**Department of Extension Family and Consumer Sciences**

**Quarterly Newsletter**

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**It’s Spring! Reduce Clutter to Release Personal Energy**

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Stuff. We all have it. At times our collection of stuff grows so large that it cannot be contained in one room. It spills out into other areas of our homes, sometimes resulting in a garage packed so deep there’s no room for the car. Or, we elect to relocate our stuff to a storage unit where we pay rent and don’t have to look at it (or deal with it!). Yet, we can visit it occasionally -- just to make certain it’s still there.

Situations that involve hoarding, the overwhelming clutter that dominates our lives and living spaces, and individuals drowning in excess stuff is problematic in America. However, stuff is big business and industry has discovered that America’s problem with clutter translates to big money. (Note: This article does not address “hoarding”, a disorder that most often requires professional therapy.)

Back in the 1970’s the late comedian George Carlin created an entire routine on “stuff.” According to Carlin:

Actually this is just a place for my stuff, ya know? That's all, a little place for my stuff. That's all I want, that's all you need in life, is a little place for your stuff, ya know? I can see it on your table, everybody's got a little place for their stuff. This is my stuff, that's your stuff, that'll be his stuff over there. That's all you need in life, a little place for your stuff. That's all your house is: a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff. (http://www.writers-free-reference.com/funny/story085.htm)

Take for example a television program that was popular just a few years back. The premise for each episode was that a volunteer family went through the process of having their lives de-cluttered. The team experts led the family members in dealing effectively and efficiently with their excess stuff. These lucky individuals reclaimed power over their lives through an elimination process.

As one who has relocated quite a bit over the past 15 years, I’m very familiar with keeping my personal possessions to a minimum. I’m certain that our military families can relate to this as well. For the majority of people, however, excess stuff is a problem.

Do you have too much stuff? Here’s a quick exercise: Look around your personal space – be it a bedroom, office, living room, or other room of your choice. No, not a sweeping glance. Give it a good look. Pretend you’ve never seen this room before. What impression do you have? Is it neat and orderly? Or, are the table, chair, and bed overflowing with piles of clutter? If the latter is the case, you need to make peace with your things and keep only those items that you really love or really need. All the other things need to go – not on vacation, but for good.

The reason you want to ditch the clutter is that it holds you in place. Clutter prevents you from moving forward. This belief is based on the philosophy of feng shui, which is all about balance. Feng shui proposes that everything in this world is made up of vibrations and everything holds energy, or Chi (pronounced *chee* as in CHEEtos). This energy is inside you and all around you. When you improve your chi, you improve your life.

Improving your chi does take focus and intention. For example, when you need to study or complete projects, clear your desk or workspace. That’s right. Remove everything. Wipe it down. Now, put back only those things that are absolutely essential (and, no, your espresso machine is not an essential). If you’ve got stuff draped over the back of your chair, put it away. This activity will give you a fresh start and a fresh perspective on your projects. Try it for a couple of weeks and see for yourself.

I worked with a woman once who cleared her desk every evening before leaving the office. She said by doing this simple exercise she was able to begin her day with a fresh start. This is similar to making certain the dishes are washed and stored before going to bed so the kitchen is clean for the new day. I adopted this practice of clearing my desk at the end of the day and I can attest to appreciating the look and feel of entering a clean office.

Here are more ideas for boosting your chi:

* Turn off the lights, the loud music, and the TV. Get some deep, peaceful sleep.
* Eat like you understand the theory that good food and lots of water will give you great skin and strong bones.
* Get some exercise! It works – try it.
* Spend time with your family and friends.
* Laugh and laugh. Then, laugh some more.
* Read a book for pleasure.
* Surround yourself with colors you love.

Now that you’ve decided to take steps in reducing clutter and, thereby, improving your chi, you might want some ideas for recycling that clutter. Here are some suggestions to get you started.

