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Simplifying Is a Personal Journey

Most people spend more time planning their vacation, a remodeling project, or their wedding than they spend planning their lives.

—DR. DENIS WAITLEY
author and motivational speaker

*A*h, I hear the sound of waves gently rolling onto the shore. The sun warms my face, and my toes wiggle in the sand. For now my novel lies on my lap. And all I have to do is occupy myself until dinner is served. I can do whatever I want. I am living the simplified life . . . I'm on vacation.

Is vacation the only place to enjoy a simplified life? Yes and no. To simplify life the rest of the year is to create that same vacation feeling—relaxation, enjoyment, and ease.

But not every vacation turns out to be that relaxing, as you know. It takes dreaming, planning, and action. And so does simplifying your life.

Simplifying your life is a journey you choose to take. To do things you enjoy, you must find the time to do them. To make your life easier, you must find better ways of doing things. To spend time with people you value, you must say good-bye to a jam-packed schedule.

Simplified living includes everything about you and welcomes your personal style of getting things done. Like a vacation, this journey is shaped by who you are and what you like to do. It recognizes personal habits you practice, such as how much time it takes to

get dressed in the morning, when you read the mail, and if and how you relax in the evenings. It is all about you and what you do every day.

Can You Simplify Your Life?

There are two very good questions to ask yourself if you want to simplify your life any more than it is. The first one is this: “How much of my life do I actually control?” If you recognize what you can control, you have opportunities to modify it for a better life.

The second question to ask is, “Am I willing to make any changes in my life?” Put quite simply, if you are willing to change, you can. If you don’t want to change, you won’t. It’s all up to you.

Where Are We Going?

This book is meant to help you on your journey of life. Instead of being a how-to resource pointing you toward your destination, it is a journey with a chauffeur to keep you company on the way. As your chauffeur, I will drive you from complex to simple, from busy to calm. As a professional organizer who learned things the hard way before developing a track record of helping thousands of clients and audience participants across the country, I will share tips on how to do things differently. (And if you missed my story in the introduction, you might be interested in reading it now.)

Any day is a great day to begin simplifying your life. Let’s get started.

A Desire to Conquer the World

One summer when my three children were home from school, I determined to simplify my life by getting the house back into shape. With great resolve, I wrote a detailed to-do list that would conquer the world—or at least every basket of laundry, home improvement project, and cluttered nook and cranny in the house. Then the phone rang. My neighbor was on the line. “We’re going over to our country club to swim for the day,” she said. “Would you and your kids like to join us?”

Invitations like this didn’t come very often. I drooled over the thought of sipping cold ice tea poolside and enjoying some meaningful adult conversation while my children splashed in a beautiful pool. But how would I ever get my house in shape?

On this particular day, I decided to go with the flow and take the kids swimming. I recognized that balancing people and tasks wasn't going to be an easy job, no matter how determined I was on a given day. But I also discovered there were ways to get things done ahead of time, leaving me a greater opportunity to develop rich relationships and do enjoyable activities along the way.

What Is Getting Organized and Simplifying Your Life?

Women know that “getting organized” is a great way to save time and avoid stress. But a desire to get there is often hindered by pressing duties and deadlines. Who really has time to get organized? After all, if we stopped everything we're doing to get organized, wouldn't that put us further behind? Not if you include simplifying your life as part of your plans.

Getting organized is like swatting mosquitoes on a summer day. You know the little creatures are bothering you, but their buzzing around never gets so bad that you have to stop what you are doing. When I hear someone say, “I've got to get organized,” however, I know she is stressed and serious about changing. It's like a swarm of annoying mosquitoes have finally gotten to her, and she is ready to do something about it.

If too many bugs are buzzing around your ears, you can get organized in one of two ways:

- Organize and simplify “as you go” each day. For instance, straighten up the kitchen each night plus clean out one refrigerator shelf. In less than a week the whole refrigerator will be done.
- Set aside time to accomplish a bigger project. When something like reorganizing a closet means you have to pull things apart, schedule a half day to get the whole project done.

Simplifying your life is all about recognizing your problem areas and deciding which organizing system to use. Organizing is one of the things you do to simplify. Simplifying is the way to enjoy the manageable lifestyle you have organized at a reasonable pace. Do it as you go, or focus your efforts on one project at a time.

Where Do I Begin?

The basis of determining what to change is really quite simple: Keep what is working; change what is frustrating.

Let's begin by looking at the following vignettes that illustrate three powerfully important organizing principles. Let them stimulate your thinking of exactly how you want to make your life easier.

Organizing Principle #1: Make Your Organizing Memorable and Fun!

I had just finished speaking at a seminar in New York when a woman came running up to me.

"Do you remember me?" she uttered, a little out of breath. Before I could answer, she blurted out, "I'm Debbie, and I came to your seminar three months ago. Since then I have lost a hundred pounds!"

