

the  minimalists

VERY, VERY SIMPLE

12 Tools for a Simpler Life

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About The Minimalists

Let's start with a simple parable from Anthony de Mello...

The philosopher Diogenes was eating lentils for supper. He was seen by the philosopher Aristippus, who lived comfortably by flattering the king.

Said Aristippus, "If you would learn to be subservient to the king you would not have to live on lentils."

Said Diogenes, "Learn to live on lentils and you will not have to be subservient to the king."

INTRODUCTION

Let's Simplify Together

It would be wonderful if more stuff was making us more joyous, but it's not—excess is making us miserable. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the average American household contains more than 300,000 items. How's that working out for us? Are we happier, more content, more satisfied, more fulfilled? Or are we still pining for more?

A few years ago, my minimalist cofounder, Ryan Nicodemus, and I published the *Minimalist Rulebook: 16 Rules for Living with Less*. Millions of people have been exposed to those rules in the subsequent years. It is still available as an ebook or audiobook at TheMinimalists.com.

The guidebook you're reading right now contains 12 brand-new tools for living with less—new rules we've developed since the *Minimalist Rulebook* was released. I refer to these 12 tools as *rules* throughout this project, but in reality, they are adjustable *boundaries* designed to fit anyone's lifestyle. What is a boundary? To put it simply, a boundary defines anything you're no longer willing to accept. That's what these tools will help you determine—the clutter that is no longer acceptable in your life.

Toward the end of this guide, we'll even spend some time reviewing some of the vintage rules that have worked well for millions of people in The Minimalists' audience over the years—our “greatest hits,” if you will.

Whether you're an overwhelmed stay-at-home mom, a retired granddad, a cluttered college student, or a busy entrepreneur, you will find value in the practical and philosophical insights that follow.

One last note before we dive in: If you'd like to listen while you're reading, you can download the audiobook version of *Very, Very Simple* at VeryVerySimple.com, or you can find it on Audible. In that audio edition, my podcast partner, the minimalist philosopher T.K. Coleman, and I also discuss the philosophical implications of these tools—like a mini-podcast appended to each short chapter.

OK, ready? Let's get started.

TOOL 1

Hate That Shirt Rule

Let's start with the easiest area to declutter: *your closet*. Statistics show that the average person wears fewer than 20% of their clothes in any given month, which means that 80% of your clothes are probably contributing to your clutter problem.

There are several explanations for this excess, but the biggest reason is simple: *you don't enjoy most of the clothes you own*.

Sure, that dress looked great on the mannequin. Yes, that oversized vest with teal tassels *used* to be in style (wink, wink). And of course, that polka-dot shirt was on sale, so you just *had* to buy it!

But here's the problem: every time you try on that dress, vest, or shirt, you hate it! It doesn't fit right, it doesn't look good, and you don't even like that pattern.

That's where the Hate That Shirt Rule enters the picture. Here's how it works.

You begin by "going shopping in your own closet." Grab any one article of clothing from a hanger, shelf, or dresser drawer. It's often best to start with things that are toward the back of the closet or at the bottom of a drawer, especially if you haven't worn it in the last year. Maybe it's an old belt, a formerly trendy pair of jeans, or that old suit you haven't worn since Aunt Mae's funeral.

Now try it on, look at yourself in the mirror.

Pause.

Does it look great on you?

If so, keep it and start wearing it this month.

However, if you feel like shouting "I hate this!" into the mirror, then it's time to let it go.

Sell it if it's worth your time. Otherwise donate it by the end of the week. Setting a deadline will keep you accountable and allow you to move on more swiftly.

This rule will help you let go of *any* clothes you don't like, retaining only your favorites.

TOOL 2

Wouldn't Repurchase Rule

This boundary will put into perspective the folly of the excess that has accumulated in every corner of your home—from your primary bedroom to your guest bathroom and everywhere in between. Plus, it's *very, very simple!* Here's how you use it.

First, look around your home. Pick an object—*any* object:

- **Toaster**
- **Blender**
- **Microwave**
- **Loveseat**
- **Coffee table**
- **Television**
- **Gaming console**
- **Floor lamp**
- **Nightstand**
- **Shower caddy**
- **Plunger**
- **Space heater**
- **Supplements**
- **Cosmetics**
- **Camping gear**
- **Bicycle accessories**
- **DVDs, CDs, magazines**
- **Literally anything you can find**

Now think: *If I lost this item today, would I repurchase it?*

If so, it probably doesn't make sense to ditch that item.

But if you wouldn't replace it, why are you still holding on to it?

Of course you'd replace your refrigerator or your HVAC system, but maybe you'd feel a little lighter if you no longer owned your college textbooks or the wedding dress from your *first* marriage. While there's nothing wrong with owning any of these things, there's also no reason to cling to something that is weighing you down.

In summary, if you wouldn't repurchase a thing, that's a sign that you might benefit from getting it out of your home.

TOOL 3

Didn't Know Rule

Next, we're going to explore the areas that have turned into repositories for your forgotten clutter:

- **Coat closets**
- **Guest bedrooms**
- **Storage spaces**
- **Shelving units**
- **Media consoles**
- **Armoires**
- **Chests**
- **Cupboards**

Have you ever found something in your home and thought, "I didn't even know I still had this?" Of course you have. Every time I work with someone who is decluttering their home, we find countless things that they didn't even know they owned:

"I didn't realize I still had that high-school jacket!"

"Oh, that's where those pants went!"

"Ah ha, I thought I'd given that book away!"

"Ugh, I couldn't even tell you what's in that box!"

Whenever you find an item and your first thought is *I didn't know I still owned this thing*, that's a sign that possession has not added value to your life in a long time (if ever).

When something ceases to add value, it's okay to free up the space it occupies in your home—as well as the space it's occupying in your mind whenever you hold on too long.

When applied regularly, this rule will grant you the permission to eject all those bits of forgotten clutter that are unwittingly in the way.

You can also apply this boundary to all that overwhelming paperwork that haunts your file cabinets and attic boxes by scanning the essentials and then shredding everything.

TOOL 4

Decluttered Duplicates Rule

Moving on to the kitchen and dining room. Okay, so maybe you *do* use that fourth spatula—every once in a while. But occasional use doesn't mean you have to keep a thing. Deploy this tool to minimize your duplicates. Your decluttered kitchen will thank you.

Common duplicate items include:

- **Scissors**
- **Whisks**
- **Measuring cups**
- **Can openers**
- **Meat tenderizers**
- **Salad spinners**
- **Thermometers**
- **Potato mashers**
- **Garlic presses**
- **Tupperware**
- **Cutting boards**
- **Baking pans**
- **Umbrellas**
- **Duplicate George Forman Grills**

Of course, there are some items that this rule doesn't apply to, such as:

- **Plates**
- **Bowls**
- **Utensils**
- **Paperclips**
- **Staples**
- **Rubberbands**
- **Underwear**
- **Socks**

When you own too many items in this second category, you can use the other tools in this book—specifically the *Didn't Know Rule* and *Wouldn't Repurchase Rule*—to address those types of clutter.

The heart of this rule is not to arbitrarily discharge all duplicates; rather, it is designed to better understand that the kitchen (and the rest of the house) runs more smoothly when decision fatigue has been minimized. Getting rid of these duplicate items helps you enjoy the things you own even more—because they are no longer watered down by the things that get in the way.

No Piles Rule

Excess accumulates quickly throughout your home because every flat surface seems to attract clutter. Between our desks and coffee tables and countertops and dressers and credenzas and benches and sideboards and end tables and media consoles, our homes are outfitted with boundless surface area ripe for the accrual of stuff.

Of course, you pay it no mind until, one day, the detritus has metastasized to cover every flat surface. Stacks of unread junk magazines and unwanted junk mail. Piles of unfinished projects and unattended toys. Hoards of untidy appliances and unremarkable junk. Not to mention the bills, receipts, notes, packages, bags, and pocket scraps, all of which accumulate with ease.

It didn't happen overnight, but fear not! The chaos can be addressed relatively expediently with the No Piles Rule, which contains two key ingredients:

- **Fewer surfaces.** Whether you live in a tiny apartment or a McMansion, having fewer flat surfaces means fewer places for the rubbish to collect. Thus, if a piece of furniture has a flat top, you can do what my wife and I do: refuse to bring it into your space unless its function is critical. Sure, we have a desk, a dresser, and a table in our home, but even those items remain clutterfree when not in use—hence the next ingredient.
- **Clear surfaces.** Even with the appropriate amount of surface area, clutter will still find its way to the, ahem, surface. It's as if our flat surfaces are a magnet for miscellanea, so I have one more boundary in my house: unless a possession is used every day, it doesn't belong on a flat surface—it must find a new home in a drawer or a closet or, better yet, the donation bin. Thus, our desk remains empty, and our kitchen counters contain only a hot-water heater and a coffee grinder, while our blender, food processor, and other appliances dwell inside their respective cabinets.

However, I do have one exception to the No Piles Rule in my home: *art*. My wife and I own a handful of well-curated objects—a pair of ceramic vases, a wooden blackbird statuette, a water-drop-shaped glass jug—that harmonize with our uncluttered surfaces in a way the debris of everyday life cannot.

TOOL 6

Entryway Rule

This one is my favorite. Why? Because your home is supposed to be a reprieve from the madness. And yet, each day, work, news, email, and social media follow you into your bathroom, living room, kitchen, and bedroom—because you are bound to your “79th organ” (your phone).

Scrolling is the new smoking. Just as you and your family benefit from not smoking cigarettes in your home, this boundary will help you minimize your at-home addiction to scrolling. With two simple steps, the Entryway Rule is surprisingly easy. Here’s how it works.

First, set up a charging station in the main entryway of your home—be it the hallway, foyer, laundry room, garage, staircase, or wherever you typically enter your home. This will be the new home for your mobile devices when you are at home.

Second, whenever you arrive home, simply plug your phone into its charger so that it doesn’t follow you around the house.

Don’t worry, you’ll still have access to your phone if someone needs to call you—or if you want to send a message to another person. But, much like a corded home phone (remember those?), your device is no longer capturing your attentions with all of its:

- **Pings**
- **Texts**
- **Emails**
- **Notifications**
- **Direct messages**
- **Miscellaneous interruptions**

Use this tool to untether from the incessant barrage of digital clutter that trails you around the house and disrupts your peace. Once this boundary is in place, you will experience a type of calm that you didn’t realize was still available in your home.

TOOL 7

Junkless Drawer Rule

Yes, minimalists have junk drawers, too. Use this fun tool to identify and eliminate the excess clutter, so that you can keep that junk drawer organized for good.

First, before you open your junk drawer, grab a pen and piece of paper. In less than two minutes, write down every item you *think* is in the drawer (be specific):

- **One pair of red scissors**
- **Two staplers**
- **Three roles of tape**
- **Seven coasters**
- **Nine black pens**
- **Two highlighters**
- **Six notepads**
- **One green flyswatter**
- **Four pads of sticky notes**
- **Three charging cables**
- **Five magnets**
- **Eight chip clips**
- **One pack of bag ties**
- **Two phone books (why?!)**

Now, open the drawer. You can give yourself permission to empty out everything that was not on your list.

For best results, bring this rule into play once every three months. Even better if you do it with someone else in the house—comparing lists is a fun way to bond while you cast aside the junk.

Once the junk is culled, you can install simple drawer organizers to help prevent the clutter from re-accumulating in the future.

Note: Everyone needs a place to keep their miscellanea, but *one* junk drawer is enough. Of course, once this tool is implemented, you might need to change its name from “junk drawer” to “junkless drawer”—hence the name of the rule.

TOOL 8

Clutter Coffins Rule

Now that you have momentum, it's time to tackle the clutter that is hidden in your basement, attic, garage, and storage unit. Face it, these areas have become mausoleums of useless stuff buried in "clutter coffins"—you know, all those totes, bins, and boxes filled with:

- **Magazines**
- **DVD's and VHS's**
- **CD's and cassettes**
- **Old paperwork**
- **Obsolete electronics**
- **Camping gear**
- **Decorations**
- **Sentimental items**
- **Out-of-style clothes**
- **Boxes stuffed with stuff**

Use this new boundary to sort through those Clutter Coffins, keep what's essential, reassess the nonessentials, and ditch the rest.

Start by noticing that everything in your Clutter Coffins can be placed into three piles:

1. **Vital**
2. **Practical**
3. **Clutter**

Since most of our *needs* are universal, only a few things belong in the *vital* pile—food, shelter, clothing, transportation, vocation, education—none of which exist in these Clutter Coffins (if any of these items were actually vital, you'd already be using them). Which means that everything else is either *practical* or it's *clutter*.

Strictly speaking your *practical* items are nonessential, but they can add value to your life if you resurrect them from their Clutter Coffins. In an ideal world, the majority of your stuff would fit in the *practical* pile; naturally, you don't need a couch or a dining table, but they're worth owning if they enhance your life.

Sadly, almost all of the things in your Clutter Coffins fit in the *clutter* pile. While this junk often masquerades as indispensable, it actually gets in the way—that's the definition of clutter. The key is to get rid of the clutter to make room for everything else that adds value to your life.

Once-a-Month Rule

An orderly household requires regular upkeep, chores, and errands. But if you procrastinate, these tasks quickly turn into unwelcome disturbances. However, domestic work needn't feel like a burden.

That's why, on the first day of each calendar month, I use the Once-a-Month Rule to take care of the small monthly maintenance items that keep the house running smoothly:

- **Refill all soap dispensers**
- **Replace toothbrushes**
- **Charge electronic safes**
- **Recharge remote controls**
- **Throw out expired food**
- **Pitch expired supplements**
- **Safely dispose of expired medications**
- **Rinse out the bottom of trash cans**
- **Dust ceiling fans and air purifiers**
- **Clean the garbage disposal with a fresh lemon**
- **Wipe down baseboards (every three months)**
- **Swap out any air filters (every six months)**
- **Switch out water filters (every six months)**

If you set a calendar reminder to do these things every month, it will lead to a calmer, cleaner, less chaotic home.

This rule takes me less than 22 minutes to implement (I know because I set a timer to see how quickly I can complete the entire list), and it gives me peace of mind the rest of the month. (Plus, I never run out of soap when my hands are dirty—what a bonus!)

Out-in-the-Open Rule

Out of sight isn't *really* out of mind—because all that material clutter hiding in your cabinets creates mental clutter.

If you saw The Minimalists' most recent Netflix documentary, *Less Is Now*, you'll remember our "Packing Party" concept in which you box up all your possessions as if you're moving and then unpack only the items you need over the next three weeks.

The Out-in-the-Open Rule is tantamount to embarking on a "Reverse Packing Party." Instead of placing all of your possessions in boxes, I want you to "unpack" all of your kitchen and bathroom cabinets, placing everything hidden behind their doors out in the open—on the floor of the room.

I like to do this at least once a year. You'll need to set aside up to four hours for this endeavor. As soon as everything is revealed, you'll be shocked by all the things that were clinging to their dark hiding spots:

- **Coffee mugs**
- **Placemats**
- **Utensils**
- **Appliances**
- **Expired food**
- **Cookbooks**
- **Hard drives**
- **Electronics manuals**
- **Cables and cords**
- **Adaptors and connectors**
- **Kids' artwork and papers**
- **Tape, staples, ties, rubberbands**

Use this tool to get everything out in the open so that you can dispose of the hidden excess. Once everything is out in the open, you'll use the three piles method that we discussed in the Clutter Coffins chapter to sell, donate, and recycle the offending excess. This boundary also works well for file cabinets, credenzas, consoles, and drawers anywhere in your home, car, or office.