* Bring something in, take something out. For example, I have a CD holder that holds 48 CDs. When I buy a new CD, I remove an old one. That way, my collection never outgrows its space.
* Bring your excess stuff to the local thrift shop.
* Take photos of the stuff you want to get rid of and post them on eBay. Extra cash perhaps?
* If your community doesn’t have an exchange center, create one! This could be a wonderful service project. In Alaska, Fairbanks had a “Free Day” where community members would bring all their extra stuff and give it away! Nothing for sale – just trade.
* Give your excess stuff to a local charity or church. See whether the charity is having a tag sale to make money, and then donate your belongings to the cause.
* Throw a gift exchange party after the holidays. Ask everyone to bring something they don’t want and can’t exchange. Your trash is sure to be someone’s treasure!

In conclusion, help create balance in your life by reducing the clutter. Find out how well clearing your space helps to clear your mind. It can be life altering!

Source: Katherine Olaksen (2005), *Dorm Room Feng Shi: Find Your Gua, Free Your Chi.*

**Understanding Child Abuse**

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Through a presidential proclamation in 1983, Ronald Reagan declared April as Child Abuse Prevention Month. This month is designated as a time for people to gain awareness about the prevalence of child abuse and the importance of prevention (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2016). Nationally, it is estimated that 646,261 children were victims of child abuse or neglect; and 1,580 children died as a result of abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016a). In New Mexico, approximately 18 children in every 1,000 children under the age of 18 were abused or neglected (New Mexico Voices for Children, 2015).

The effects of child abuse are not limited to just children and their family members. Entire communities are negatively impacted and can also play an important role in the prevention of abuse. A great number of substantiated child abuse cases originate from situations and conditions that are preventable when community programs and systems such as Cooperative Extension are engaged and supportive. Extensive research has identified specific factors that are known to prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect. These factors include: (a) nurturing and attachment, (b) parental resilience, (c) parenting education and child development knowledge, (d) children’s social and emotional competence, (e) social connections, and (f) concrete supports for parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b).

**Nurturing and Attachment** – Children who experience stable relationships with nurturing and affectionate parents have an increased chance for overall well–being. A secure attachments with loving parents or primary caregivers can act as a protective factor against maladaptive emotional and behavioral outcomes as children age **(**Lowell, Renk & Adgate, 2014). Studies on infant brain development discovered that attachment quality between a baby and their primary caregiver sets the stage for self-regulation and relational skills later in life (Jacobs, 2012). Although many parents feel overwhelmed with their daily strife, it is important to take time to connect with and nurture the parent-child relationship through physical and verbal affection, laughing and having fun, soothing hurt feelings and knees, and encouraging success.

Extension programs can help build nurturing and attachment in the following ways:

* Use parent education strategies (workshops, lending libraries) as opportunities to share information about how a strong parent-child bond enhances brain development and supports positive behavior in young children.
* Share resources available from your agency and throughout the community on how parents can nurture and connect with their children at every age.
* Engage and include all important adults in a child’s life, including fathers, grandparents, and extended family, as part of a child’s “nurturing network.”
* Acknowledge cultural differences in how parents and children show affection.
* Recognize that when a child does not show a positive response to the parent (due to an emotional, developmental, or behavioral disability, for example), the parent may need additional support (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b, p. 12).

**Parental Resilience** – Resilience is defined as the ability to recover from setbacks, adapt well to change, and keep going in the face of adversity (Ovans, 2015). Resilience is an important trait in parents because it determines their ability to cope with, not only, the daily stressors of life but also major crises or a pile-up of adverse events such as unemployment or underemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, physical or mental health problems, and divorce and homelessness. On the other hand, studies show that “community-level protective factors such as a positive community environment and economic opportunities serve to enhance parental resilience” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b, p 15). Everyone has the capacity to build resiliency by utilizing their inner strength and personal resources. Having a sense of humor and hope, being able to communicate needs, having problems solving skills and being able to reach out to others, maintaining supportive and loving relationships, and believing in a higher power are just a few personal resources that serve in building parental resilience.

Extension programs can help build parental resiliency in the following ways:

* Provide resources to help parents understand the causes of stress and how it affects health, relationships, and family life.
* Teach parents concrete skills to prevent stress, such as planning and goal setting, anticipating difficulties, problem-solving, communication, and self-care.
* Link parents with resources for stress management, such as exercise opportunities, relaxation techniques, and venues for meditation or prayer.
* Train staff to observe and assess children for early signs of child or family distress and respond to children and parents with encouragement and support
* Partner with resources in the community that help families manage stress and deal with crises, including programs that offer family-to-family help for personalized, sustained support, as well as services such as mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence programs, and self-help support groups (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b, p. 15-16).

