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# The Simple Secret to Happiness



To feel calmer instantly, improve your mood, and just make life a billion times more enjoyable, you need to learn this single bliss trick: Pare down.

By Kimberly Dawn Neumann

■ Cosmo girls have a lot going on: things to do, people to see, objects to buy....And while we assume that packing it all in enriches our existence, it actually has the opposite effect. "Overabundance, whether it's a surplus of stuff, commitments, or even mental clutter, can have a negative influence on your quality of life," says Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD, professor of Harvard's most popular course, Positive Psychology, often called Happiness 101. "You get so overloaded, you fail to enjoy the simple pleasures right in front of you."

Proof: Even though people are wealthier and have more choices than ever, studies find they're also more unsatisfied and depressed. The remedy? Realizing that, when it comes to what brings happiness, less is more. We're not *just* talking about purging material things (though that's one part) but about letting go of excess worry, obligations, and relationships that drain you. Here's how to unburden to find bliss.

## Invest in Your Life, Not in Your Closet

Don't think: Name the happiest you've been in the last year. You probably didn't say "Looking at my great shoes," even if they're your most prized possession. "Research has found that once people's basic needs are met, having more stuff doesn't increase happiness," says psychologist Daniel Gilbert, PhD, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*. Cut down on clutter and you'll have more room to enjoy yourself. Try this:

✓ **Buy memories instead of things.** When deciding whether to spend your cash on an item or an experience—say, a new designer suit versus a weekend trip with friends—go with the experience, says Gilbert. Most people think the outfit is the better choice because a

getaway ends. But the trip will always stay perfect in your mind, while the item (suit, shoes, whatever) will eventually lose its luster and be taken for granted.

✓ **Live fast.** Spend less time getting ready for your life and more time living it by using "item rotation," says psychologist Barry Schwartz, PhD, author of *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. If you have 10 work skirts, hide 5 of them so you have fewer choices to stress about each day. Once a month, swap them out, and pitch any you didn't miss while they were hidden.

✓ **Do a digital detox.** Being hooked to your crackberry, cell, and computer means constant pressure to stay in contact...without any face time. So go on an occasional tech fast. Call, don't text, turn off your cell when you're with someone, and only reply to urgent e-mails. "You'll connect more with the people around you and feel more a part of your life," says Timothy J. Moore, PhD, a life coach in Santa Monica, California.

## Love What You Have

Studies show that no matter how much people already possess, they still focus primarily on what they want next, explains Gilbert. It's a trap researchers call the hedonic treadmill. You know: You finally get your dream couch, then immediately decide you "need" a new lamp. Or that promotion comes through, but now you're gunning for a snazzier title. To stop and take stock:

✓ **Flip your brain.** Instead of comparing yourself to people based on what you don't have (a friend's awesome job, J.Lo's bod), turn around and look at what you *do* have that someone else might want, says Gilbert. You'll realize just how envy-worthy your life is.

✓ **Start this bedtime ritual.** Every night while brushing your teeth, think of three reasons your life is great right now, no matter how simple ("Cute dude smiled at me"). Okay, okay, it sounds dorky, but it will work—research has shown that consciously noting happy moments makes you feel more contented overall, says Schwartz.

## Streamline Your Schedule

It's basic math: You'll be more satisfied if you plan and accomplish 2 things a day than if you get 3 shoddily done but feel like a failure for the 18 others you didn't get to. "People book themselves crazy because they can't bear the

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## YOUR STORAGE AREAS

Purge all this:

- Souvenirs that don't move you, like ticket stubs, wedding programs, knickknacks. Keep one thing from each major trip.
- Old pictures, posters, and magazines—send the pictures to friends; read articles online.
- College textbooks and class notes you'll never need again
- Any appliance you've stashed until you get it fixed/find the manual/need a yogurt maker
- Exercise equipment and DVDs gathering dust
- All that nice crap your ex(es) left behind

**TRASH-IT TIP:** Don't hold on to something just because it cost a lot. There's eBay. Better to make a few bucks off it.



