

Simplify Your Life

Most people say they want to simplify their lives because they feel like they have lost control of their time. They want to have more time to do the things they want to do, both at work and at home. Every few weeks, there is another newspaper or magazine story about how people feel that they aren't spending their time on things they enjoy. A recent poll, for example, found that 65% of people are spending their free time doing things they'd rather not do. Isn't that amazing? It's great if you have created a full and interesting life for yourself, but how frustrating if you don't have the time to enjoy it!

The 80/20 Principle

The 80/20 Principle, first stated by Vilfredo Pareto in 1897, says that 20% of our effort produces 80% of the results. This means that a small number of resources are highly productive—and a large number (80%) are not very productive at all. Here are a few examples:

- 20% of the things in your house are used 80% of the time.
- 80% of the things in your house are used 20% of the time.
- 20% of your activities give you 80% of your satisfaction.
- 20% of the stocks in an investor's portfolio produce 80% of the results.
- 20% of the books in a bookstore account for 80% of the sales.

The challenge is to identify those few *vital* items that produce the greatest value for you. Focus on the activities that result in satisfaction, such as money, better health, or more free time. At the same time, identify those many *trivial* items that *don't* lead to things like satisfaction, money, better health, or more free time. These unprofitable activities are taking up 80% of your time. Doesn't it make sense to deemphasize them in favor of the vital 20%?

Making Time Takes Time

The first challenge to simplifying your life is that it takes an investment of time. If you want to discover how to make time for the things you enjoy, you have to examine how you are spending your time now. If you keep living your life the same way you always have, it will *stay* complicated.

For some, the excuse, "I can't slow down because everything is important," is a way to avoid seeing what they don't want to see: a relationship that is no longer fulfilling, a job that no longer satisfies, an emotional distance that has emerged between them and their family members. Some people keep their lives going at a furious pace to avoid seeing what they don't want to see.

If you really do want to simplify your life, you will make the time. You don't have to do anything radical; in fact, it is best to start small. Set aside just 15-30 minutes each day for a month. During that time, think about a simple question: What are the elements that contribute to my life feeling so complicated? Make a list of the factors in your private journal and write about them. Begin to think about what can be changed or eliminated.

Finding this time is not as impossible as it may seem at first. Maybe you can leave work 15-30 minutes early for a month and use the extra time for this exploration, possibly at home. Perhaps you can take the bus instead of driving, or turn off the television during the evening news and write in your journal instead. Set aside 15-30 minutes a day for one month, ask yourself some important questions, and be prepared to learn some remarkable things about yourself.

Fewer Responsibilities

You may think that this sounds too simple. Most people who seek to simplify their lives think that the answer is to get more help. But this probably won't help. In fact, if you hire someone to help you get more done, you will actually have added another complication to your life rather than making it simpler. You probably don't need more help; you probably need fewer responsibilities.

Learn to Say *No*

If you want a simpler life, you must learn to say *no*. In *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things That Really Matter*, author Elaine St. James says that people get into trouble because they agree to do things they really don't have time to do. This leads to a constant state of being overcommitted and frustrated. Our culture makes it difficult for us to say no to requests to attend extra meetings, dinner engagements, or to take on new responsibilities. Many of us feel obligated to always be participating at a high level. We are proud of our high productivity and involvement, but it comes with a high price: a complicated life that leaves no time for you. St. James suggests that you actually schedule time *for yourself* on your calendar at the beginning of every month; when you are invited to participate in something, turn down the request because you already have a commitment.

Clear Away Clutter

Get rid of things you don't use. Think of all the stuff you have acquired in the past five or 10 years. Most of it is designed to make life simpler, but in fact most of it brings along its own set of complications. Think of what typically happens when you buy a new electronic gadget: Consider all of the time required to earn the money to pay for it, shop for it, buy it, set it up, learn how to use it, fix the unexpected problems it causes with another gadget, and then the time you spend actually using it. Most of us have rooms in our houses filled with stuff that seemed like a good idea at the time, but ends up sitting on a shelf or in a drawer, unused. St. James suggests that you go through your house once each year and get rid of everything you haven't used during the previous year.

She also has an idea for not acquiring new stuff in the first place. She suggests a technique called the 30-Day List. When you start thinking that you must have a certain product, add it to your 30-Day List and wait. At the end of 30 days, ask yourself if you really still need it. Chances are, you will have lost your enthusiasm for the product and will cross it off the list.