**Parenting Education and Child Development Knowledge** – Parents who have a limited or no understanding of child development can easily misinterpret normal behavior and react to their children in negative or abusive ways. Parents with child development knowledge are able to anticipate normal childhood milestones, set appropriate rules and limits, encourage developmental growth by understanding and supporting their children’s stages, and be able to take the appropriate actions when their children may be experiencing anything out of the ordinary (McMillin, Bultas, Zander, Wilmott, Underwood, Broom & Zand, 2016).

Because all children are unique, parents need to be flexible and adjust their parenting strategies to fit various circumstances and their children’s temperament. This is especially true for parents who have children with special needs. Children with special needs are 1.68 times more likely to be abused or neglected in comparison to children without a disability (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). One parenting style does not fit all children.

Extension programs can help build knowledge of parenting and child development in the following ways:

* Offer informal, daily interactions between parents and program staff, plus coaching from staff on specific developmental challenges when they arise (e.g., inconsolable crying, eating or sleeping problems, biting, sharing toys, lying, problems with peers).
* Educate staff on parenting and child development so that they can play a more effective role in coaching parents on these issues.
* Provide parent-child interaction training opportunities through classes or workshops that address topics parents request or that respond to current issues.
* Provide observation opportunities such as video monitors or windows into classrooms and outdoor space, where parents can watch their child interacting with other children and learn new techniques by observing staff.
* Give parents opportunities to participate in conversations with other parents about their own experiences as children and how they want to change their parenting.
* Offer a lending library of educational materials about parenting and child development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b, p. 14).

**Children’s Social and Emotional Competence** – As children grow, they develop increasing abilities to effectively express their feeling, solve problems, and regulate their own behavior which enriches the child’s relationships with parents, peers and family members. As a result, parents’ frustration levels decrease due to the increasing ease in the parent-child relationship (Russell, Lee, Spieker & Oxford, 2016). Parenting can be challenging when children are unable to communicate or “act out” as a means of getting their needs met. Delays in children’s social and emotional competence can place them at greater risk for abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b). Early detection of developmental issues is key to ensuring the well-being of children.

Extension programs can help build children’s social and emotional competence in the following ways:

* Use both structured curriculum and informal interaction to teach children to share, be respectful of others, and express themselves through language.
* Include discussions about the importance of feelings in programming for children and parents.
* Create and post a chart that describes which social and emotional skills children typically do and do not possess at different ages.
* Provide art programs that allow children to express themselves in ways other than words.
* Foster ongoing engagement and communication with parents about their children’s social and emotional development and the actions the program is taking to facilitate it. Children often take home what they are learning at school.
* Encourage and provide opportunities for parents to share resources with each other and exchange ideas about how they promote their children’s social and emotional development.
* Take timely action when there is a concern—this might include asking another experienced person or staff member to help observe a child, talking with the parent, or bringing in a consultant (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b, p. 20-21).

**Social Connections** – Parents with a stable social network consisting of family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors are better able to meet the needs of their children and themselves. Families who are isolated with limited social connections, especially in times of need, have an increased risk for child abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b). Parents need a network of people that can provide both tangible and emotional support. Parents may need assistance in identifying community resources that help with building social connections such as churches, community programs, and support groups.

Extension programs can help build social connections in the following ways:

* Set aside a welcoming space for parents to mingle and talk. Provide coffee, snacks, or other “perks.”
* Create opportunities for parents to plan social events that reflect their interests or culture.
* Use regular potluck dinners with parents and children to reach out to new parents and foster new friendships.
* Sponsor sports and outdoor activities for parents, including fathers.
* Provide classes and workshops on parenting, cooking, health, and other topics of interest.
* Create special outreach activities for fathers, grandparents, and other extended family members.
* Offer parents who seem interested specific suggestions, information, or services to help them make social connections.
* Offer resources to help parents overcome transportation, child care, and other barriers to participating in social activities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b, p. 17).

**Concrete Supports for Families** – Parents facing a lack of basic needs like food, housing, transportation and clothing are far less able to support the ongoing well-being of their children. Families dealing with employment loss, parental incarceration, natural disaster, or health crisis may need help accessing resources in an effort to limit the stress that can lead to child abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b).

Extension programs can help build concrete supports for families in the following ways:

* Connect parents to economic resources such as job training and social services.
* Serve as an access point for health care, child care subsidies, and other benefits.
* Provide for immediate needs through a closet with extra winter coats and a direct connection to a food pantry; facilitate help from other parents when appropriate.
* Help families access crisis services such as a battered women’s shelter, mental health services, or substance abuse counseling by helping families make initial calls and appointments, assisting with transportation, and providing the name of a contact person in addition to a phone number.
* Link parents with service providers who speak their language or share a similar background, when available.
* Train staff to listen for family stress and initiate positive conversations about family needs.
* Let parents know about all available community resources, so they may select what is most appropriate for their needs.
* Develop processes for parents to share information about formal and informal resources that they find helpful (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016b, p. 20).

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**Introduction**

Lourdes Olivas, MA

Extension Associate I

Hello, I want to apologize for not thoroughly introducing myself in the last newsletter. I failed to realize there are several that I have not had the privilege to meet yet. Although, I have had the honor to work with several, some have recently retired, but still the honor to work with and hope I can collaborate with those I haven’t worked with yet. I have been with Extension Family Consumer Sciences for 10 years. I was hired on to coordinate and lead the pilot study for Keep Moving, Keep Healthy with Diabetes, which is part of the On the Road to Living Well with Diabetes. I have my bachelors in Kinesiology and my masters in Curriculum & Instruction. I have been involved primarily involved with the On the Road program that has been collaborated with Joslin Diabetes Center. However, I have also helped with Fit Families, Kitchen Creations, ICAN, and Strong Women, Strong Bones. I look forward to work with all of you and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, particularly related to exercise.

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**2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines: What’s New and Different?**

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Program Specialist

Early this year the new 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans were published by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Updates to the Dietary Guidelines are the result of several steps that take years of work. The guidelines are updated every five years by the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. The committee’s report contains the latest evidence-based information related to nutrition and health. The public and agencies can take part in updating the Dietary Guidelines during public hearings. The USDA and HHS work together to make the final Dietary Guidelines available to the public (USDA/HHS, 2016).

You can find the 8th edition of the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans at:

<http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/>

The 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) focus on healthy eating patterns. Some changes have emerged from the previous edition of the DGA, such as an addition of the physical activity icon to the five food groups, which was missing in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines. Physical activity minimum recommendations are 150 minutes per week for adults and 60 minutes for

youth. A healthy eating pattern includes the five food groups, limits saturated Graphic source: USDA/HHS

fats and trans fats, added sugars, and sodium.

Five key guidelines are suggested:

1. **“Follow a healthy eating pattern across the lifespan”**

Everything that we eat and drink matters. It’s important to reach the appropriate calorie level for a healthy weight, get enough nutrients and reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Many of our nutrition programs teach about these important topics.

1. **“Focus on variety, nutrient density, and amount”**

Some of the food group key messages have changed some words, however, the main idea is to choose a variety of nutrient-dense foods within all food groups.

1. **“Limit calories from added sugars and saturated fats and reduce sodium intake”**
* Limit saturated fats and trans fat to less than 10% of daily calorie intake

* Limit added sugars to less than 10% of the daily calorie intake
* Limit sodium to less than 2,300 mg per day. People with prehypertension or hypertension should reduce their sodium intake to 1,500 mg per day

According to the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, dietary cholesterol should be consumed “as little as possible” while trying to achieve a healthy eating pattern. The 2010 DGA limited dietary cholesterol to 300 mg per day. Based on consumption, the current average intake of dietary cholesterol among those one year and older in the United States is approximately 270 mg per day. (USDA/HHS, 2015)

Look for added sugars. It’s important to read the food labels to identify those extra sources of added sugars such as:

Brown sugar Invert sugar

Corn Sweetener Lactose

Corn Syrup Malt syrup

Dextrose Maltose

Fructose Molasses

Glucose Raw sugar

High Fructose corn syrup Sucrose

Honey Trehalose

 Turbinado sugar

1. **Shift to healthier food and beverage choices”**

As a lifestyle coach and registered dietitian, I understand how difficult lifestyle changes can be. Making some small changes at a time can be an effective way to switch to healthier food and drinks. Aiming for nutrient-dense food items can have a huge impact on health.

Graphic source: USDA/HHS

1. **“Support healthy eating patterns for all”**

This section ties in with the NMSU Cooperative Extension Service perfectly, as we already have an active role in our community. Providing the support to start a vegetable garden, cheering for the changes our health/nutrition participants do over the week, increasing chronic disease prevention classes in our community, answering health/nutrition questions in our community, providing healthy meals every time we have an opportunity, volunteering at the local food bank, hosting walking meetings and supporting health related events. These are just some of the activities that we can do to support healthy eating patterns. Changes start at home, at work, and in our community by changing one person at a time, one community at a time. We all make a difference supporting healthy eating patterns! Providing evidence-based information to our community, such as the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, is a good place to start. (USDA/HHS, 2015)

Graphic source: USDA/HHS

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**Sucralose Scare**

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Over the last two months, word has spread that sucralose (also known by the brand name Splenda®) is linked to leukemia. Sucralose has been on the US market since 1998 and is a popular choice for consumers who use artificial sweeteners because it does not have a bitter aftertaste and is heat stable so it can be used in cooking and baking. It is also a popular manufacturing ingredient, being used in over 4,500 products. Sucralose is made by chemically altering sugar molecules to replace three hydrogen-oxygen groups with three chlorine atoms. The resulting molecule is 600 times sweeter than sugar but is not broken down by the body, so it is considered a no calorie, non-carbohydrate sweetener.

The media was quick to feature alarming results from an article published on sucralose in the *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health* on January 29, 2016.1 Most of the headlines implied it is a proven fact that Splenda is linked to, or increases the risk of, leukemia. As is usually the case when the media discusses a single study, the issue is not so conclusive or sensational.

The study tested the carcinogenic effect of sucralose in over 850 mice. The mice were divided into ten groups, five male and five female groups, each receiving a concentration of sucralose in their feedings equal to 0, 500, 2,000, 8,000, or 16,000 parts per million (ppm). The mice received the same dose daily from 12 days of gestation until they died. Sucralose consumption was associated with malignant tumors and blood cancers in the male mice. Those receiving 2,000 and 16,000 ppm experienced the highest incidences of blood cancers.The media rarely reported that sucralose consumption was associated with decreased incidences of cancer in the female mice.1

There are many debates regarding this research, which was done by the Ramazzini Institute in Italy. This is not the first sweetener it has studied and reported as carcinogenic. Yet, agencies such as the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), Health Canada, and the World Health Organization have consistently rejected research from the Ramazzini Institute as unreliable. Artificial sweeteners have been studied extensively. There are over 110 research studies on sucralose alone, and the results of those studies have been sufficient for most to deem sucralose as safe.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a nonprofit food safety and nutrition watchdog group, gives more weight to the independent Ramazzini Institute study than these other studies, as many of them were industry funded and had fewer test subjects. Another reason is that most of the animal studies introduced sucralose feedings when the animals were adolescents and stopped giving sucralose long before the animals died. The Ramazzini Institute study gave sucralose throughout the life span, which seems appropriate since the FDA set an acceptable daily intake of sucralose for children at 5 milligrams per kilogram body weight.