I didn't remember the woman, but I honestly could not imagine how this petite woman had lost so much weight.

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "That's amazing. Please tell me about it."

"After I came to your seminar three months ago, I cleaned out all my closets and my garage. I donated clothes, shoes, purses, and other unused items. Before I hauled it off to a charity, I bagged it all up and weighed everything—and it totaled one hundred pounds!"

Debbie and I shared a good laugh, and everyone around us congratulated her on her success. She had made her project fun by measuring her simplifying efforts in a tangible way. I am sure her energy and enthusiasm will carry over to her next household cleanup project, whether it's a pile of papers on her kitchen counter or a corner full of boxes stashed in the basement.

Success breeds success when it comes to good organization. And every victory counts toward the overall goal of simplifying your life.

Organizing Principle #2: Learn to manage your current situation with ease.

Adele was a competent attorney, having achieved her lifelong goal of working in a prestigious law firm. Her dreams began to vanish in a sleep-deprived fog, though, after she had her first baby. All her well-honed skills and strategies that kept her on top of the pack at work began to stall now that she was home.

"I don't know what's happened to me," she began. "I used to be organized, but it seems I've lost it all since I had my baby. The odd part is that even though I'm home all day, I

can't seem to get anything done. I have only one month's leave from work left, but I wonder if I will ever get organized again. What's the matter with me?"

Inevitably, life changes for everyone with a new baby, an unforeseen job change, a new location, or an unexpected health issue. This can upset our rhythm until we regain our equilibrium and build a new lifestyle. Establishing a new purpose and a regular routine are the best solutions when life feels out of control.

In Adele's case, we began to rebuild her life one step at a time, recognizing that having a child and a career meant that life would not be the same as before. Knowing that she and the baby would take some time to adjust to each other, we started organizing the controllable—and familiar—part of her world, which was her work at the office.

We sorted piles of paper on her desk, credenza, and floor. She cleaned out her drawers and reorganized her files to accommodate her current work. I taught her to utilize a personal planner that included self-generated actions important to both her professional and personal life. She quickly learned that getting organized and staying organized was the key to maintaining the best of both worlds.

It takes courage and perseverance to restructure our time to handle the changes that come along in life. Adele could do that. As she adjusted to change, she gave herself permission not to take on anything new until she could manage her current situation with ease.

Organizing Principle #3: Use it or Lose It!

Lindsey came to my seminar, "Making a Clean Sweep in Your Home." Months later, she recognized me at a local grocery store.

"Marcia, I just have to tell you—your seminar saved my marriage."

"Really?" I asked in surprise. "I'm flattered you rate it so highly, but what do you mean exactly?"

"After you talked about getting rid of clutter and simplifying your life, I went home and got rid of all the 'stuff' that was sitting on my countertops, closets, floors . . . everywhere," she explained.

I smiled as I envisioned her progress from one countertop to the next and filling charity boxes with her overflowing items.

"We have three little girls under four years old," Lindsey continued. "My husband was always yelling at me about the mess in the house. Your seminar finally motivated me to get rid of everything we didn't use."

“Good for you, taking charge of your things!” I reaffirmed her.

Lindsey’s eyes brightened. “After organizing for a couple weeks, my husband came home one day and said, ‘I don’t believe it. You really did it! This mess was driving me crazy, and I just couldn’t keep living this way. It was about to destroy our marriage.’”

I gulped. “It’s amazing how chaos can affect people.”

“No kidding,” Lindsey agreed. “I had no idea such a little thing could be such a big deal. Right then we sat down and talked—in the clean family room. After that I kept at it each day, and my husband even started to pitch in and help out. I’m not perfect, but now I feel so much better about my children, my marriage, and myself. Thank you!”



THREE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES TO LIVE BY

1. *Make your organizing memorable and fun!*
2. *Learn to manage your current situation with ease.*
3. *Use it or lose it!*

Lindsey’s story is a dramatic example of how disorganization can hamper personal relationships and self-esteem. Instead of wallowing in self-pity over having three children under four years old, Lindsey got busy giving away extra toys, tossing piles of papers, and creating cleanup systems for the usual family “stuff” that litters a house every day. Getting rid of physical clutter always frees up time and space.

So remember this simple adage when you are looking at a pile of clutter: Use it or lose it. You don’t have extra time or energy to waste on anything less important than the people you live with every day.

Life Worth More Than This

I don’t promise that every organizing effort will yield a dramatic, life-changing result. But do you see my point? Your life is worth so much more than being tripped up by organizing issues. Organizing and simplifying your time, your home, and your work gives you more life to enjoy. Your life works for you when you have the right systems in place.

Three Key Questions before Making Any Change

Once you determine what it is that you want to change, it’s easy to move that area into the limelight of your life and really begin to tackle it. To give you ideas, I’m showing you how three other women did it: