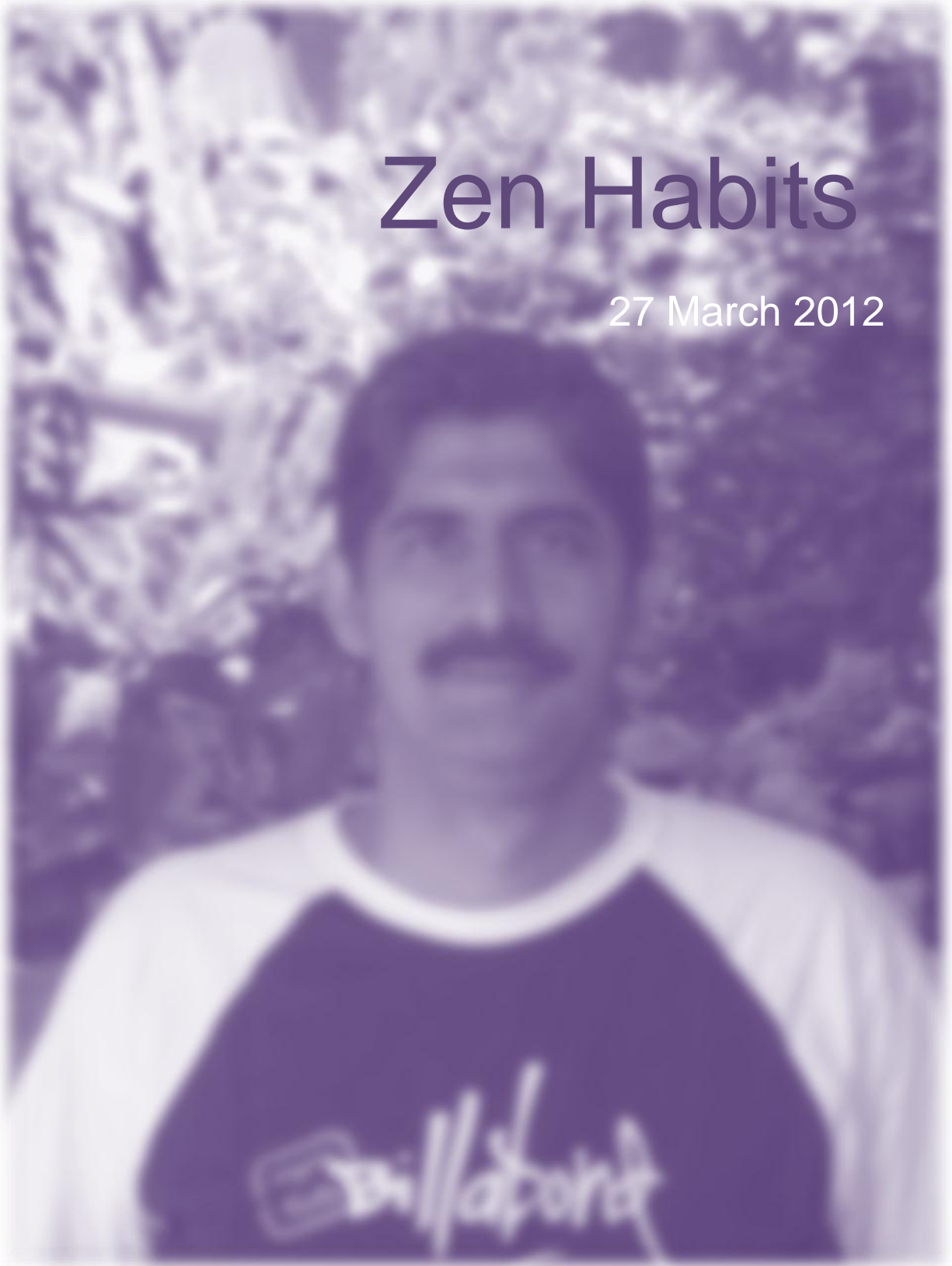


Zen Habits

27 March 2012



Breathe.

Post written by Leo Babauta.

Breathe.

Breathing can transform your life.

If you feel stressed out and overwhelmed, breathe. It will calm you and release the tensions.

If you are worried about something coming up, or caught up in something that already happened, breathe. It will bring you back to the present.

If you are discouraged and have forgotten your purpose in life, breathe. It will remind you about how precious life is, and that each breath in this life is a gift you need to appreciate. Make the most of this gift.

If you have too many tasks to do, or are scattered during your workday, breathe. It will help bring you into focus, to concentrate on the most important task you need to be focusing on right now.

If you are spending time with someone you love, breathe. It will allow you to be present with that person, rather than thinking about work or other things you need to do.

If you are exercising, breathe. It will help you enjoy the exercise, and therefore stick with it for longer.

If you are moving too fast, breathe. It will remind you to slow down, and enjoy life more.

So breathe. And enjoy each moment of this life. They're too fleeting and few to waste.

—

Tip: Put the word “Breathe” as a screensaver or desktop pic, or put it up as a note on your wall or fridge or on your desk. Then do it every time you see the word.

Be Still.

Post written by Leo Babauta.

Be still.

Just for a moment.

Listen to the world around you. Feel your breath coming in and going out. Listen to your thoughts. See the details of your surroundings.

Be at peace with being still.

In this modern world, activity and movement are the default modes, if not with our bodies then at least with our minds, with our attention. We rush around all day, doing things, talking, emailing, sending and reading messages, clicking from browser tab to the next, one link to the next.