The CSPI downgraded Splenda from its rating of “safe” to its “caution” category in 2013 when it learned of the Ramazzini Institute’s research, which was unpublished at the time but was presented at a conference. In February, little more than one week after the study was published, the CSPI further downgraded sucralose to its “avoid” category, which also includes the sweeteners saccharin, aspartame, and acesulfame potassium. CSPI president Michael F. Jacobson added, “That said, the risk posed by over-consumption of sugar and high-fructose corn syrup, particularly from soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages, of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, far outweighs the cancer risk posed by sucralose and most other artificial sweeteners. Consumers are better off drinking water, seltzer, or flavored waters, but diet soda does beat regular soda.” 2

The bottom line is that sucralose will keep its current safety rating by regulatory agencies unless additional studies show results similar to those recorded by the Ramazzini Institute. The EFSA will conduct its own study on the issue at the request of the European Commission, which has asked the EFSA to provide a scientific opinion by the end of July. Even if further study produces similar results, safety ratings are likely to take into account the concentrations used in the research. The Ramazzini Institute study used amounts that are far above what any human would consume, equivalent to 400-12,000 packets of Splenda every day for life.

Are sucralose and other artificial sweeteners beneficial for people with diabetes? The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics provides an Evidence Analysis Library for its members that asks the same question. Experts regularly review nutritional research published in peer-reviewed journals. They use specific criteria to evaluate and grade the strength of evidence that interventions result in a desired (or undesired) outcome. In 2013 and 2014, it evaluated studies on the use of FDA-approved non-nutritive sweeteners (stevia, sucralose, saccharin, acesulfame potassium, aspartame and neotame) in adults with type 1 and type 2 diabetes. Few studies met the criteria for inclusion in these literature reviews, so there is limited evidence. The studies that met the criteria for inclusion do not support that FDA-approved non-nutritive sweeteners have a significant impact on A1C, fasting blood glucose, endogenous insulin, lipid, or blood pressure levels independent of weight loss.3 So, artificial sweeteners are likely beneficial only to the extent to which they aid consumers in weight loss.

The nutrition labeling on packages of artificial sweeteners may mislead some people into thinking they are completely free of calories. Because sucralose and most other artificial sweeteners are so sweet, only tiny amounts are in each packet. Sucralose sweeteners like Splenda (as well as other tabletop sweeteners) are mostly dextrose and maltodextrin, which provide the volume to make the sweeteners measurable and consistently sweet. These fillers provide some calories, but because there are less than five calories and one gram carbohydrate per serving (packet), the sweeteners are labeled as calorie free.

If people use larger amounts, for example in baking or sweetened beverages, the calories may add up to become substantial. One cup of Splenda provides 96 calories and 24 grams carbohydrate. The Splenda sugar blend contains more, providing 384 calories and 96 grams carbohydrate per cup. This is much less than the 774 calories and 200 grams carbohydrate provided in one cup of sugar, but people with diabetes need to be aware that consuming large amounts of artificial sweeteners does contribute enough carbohydrates to raise blood glucose.

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**Simplify Your Life to Find Greater Happiness**

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Do you know the Joneses (maybe for you it is the Taylors or the Andersons)? The neighbors who have better cars, clothes, furniture, and electronic toys than you do? In the search for finding greater happiness in life, many of us often turn to buying newer and better stuff. We mistakenly believe the lies of the advertisements that if we have new stuff (or at least better stuff than our neighbors), we are winning at life. What we don’t realize is that all this consumerist mindset gets us is debt up to our eyeballs, added stress, broken relationships, and misery.

Because of this negative outcome due to a consumeristic society, many have finally decided that they don’t believe the advertisements anymore. There is a growing movement against consumerism. Some of the names of this movement are “minimalism,” “freeganism,” and “tiny homes” to name a few. Tiny homes aren’t just about looking cute but are a part of a movement that promotes living more simply and having sustainable living. Freegans decide on an alternative living strategy where they have limited participation in the conventional economy and instead consume resources that would otherwise be wasted (think dumpster diving and reusing the trash of others). Minimilists believe we give too much meaning and too much of our lives to our things while basically ignoring our health, our relationships, our personal growth, our passions, and our desire to serve others (see <http://www.theminimalists.com/minimalism/>).

