an open fire, who have four shirts and two bras and three skirts and one pair of sandals as their entire wardrobe. I may not have everything I expect, but I almost always have everything that is really essential.

Set priorities.

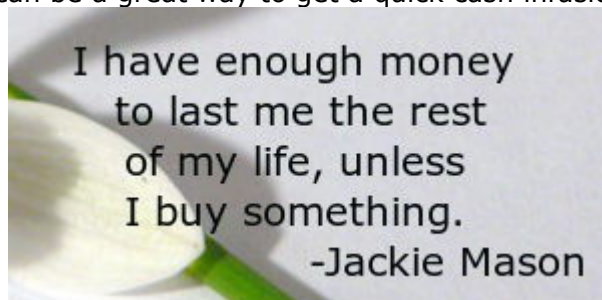
- If you are out of money for Groceries but you still have your Spending money, decide what is more important for you this week. You can be flexible. If you have enough food in the pantry and freezer to get you through the week, then avoid the grocery store. If you really can't feed your family without purchasing some more food, use your Spending money. Do not use your credit card!

Go vegetarian for a week.

- It's the simplest way to reduce your food costs dramatically. If you go vegan for a week and eliminate dairy products as well as meat, you'll save even more money. Plus you'll stretch yourself creatively in the kitchen, and you might gain some healthy and frugal recipes.

Sell stuff on Craigslist.

- Or find another way to sell: put together a quickie garage sale, take items into a resale or pawn shop. I know I have more stuff than I need, and selling it can be a great way to get a quick cash infusion.



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Stay at home.

- I think there's probably a mathematical equation that fits here; something like your expected cash outlay increases by \$0.25 for every mile you go away from home... It's either gas or food or entertainment or oh-no-I-forgot-to-put-wipes-in-the-diaper-bag emergencies. Going out to places with stores and shops and opportunities to spend means that you'll probably spend. Staying home helps you save.

Get creative.

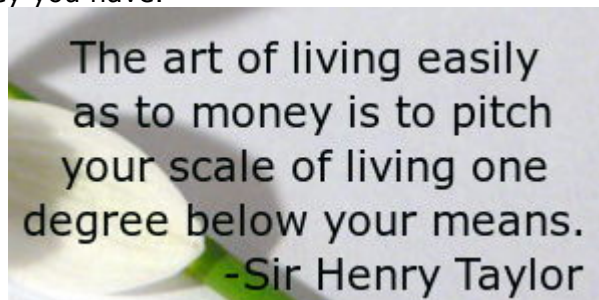
- You're out of paper towels; cut up some old t-shirts and use them. Wash and reuse. You may never want to buy paper towels again. You're out of rice; use pasta. You're out of milk; drink water. You're out of diapers; got any thick burp cloths? Do cloth diapers for a few days. You're out of wipes; use soft cloths and warm water. You need a dress for that wedding on Saturday; borrow from your friend, sister, cousin. You're out of gas; stay at home, take the bus, walk, ride your bike, or get a ride with a friend (offer to pick her up next week). Or don't go. It's okay to simplify.

Borrow from a friend or family member, if all else fails.

- Avoid that credit card! If you have to have \$20 for whatever, then borrow it from someone you'll see often and feel obligated to repay quickly. A credit card is far too impersonal and it's too easy to lose track of what is on there. Borrow the \$20 and pay it back as soon as the next paycheck comes in.

Figure out what happened.

- If you're short on the cash you need, figure out how the shortage occurred. Did you make an extra purchase over the weekend or spend all your money on stuff you don't need? Or is your budget simply inadequate for what you really need? It's fine to adjust your budget; see how you can reduce your bills and tweak your expenses so you can work with the money you have.



• Finding Sanity in Your Social Life



Pick one.

- No, not one friend: one social networking site. Really. You can still keep up without memberships in five niche social networks and three more mainstream sites. At least narrow it down to two or three; you might find you have time to actually benefit from all the online socializing then.

Schedule time at home.