Set the Stage Rule

Do you hate waking up to a cluttered bedroom, living room, or bathroom? Me, too!

You can use the Set the Stage Rule to start your day right by “setting the stage” the night before. It takes only 10 minutes today to simplify your tomorrow.

Here’s how it works in two quick steps.

First, 10 minutes before bedtime, identify any household clutter that might disrupt your next morning (remember: if it gets in the way, it’s clutter). I usually look for:

- **Dishes left in the sink or on the drying rack.**
- **Kids toys and art supplies that have been left out.**
- **Keys, wallets, purses, chapstick, and other pocket accessories.**
- **Watches, jewelry, belts, ties, and other ornamental items.**
- **Jacket, belts, hats, and other wardrobe accessories.**
- **Socks and shoes that were abandoned in the hallway.**
- **Dirty clothes that haven’t found their way to the hamper.**
- **Clean laundry from the dryer that hasn’t returned to the closet.**
- **Chargers, headsets, phones, laptops, and other electronics.**
- **Books, magazines, papers, mail, and anything else that has been set on a flat surface—counters, tables, shelves, etc.—that day.**

What else gets in your way? Identify any obstacles that will prevent you from having a peaceful morning.

Second, make it fun by turning into a game that you play with other members of the household (or by yourself). Set a five-minute timer and see how many items you can return to their homebase before the alarm sounds. Whoever puts away the most items wins an agreed upon prize (a foot rub, five bucks, bragging rights). No matter who wins the game, everyone will win a calmer, clutter-free morning.

Future Clutter Rule

We saved the most fun tool for last! Once you get beyond the physical clutter, you can use the Future Clutter Rule to stave off “stuff-itis” and other forms of “lifestyle inflammation” from creeping back into your life.

This boundary includes six questions to ask before buying any new material possessions:

1. **Who am I buying this for—for myself or to impress others?**
2. **Will this add value to my life?**
3. **Can I afford it financially?**
4. **What’s the true cost beyond the price tag?**
5. **Is this the best use of this money?**
6. **Would the best version of me buy this?**

Then, as you avoid most new purchases with these questions, you can replace that future clutter with meaningful experiences. Some of my family’s favorites are:

- **Concerts**
- **Picnics**
- **Sunsets**
- **Hiking**
- **Swimming**
- **Exercise**
- **Camping**
- **Museums**
- **Galleries**
- **Sporting events**
- **Farmers markets**
- **Screenless Saturdays**

This rule is a real-world demonstrate that you aren’t simply getting rid of your things—you are making room for a better life with less.

BONUS TOOL

Wednesday Rule

Oh wait, we ain't done! I have a bonus tool for you. I've been using this one more than any other rule lately, so I'd be remiss if I left it out.

The Wednesday Rule helps me make better decisions *today*. I apply it to purchases, health, relationships, finances, commitments, and of course material clutter—and it's very, very simple.

Before you make a decision, simply ask yourself one question:

Will I be delighted with this decision next Wednesday?

It's that simple.

Next Wednesday, when I'm looking back on my decision:

Will my future self be happy that I bought those pants?

Will my future self be satisfied that I ate those potato chips?

Will my future self be glad I got frustrated with my daughter?

Will my future self be grateful he wasted that money on a lottery ticket?

Will my future self be excited by that meeting I scheduled?

Will my future self be thrilled that he didn't clean out the junk drawer?

If the answer is yes, then it's probably a good decision:

Yes, I'm relieved I purchased this new dress shirt for my job interview.

Yes, I'm thankful I ordered the smoothie instead of the milkshake.