**What type of consumer are you?**

Being honest with yourself, how much of a consumer are you? Do you, as Dave Ramsey states, “buy things you don’t need, with money you don’t have, to impress people you don’t like?” If you do go a bit overboard on your purchases, ask yourself why? Is the new item really bringing you joy and peace or instead is it to make sure you’re keeping up with your neighbors? Is life really just about competing to have the best, or at least the same, stuff? Would you feel inferior if you lived more simply and had an older car, a smaller house, and less expensive furniture and clothing? According to Dr. Thomas Stanley, the author of The Millionaire Next Door, living more simply with less expensive stuff is exactly how many millionaires live, in fact, that is how they built their wealth. According to Stanley, most millionaires avoid buying status objects (e.g., leasing or buying new vehicles, having the largest home on the block, and buying expensive clothing) but instead buy reliable used vehicles, have a regular size home, and buy their clothes and shoes from places like Walmart. Instead they decide to use their money to have experiences with those they love and to build wealth. The millionaire mindset reminds me of a financial principle that states, “money spent on things you value usually leads to a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment. Money spent on things you do not value usually leads to a feeling of frustration and futility.” So, do we spend money on strengthening our relationships and other things we value, or are we just running in the rat race trying to keep up with what our neighbors and friends are doing?

**Income, our perceptions, and happiness**

Studies show that once we have sufficient for our needs, happiness and income are not related (see <https://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S15/15/09S18/index.xml?section=topstories>). Yes, money can buy a level of comfort and we need money for the necessities of life, but once we have our basic needs met, more money usually just means more problems rather than a happier life. Other studies explain that it is not how much we actually earn but our perception of how much we have and earn that really matters. For example, take two families who live in the same neighborhood, have the same number of children, and earn the same income. One family could be grateful for what they have and feel blessed with their household income while the other family could feel poor and consistently want new stuff. Rather than income, the family’s perception would make their financial reality. What are your perceptions making a reality? Are you full of gratitude or desire for more stuff?

**How this applies to you…**

Be like a minimalist or freegan and instead of wanting the next new thing, look at what you have and fix it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.

Take the 33 for 3 challenge. Choose 33 items from your clothing (not including socks or underwear but does include shoes) and only wear (by mixing and matching) these 33 items of clothing for 3 months. Or, if you prefer, box everything up and only take something out when you use it. After a few months (or each season), look at what you never use and give serious thought to giving it to a second-hand store. According to minimalists, using only what we need, giving our excess, and decluttering our homes and our lives is liberating. Being free from out “stuff” allows us more time, room, and energy to focus on what really matters. It frees us from worry, from guilt, from consumerism.

Each year I take a group of students and professionals on a study abroad experience. In 2014 we went to Costa Rica where the focus was on consumerism and happiness. Students were asked to reflect on their lives and what truly mattered to them, what brought them happiness in life. They reflected on what their time was spent on and if it was spent on things that mattered most to them. They then were asked to reflect on the state of happiness of those they observed living in Costa Rica and where their happiness came from. Students overwhelmingly came to the realization that the people they observed in Costa Rica were happier than they were, even though they were the ones with the new phones, new cars, nicer clothes and homes, and more money. Most students were humbled and even felt ashamed at their selfishness and ungrateful attitude. The students desired to live more simple lives, lives like those they met in Costa Rica where they lived the “pura vida” or the good life.

While each of us can’t travel to Costa Rica to have a life epiphany, each one of us can reflect on our lives and what brings happiness. If happiness truly comes from relationships, family, service, and experiences, are we spending the necessary time in these areas? Or, is most of our time, energy, and focus spent on acquiring more stuff? **Don’t we owe it to ourselves to simplify our lives, to let go of the less important for the things that truly matter?** We shouldn’t let our lives get so filled with good things that we don’t have time for the essential things. Perhaps we should be like the Yale graduate, New York City journalist who quite her $95,000 job to move to an island in the Caribbean to sell ice cream (see <http://www.today.com/news/woman-gives-95-000-job-new-york-city-move-island-t18536>). The prior journalist observed “that for most of the 20th century, a large part of the American Dream had to do with the accumulation of wealth and material things — but that's changed. ‘I think that in the last decade or two, people started realizing that 'things' weren't making them happy. Experiences make people happy,’ she said.

**The bottom line –** simplify your life to find greater happiness. Whether you declutter your home of stuff or your life of pursuits that don’t really matter, freeing up space and time lightens your load and brings a smile to your face. Make a goal to simplify your life in at least one way and to spend more time and energy on things that truly matter, things that will bring you increased happiness