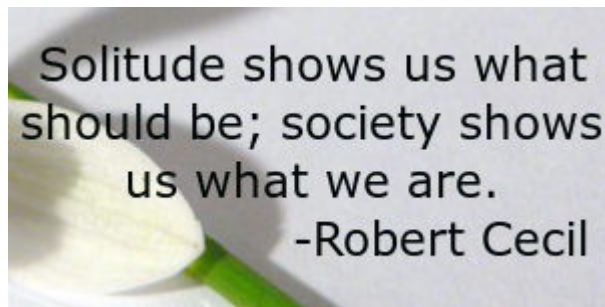
- If it's difficult for you to say no, you find yourself constantly running, you're always looking for something to do or somewhere to go, or you end up out late every night and broke by the weekend, it's time to set some boundaries. Pick one or two or three nights that are at-home nights. Finish up a project. Catch up on phone calls. Watch a movie. Indulge in a hobby. Take a long bath. Read a book. Write letters. Go to bed early. Chat on that social networking site...

Bring new friends into old circles.

- You have the high school friends circle, the college friends circle, the single people circle, the married people circle, the married with children circle, the I-know-them-through-my-older-sister circle, the we-all-love-the-same-kind-of-music circle, the people-I-know-from-work circle. It's a lot of circling. I get dizzy. Start merging the circles. Be bold, be brave, be unafraid. Meet a new person? Don't get pulled into a new circle! Instead, do the pulling; invite said new person to join an activity with an already existing circle, and you end up expanding your circle instead of creating more complication. Wow.

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Have regular dates...

- not necessarily with a romantic intention. Set up regular weekly or monthly activities with the friends you want to see. It's easier for everyone to plan on something regular, and you don't have to go through the hassle of deciding what-when-where every time you want to get together.

Don't be the go-to planner.

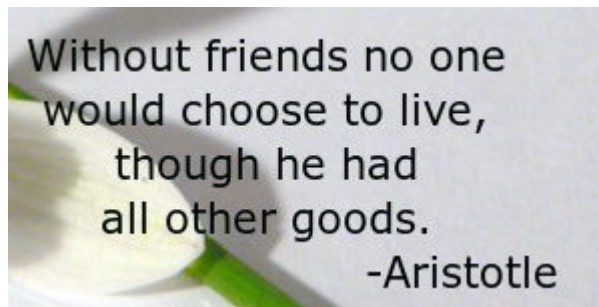
- If you've got a smidge of creativity and some organizing skills, you may well end up being the one who always figures out what the group is doing, where, when, how often, what it costs, and did somebody remember to call whats-his-name? Just quit. Or take an extended leave of absence. See what happens. Somebody else in the group is probably capable, too; they just need a chance. You can simply go along and enjoy the event instead of figuring it all out.

Choose easy activities.

- Really, this is fundamental; why over-complicate the stuff that is supposed to be for fun? Don't pick the restaurant that requires a 45 minute drive followed by a 45 minute wait. Choose simple stuff; go to the park, have a picnic, grab some ice cream. The point is to be with the people you enjoy.

Theme your life.

- Works great when you simply have too many options to choose from, too many interests to follow, too many creative friends offering suggestions. Choose a theme for each week or month: indie bands, the color orange, developing your kung fu moves. Then refuse any social invitation that doesn't fit the theme. Next month: new theme, new activities.



Get to know what's local.

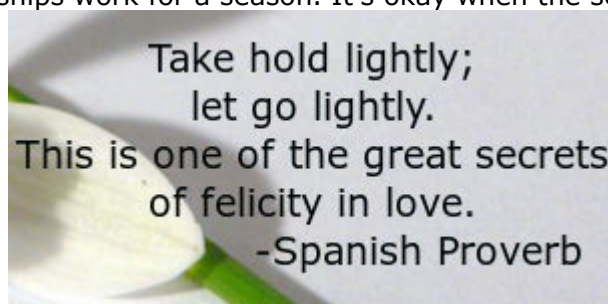
- Try to find great restaurants, cafes, coffee shops, book stores, walking trails, shops, theatres, concerts, and attractions that are close to you. If in walking distance, that much the better, as you eliminate the complication of whose car to take and where to park it.

Build on common interests.

- If you have trouble fitting in time for friends and for your hobbies, start combining. Invite your best bud along to your hobby gathering, or go shopping for hobby supplies together. Engage in some give and take; be willing to accompany her on hobby-related expeditions as well.

Let go.

- Old friendships not working? Nothing in common? Can't remember why you still have her phone number? Let go. Move on. People change, and some relationships work for a season. It's okay when the season ends.