Yes, I'm pleased I acknowledged my coworker's achievement.

Yes, I'm grateful I invested my extra \$100 in index funds.

Yes, I'm overjoyed I scheduled a coffee date with my best friend.

Yes, I'm pleased and Punch that I cleared out that storage locker.

However, if the answer is *No*, *I will not be delighted by this decision*, then the decision is already made for you: *when in doubt, opt out*. I like to think of it as "letting go in advance."

More Tools for Less

Let's complete this audio experience by reviewing some of the vintage rules that have worked well for millions of people in The Minimalists' audience over the years. When added to the previous 13 tools, these "greatest hits" will help round out your minimalist toolkit so that you can better manage your material possessions—and release the mental and emotional clutter—for the rest of your life:

Seasonality Rule. Look at your possessions. Pick something. Anything. Have you used that item in the last 90 days? If you haven't, will you use it in the next 90? If not, say goodbye! That's why some people call this the 90/90 Rule. It's especially useful for excess clothing since it covers every season.

Just in Case Rule. Are you holding on to anything "just in case" you might need it someday? You don't need to. Enter: the Just-in-Case Rule, aka the 20/20 Rule. Any JIC items you get rid of that you truly need later, you can replace for less than \$20 in less than 20 minutes from your current location.

Spontaneous Combustion Rule. Your material possessions cause more stress than you realize. As you grow more and more burdened by past purchases, the discontent heats up. But you needn't wait until the temperature is scorching. This is why we invented the Spontaneous Combustion Rule, which starts with a simple question: *If this item spontaneously combusted, would I feel relieved?* If so, let it go!

Minimalist Gift-Giving Rule. For meaningful birthdays and holidays, you can avoid physical gifts and still participate in the gift-giving process. Since presence is the best present, what would happen if you gifted only *experiences* this year? How much more memorable would that be?

Wait for It Rule. With the advent of online shopping and one-click purchases, it's easier than ever to add to your hoard. To prevent impulse purchases, I created the Wait for It Rule, aka the 30/30 Rule. If something costs more than \$30, ask yourself whether you can make do without it for the next thirty hours. You'll be surprised how many purchases you *don't* make once you enact this boundary.

CONCLUSION

Simple Ain't Easy

While living with less seems straightforward, the process of decluttering, making intentional choices, and shifting your mindset away from consumerism requires significant effort, discipline, and consistent decision-making to achieve contentment and to focus on what truly adds value to your life. It's about the hard work of defining your values and saying no to excess, rather than just getting rid of stuff easily.

In other words, *simple ain't easy*.

Simplicity is not merely a philosophy about owning fewer things; it's a philosophical shift to question why you own things and what they cost you in time, money, energy, and attention. To live a simple life, you must actively choose what stays and what goes, which involves breaking old patterns by confronting habits and emotional attachments, a process that's often difficult—especially when you're first getting started.

Maintaining simplicity is a continuous process, not a one-time event. It involves daily choices to avoid clutter and stay focused on your life away from things.

Because modern society pushes for more, a minimalist life can feel like a counter-cultural way of living. It can also feel challenging. But it's worth it. I know because I've lived this way for more than 15 years—and I've witnessed countless people improve their lives—not through addition but subtraction.

Now that we are at the end of this journey, your real journey begins. I recommend returning to this ebook for inspiration and insightful reminders as you let go. You can also download the audiobook version of *Very, Very Simple* at veryverysimple.com or find it on Audible.

Most important, while minimizing can feel overwhelming at first, you now have the tools you need to make the process fun and joyous. Letting go is much easier when you approach minimalism with a spirit of play and possibility.



Fifteen years after simplifying their lives and jettisoning most of their possessions, Joshua Fields Millburn, Ryan Nicodemus, and T.K. Coleman, known collectively as The Minimalists, now help millions of people heal their relationship with stuff through their media appearances, films, blog, social media, podcast, speaking tours, and books.

Learn more at TheMinimalists.com.

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