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thought of possibly missing out on something," says Schwartz. "Then they're constantly harried and don't really enjoy anything." Cut down this way:

✓ **Clear your calendar.** Leave at least one weeknight evening free each week. You'll fill that slot with something you actually enjoy, rather than an obligation, which makes you happier with life.

✓ **Use the dread test.** Before you commit to something, ask yourself whether you'd say yes if it were taking place tonight. If it makes you groan, decline because you won't want to do it when the time comes either. People think about the future abstractly, but we're more realistic when we consider the right now, says Gilbert.

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## YOUR CLOSET

Here's what to toss:

- Anything that itches, pinches, pulls, or otherwise makes you not wear it. Shoes count.
- Unflattering clothing (hello, camel toe), even if you did pay a lot for it. Invite an honest friend over to help evaluate.
- Multiples of basics like black tees, flip flops, and jeans (keep the best of each)
- Your wardrobe from three sizes ago
- Outdated fashions—quit waiting for baby backpacks or high-heeled sneakers to re-emerge.
- Sleep shirts you don't wear

**TRASH-IT TIP:** Getting rid of the good stuff is easier if you donate it or hold a bitch-and-swap with friends.



✓ **Say no nicely.** Instead of stressing about how to turn down friends (and acquaintances), just say, "I'd love to, but I have a bunch of new things happening that I need to focus on."

## Ban Pick-Me-Up Treats

You're bummed, so you shop, pig out, or otherwise overindulge. But instead of helping, those just add to your material and mental clutter. So learn to ride out your funks. "It's good to experience a range of emotions, including sadness, because then you recognize real happiness later instead of trying to create it," says Ronald Dworkin, MD, PhD, author of *Artificial Happiness*. Here's how:

✓ **Put life on pause.** Before you charge something expensive or eat crap, hold off for about 15 minutes. "Step back, breathe, and ask if it'll make you feel better or if you're trying to anesthetize yourself," says Moore. Usually you'll reconsider.

✓ **Listen when you're sulking.** Instead of trying to fix your *mood* (your boss's insult turns into "Drink! Drink! Drink!"), look at what's *causing* it, says Dr. Dworkin. Addressing the situation (you may need to switch jobs or learn to stand up for yourself) means it won't keep being a problem in the future.

## Pitch Pointless Obsessing

Angsting over things you can't control, like the weather or someone else's opinion, just crowds your brain with toxic thoughts, says psychologist Mark Leary, PhD, author of *The Curse of the Self*. Learn to let go of those what-ifs.

✓ **Stop the mental tug-of-war.** Instead of belaboring something like calorie counts, choose whatever brings the least baggage. If salad makes you feel deprived, causing you to binge later, eat pizza. If pizza makes you feel guilty, eat salad. Know yourself, commit, and move on.

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## YOUR BATHROOM

Buh-bye:

- Mascara older than three months and creamy cosmetics older than six months
- All but one of any product you have multiple, almost-empty bottles of
- All those hair goos and accessories from styles past
- Expired and outdated meds
- Your stockpile of freebie lotions, shampoos, and shower caps from hotels
- Ratty, ugly towels that "still work." Towels always work!

**TRASH-IT TIP:** Pour the last little bit of your favorite products into one saved hotel bottle for trips.

—BETHANY HEITMAN  
SOURCE: JULIE MORGENSTERN, AUTHOR OF  
ORGANIZING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

✓ **Get a reality check.** During flash freakouts, remind yourself, everything is okay *right now*, says Leary. Example: If you're stressing at night over the big meeting tomorrow, remember that you're actually cozy in bed, not sweating in a conference room. Once you see how many micrisis are self-created, you'll have fewer of them.

✓ **Take the backseat.** A new Cornell University study found that people are just as happy when a choice is made for them as they are when they make the decision themselves. Always being the decider creates more work and worry for you ("What if I pick wrong?"), so let other people have the final say sometimes. Let your pal choose what film to see, or ask the waiter to recommend one of two entrees you can't decide between. ■