Be spontaneous.

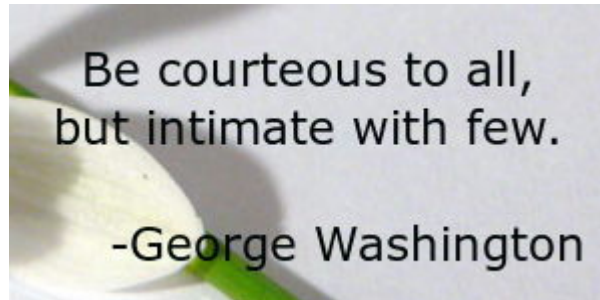
- Sometimes the best thing about time with friends is the unplanned, the jump in the car or meet up in ten minutes feeling of freedom and figuring it out as you go along. So don't feel like you have to have a schedule and agenda for every outing. Go with the flow.

Say no.

- If you don't wanna, don't. It's okay. They'll get by without you just this once.

Host the event.

- And make it an easy job by assigning "You bring the..." duties to every one you invite. Keep things simple and casual, put out a big garbage can, and relax in the comfort of your own home, all while being a social butterfly.



• Finding Joy in Your Work

We fight against work. Our American culture celebrates days off, relaxation, vacation, rest, television, games, sports, contests of any kind, races, entertainment: not work, not any more.



Do you feel punished by your work?

Work is a punishment to us, a drudgery we must get through to get to the "good stuff" of life. Books like [The 4-Hour Workweek](#) and the popularity of passive income rise from this mindset. Of course, it's great if you can work more reasonable hours and spend more time with your family. And I am all for the idea of generating income through any ethical means you can. If you are producing anyway, why not attempt to make money? It's good sense.

But the obsession that I notice, the one that worries me, is not that people want to simplify a bit or be smarter about how they earn money for bills; simplifying and smart earning are potential steps to improving your life. What is *not* a step toward life improvement is the "I-hate-work" attitude.

Where did you learn to hate work?

What's to hate about work? We've all had jobs, at one time or another, that didn't suit us, perhaps, that were far more drudge than delight. Maybe we hated those jobs.

In high school, I hated babysitting. I liked the kids, because I was very picky about who I chose to babysit for. But I hated the times - nights and weekends - when I had to be away from my family, cozy at home or doing fun things without me. Even though I hated babysitting, though, I got the work concept and I liked it: I give you my time, service, or product, and you pay me. An equitable exchange. I put up with the timing I didn't like because work was worth it.



In college, I waitressed (among other things). I hated those hours too, nights and weekends again, but I loved the work when it was busy and I was running, jumping, talking, smiling, being efficient, making people happy, *working*.

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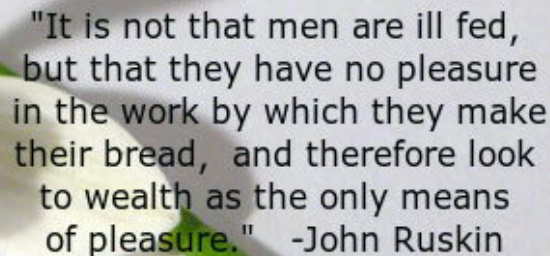
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I hated being there on slow lunches during the week, or on dead holiday nights when everybody in my college town was out of town. Four or five tables, four or five hours of looking for something to fix, or clean, or make, or do, and twenty bucks in my pocket when I walked out? The immediate problem seemed to be *not enough pay*; the real problem was *not enough work*. Lack of work created lack of pay.

Creating value in work

And that's the problem with many passive income ideas, and with almost all get-rich-quick schemes. The nature of work is that you produce something of value to generate a fair income. An equitable exchange. Value for value.

Passive income can work if you create value that will last and can be used over and over again, as in getting royalties from a book or rent from an apartment complex. But expecting to generate income from no value almost always leads you toward unethical "work": spamming, cheating, plagiarizing, defrauding, etc.



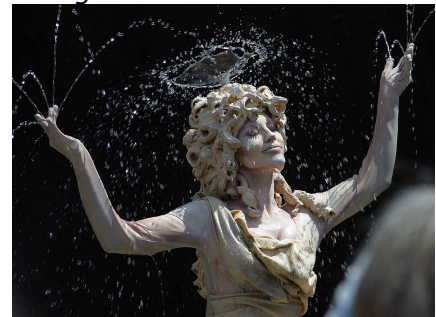
"It is not that men are ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure." -John Ruskin

Finding the value of work

We buy into ideas that don't make sense and can't, ethically, make us money, because we have not learned to value work for its own sake. We think of work as nothing more than a frustrating job we wish we could afford to lose. Money seems like the answer.

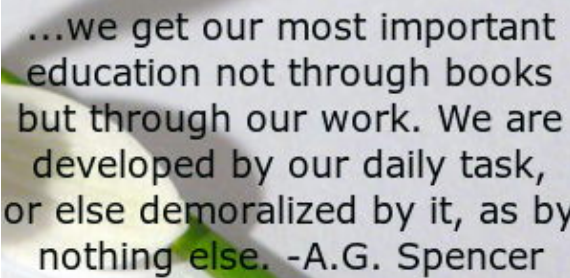
The real answer is finding the work you love by *learning to love work*.

The best place to start is in the Bible, book of [Genesis, first two chapters](#). Here we see man and woman, in a perfect world, freshly created. Here we watch God give them their instructions: work. Work is not a result of sin, didn't come as a punishment after man's fall (though it did change, and that's part of our problem); work was something for which we were created.



Check your work attitude

Determine your own attitude toward work, whether it's a weekend job, a full-time career, or an endless stream of laundry, cooking, cleaning, organizing, and teaching. Do you strive to get through stuff so you can get to the good stuff? Are you cheating yourself out of the delight and fulfillment that come from doing your work with zeal and a standard of excellence?



...we get our most important education not through books but through our work. We are developed by our daily task, or else demoralized by it, as by nothing else. -A.G. Spencer

• 30 Ways to Simplify Your Life Today

Simple living won't just become your standard one day, when you happen to wake up and everything is suddenly infused with great clarity and meaning. The world, our work, people, media, everything around us conspires to add more clutter to our already filled lives.



You have to take steps and make changes every day to move away from a cluttered and unfulfilling life toward a simple and meaningful one. The good part is that many changes you can make are very simple, but all will contribute toward your ultimate goal.

Try implementing a few of these changes today, or take the next month and make one small change every day. Ready? A simpler, better life awaits.

1. Throw something away. Yes. Into the garbage can or the recycling bin. Out of the house. Stuff is a big part of the complication in our lives, so give yourself permission to get rid of something you no longer need or want or find useful. It may be that old collection of VHS tapes that you know you'll never watch again, or a pair of shoes that is way too uncomfortable, or a pile of papers to read. Just get rid of it. It's taking up valuable space in your life and making you feel guilty about not getting to it.

2. Get up at the same time every morning. It doesn't have to be at some unnaturally early hour, just the same hour every day. You'll have to be super-consistent while you're establishing the habit, but once you do your body will automatically wake up at that time. Your mornings will be smoother and you won't have to go through that snooze-button struggle.

3. Clean out a drawer. Pick that drawer in the kitchen that you always spend five minutes rummaging through to find the garlic press, or the one in the bathroom that seems to eat your floss, or the one in your dresser that refuses to return socks. Dump the whole thing out, throw away or put away (in an appropriate place) anything that you don't use on a regular basis, then replace the items that should actually be in the drawer. Use a drawer organizer, or small boxes, or anything that will create boundaries for that stuff in there can't get free again.

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4. Give away your old clothes. This doesn't have to be a big project. Grab a box or garbage bag, go to your closet, and quickly, without stopping to talk yourself out of it, toss in all the clothes you haven't worn in the last six months (unless they're seasonal and you store them in there). If you are storing out-of-season clothes in your closet, consider boxing them up and putting them out of sight until the appropriate season. A clean, roomy closet makes getting dressed a much more pleasant activity. Take your now-full bag or box to the car and drop it off at a charity next time you run errands.

5. Clean off your bedside table. You don't need so much stuff there, and it's only distracting when you're trying to relax and go to sleep. A lamp, one or two books (no more!), a paper and pen if you often get inspired at night, and one or two other necessities. I have to have my Burt's Bees Lip Balm handy. Put the rest of that accumulated stuff away: books go to the bookcase, lotions to the bathroom, jewelry to the jewelry box, papers to the filing cabinet or desk, etc. You might even find that you have room for a vase of flowers.

6. Cancel a magazine subscription. If you have two or more of the same magazine sitting around, waiting for you to find time to read them, maybe you should give yourself one less thing to do. If it's not important, it's not important. That's okay. Cancel the subscription, save yourself the money, and quit feeling like you have to read everything your mailbox brings.

7. Switch to online banking. If you haven't already, you can save lots of time (and money) by taking advantage of online banking. Almost all major banks offer it as a free service, and with online banking you can check your balance, make transfers, pay bills, set up scheduled payments, and use many other services quickly. If you're unfamiliar with the whole process, get a friend who is more internet-oriented to help you set it up and walk you through the basics.

8. Cancel your land line. If you have a cell phone, you really don't need a separate home-based telephone line. Increase your cellular coverage if needed and cancel your home phone. You'll have only one bill to pay, one number to remember, one voice mail system to keep up with, and you'll probably save money.

9. Say goodbye to Tupperware. Tupperware is the enemy of simplicity in the kitchen. It doesn't stack, it's impossible to keep all the lids and containers together, and you never have the right size handy. At least that's my Tupperware experience. So pull out all those random plastic pieces and send them to Goodwill so they can complicate someone else's life. Invest in a good stack of disposable containers (take-out boxes, disposable plastics, etc.), a couple of boxes of zip-top bags in different sizes, and some good-quality, glass

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containers with tight-fitting lids. Use the disposables for lunches, the bags for vegetables, fruits, and anything not liquid, and the glass containers for other leftovers.

10. Set up a phone charging station. Use a power strip if you need more than two outlets; plug in the phone chargers and snake the line up to a hook on the wall or some other handy spot nearby. Every night, you know where to put your phone, and every morning you'll know where to find it. It's even better if you can set a bowl or tray nearby to hold car keys, loose change, etc., and a hook on the wall for your purse.

11. Put a trash bucket in your car. It doesn't need to be big and ugly; in fact, you definitely want something small and unobtrusive. A basket or small crate or container of some kind. Line it with a plastic bag and put your trash in there. When it's full, tie up the bag and throw it all away.

12. Establish a morning routine. Morning routines work hand-in-hand with a standard wake-up time to create a daily beginning that is peaceful and enjoyable. Keep your morning routine as simple as you can so you can easily remember it, but try to include all the essential activities of the morning. Jot down the best order to do them and start doing them in that order every single morning until it's so routine you don't even think about it.

13. Eat the same thing for breakfast every day. If you need more variation, then pick two breakfast items and switch them out, or eat the same thing every day for a week and then switch to something different the next week. The idea is to have a plan and keep the breakfast meal simple. Oatmeal, cereal, a power bar, a fruit smoothie, a muffin and hot tea, whatever appeals to you. Get enough to last for at least a week and eat breakfast every day.

14. Take advantage of the dry cleaner. It's relatively inexpensive to get shirts and pants dry cleaned, so don't limit yourself just to silk items or suits. Anything that needs to be ironed is a good candidate. It will come back in perfectly pressed condition and all you have to do is wear it.

15. Cut down on your social networking sites. Do you really need more than one? All the social networking sites exist for the same purpose: social networking. So limit yourself to one site, delete your pages from the rest, and enjoy the networking there for a reasonable amount of time without constantly switching back and forth and talking to the same people on two or three different sites.

16. Use folders to sort your email. Use fairly broad categories that address the kind of email you deal with on a daily basis: Business, Personal, Subscriptions, etc. You might find it helpful to set up individual folders for the people you communicate with most through email.

17. Check email less frequently and respond immediately. Don't fall into the smoke-break email trap, in which you have to stop and check your email as often and obsessively as a smoker has to stop for a smoke. Determine a few times during the day when it's convenient for you to check, read, and respond to your emails. Maybe the beginning and end of the day? Right before lunch? Just limit it so you can deal with it all at once.

18. Shop online for gifts at the beginning of each month. This is such a great simplification concept that I'm surprised more people don't implement it. Pick one day a month and set aside an hour or so to shop online for all the gifts you will need to purchase in the next 30 days or so. Shop, order, pay, and have them shipped. No one minds getting gifts early. If you balk at sending things too early, then bookmark the site and set up a reminder on your calendar to buy and have the gift shipped a little closer to the occasion.

19. Clean out your freezer. Seriously, you don't even have a clue what might be hiding in there, do you? Throw out all the unidentifiable objects and the out-dated stuff, give the shelves a good scrub with disinfectant spray and a paper towel, then replace, in an orderly fashion, the food that is edible. Now you can actually use what's in your freezer.

20. Pay your bills when you get your paycheck. If you've set up online banking, this process is so simple it's... well... simple. Pay all the bills that will come due before your next paycheck. There, you're done, you know how much money you have left over after bills, and you don't have to worry about it again until your next paycheck.

21. Establish a cleaning routine. If you have a good cleaning routine and follow it consistently, you can keep your house clean in about twenty minutes a day, four or five days a week. As with your morning routine, make a list of things that need to be done on a regular basis - daily or weekly - and follow that routine consistently until it has become second nature. The more consistent you are, the faster you will be at those cleaning tasks.

22. Set up a basic work schedule. Know what you're doing and when so that you can make continual progress toward your biggest goals. If you don't take charge of your schedule, the random details and demands of life will do it for you.

23. **Get a great haircut.** A great haircut simplifies your life whether you are male or female, have long or short or curly or straight hair. It's worth the money to get a style that works with your hair type, is easy to maintain, and doesn't require a lot of hair products to get you looking decent.

24. **Learn to ignore distractions.** This is a difficult skill to master, but well worth it. Basically, you need to embrace the idea that the world does not depend on your reaction. You can ignore the arguing couple at the next table, or the annoying music from the car down the street, or the endless forwards your co-worker sends, or any other unnecessary, meaningless distraction. You cannot eliminate distractions, but you can choose to give them no place in your life.

25. **Ignore your phone.** When you're knee-deep in a project that requires your total concentration, it's simply idiotic to stop what you're doing just to jump across the room, grab your phone, and answer it breathlessly only to find that the caller just needed to find out what time the meeting starts tomorrow or what you want for dinner. I'm not suggesting that you ignore your friends and family members, but that you give yourself permission to focus on what you're doing while you're doing it. You have voice mail. Use it.

26. **Eat more fresh fruits and vegetables.** Not only will you feel better and have more energy when you eat more fresh, raw fruits and vegetables, but you won't have to stop and "fix a snack" when you get hungry. Fruits and vegetables are the perfect snack food. They provide quick energy without giving you a sugar rush. They clean up easily, they're portable, and they taste great.

27. **Buy household staples in bulk.** If you have space to store bulk items, then buy any household staple you replace weekly in a bigger supply and save yourself the trouble. Items like toilet paper, paper towels, diapers, and many pantry food staples are available in bulk quantities that usually save you a significant amount of money. You do need a place to store these things, however, so don't just run out and buy a bunch of stuff unless you know where you're going to put it.

28. **Say no to stupid requests.** It's okay to quit babysitting the perfectly capable adults who surround you at home or at work. Don't be rude, but do be firm. They'll probably be a little shocked if they are used to having you jump and run every time they ask for something, but they'll get used to it and they'll learn how to take care of those things without your help.

29. **Write everything down.** Writing lists and notes keeps your brain from

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"There is no greatness where there is not simplicity, goodness, and truth." -Leo Tolstoy

feeling like it has to remember all those items. I use a simple notebook for everything from writing daily journal entries to article ideas to a master to-do list for house projects. I grab it when I go out the door and have it for reference if I need it, or if I think of something else to add.

30. **Take a walk.** Sometimes what we all need is a reminder that the world is big and we are small. Get outside for ten or twenty minutes, breathe, admire the trees and the grass and the sky and the clouds, feel the rain or the sun, let your muscles stretch and relax.

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About the Author

Annie Mueller tutors, teaches, edits, writes, and blogs. She has tutored individual students at both high school and college levels, compiled and taught curriculum for upper-level high school classes, edited and critiqued manuscripts, and written for clients including a non-profit organization, a technology-based corporation, small businesses, blogs, and an educational center. She is a Summa Cum Laude graduate with a Bachelor's in English, a penchant for poetry, and an obsession with how-to books. In between articles, she is busy raising her three children (all under three years old), killing plants (unintentionally), and trying to learn how to skateboard (from her husband).



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