We are always on, always connected, always thinking, always talking. There is no time for stillness — and sitting in front of a frenetic computer all day, and then in front of the hyperactive television, doesn't count as stillness.

This comes at a cost: we lose that time for contemplation, for observing and listening. We lose peace.

And worse yet: all the rushing around is often counterproductive. I know, in our society action is all-important — inaction is seen as lazy and passive and unproductive. However, sometimes too much action is worse than no action at all. You can run around crazily, all sound and fury, but get nothing done. Or you can get a lot done — but nothing important. Or you can hurt things with your actions, make things worse than if you'd stayed still.

And when we are forced to be still — because we're in line for something, or waiting at a doctor's appointment, or on a bus or train — we often get antsy, and need to find something to do. Some of us will have our mobile devices, others will have a notebook or folder

with things to do or read, others will fidget. Being still isn't something we're used to.

Take a moment to think about how you spend your days — at work, after work, getting ready for work, evenings and weekends. Are you constantly rushing around? Are you constantly reading and answering messages, checking on the news and the latest stream of information? Are you always trying to Get Lots of Things Done, ticking off tasks from your list like a machine, rushing through your schedule?

Is this how you want to spend your life?

If so, peace be with you. If not, take a moment to be still. Don't think about what you have to do, or what you've done already. Just be in the moment.

Then after a minute or two of doing that, contemplate your life, and how you'd like it to be. See your life with less movement, less doing, less rushing. See it with more stillness, more contemplation, more peace.

Then be that vision.

It's pretty simple, actually: all you have to do is sit still for a little bit each day. Once you've gotten used to that, try doing less each day. Breathe when you feel yourself moving too fast. Slow down. Be present. Find happiness now, in this moment, instead of waiting for it.

Savor the stillness. It's a treasure, and it's available to us, always.

—

From the Tao Te Ching:

It is not wise to dash about.

Shortening the breath causes much stress.

Use too much energy, and

You will soon be exhausted.

That is not the Natural Way.

Whatever works against this Way

Will not last long.

the best goal is no goal

“With the past, I have nothing to do; nor with the future. I live now.” ~**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Post written by Leo Babauta.

The idea of having concrete, achievable goals seem to be deeply ingrained in our culture. I know I lived with goals for many years, and in fact a big part of my writings here on Zen Habits are about how to set and achieve goals.

These days, however, I live without goals, for the most part. It's absolutely liberating, and contrary to what you might have been taught, it absolutely doesn't mean you stop achieving things.

It means you stop letting yourself be limited by goals.

Consider this common belief: “You'll never get anywhere unless you know where you're going.” This seems so common sensical, and yet it's obviously not true if you stop to think about it. Conduct a simple experiment: go outside and walk in a random direction, and feel free to change directions randomly. After 20 minutes, an hour ... you'll be somewhere! It's just that you didn't know you were going to end up there.

And there's the rub: you have to open your mind to going places you never expected to go. If you live without goals, you'll explore new territory. You'll learn some unexpected things. You'll end up in surprising places. That's the beauty of this philosophy, but it's also a difficult transition.

Today, I live mostly without goals. Now and then I start coming up with a goal, but I'm letting them go. Living without goals hasn't ever been an actual goal of mine ... it's just something I'm learning that I enjoy more, that is incredibly freeing, that works with the lifestyle of following my passion that I've developed.

The problem with goals

In the past, I'd set a goal or three for the year, and then sub-goals for each month. Then I'd figure out what action steps to take each week and each day, and try to focus my day on those steps.

Unfortunately, it never, ever works out this neatly. You all know this. You know you need to work on an action step, and you try to keep the end goal in mind to motivate yourself. But this action step might be something you dread, and so you procrastinate. You do other work, or you check email or Facebook, or you goof off.

And so your weekly goals and monthly goals get pushed back or side-tracked, and you get discouraged because you have no discipline. And goals are too hard to achieve. So now what? Well, you review your goals and reset them. You create a new set of sub-goals and action plans. You know where you're going, because you have goals!

Of course, you don't actually end up getting there. Sometimes you achieve the goal and then you feel amazing. But most of the time you don't achieve them and you blame it on yourself.

Here's the secret: the problem isn't you, it's the system! Goals as a system are set up for failure.

Even when you do things exactly right, it's not ideal. Here's why: you are extremely limited in your actions. When you don't feel like doing something, you have to force yourself to do it. Your path is chosen, so you don't have room to explore new territory. You have to follow the plan, even when you're passionate about something else.

Some goal systems are more flexible, but nothing is as flexible as having no goals.

How it works

So what does a life without goals look like? In practice, it's very different than one with goals.

You don't set a goal for the year, nor for the month, nor for the week or day. You don't obsess about tracking, or actionable steps. You

don't even need a to-do list, though it doesn't hurt to write down reminders if you like.

What do you do, then? Lay around on the couch all day, sleeping and watching TV and eating Ho-Hos? No, you simply do. You find something you're passionate about, and do it. Just because you don't have goals doesn't mean you do nothing — you can create, you can produce, you can follow your passion.

And in practice, this is a wonderful thing: you wake up and do what you're passionate about. For me, that's usually blogging, but it can be writing a novel or an ebook or my next book or creating a course to help others or connecting with incredible people or spending time with my wife or playing with my kids. There's no limit, because I'm free.

In the end, I usually end up achieving more than if I had goals, because I'm always doing something I'm excited about. But whether I achieve or not isn't the point at all: all that matters is that I'm doing what I love, always.

I end up in places that are wonderful, surprising, great. I just didn't know I would get there when I started.

Quick questions

Question from a reader: Isn't having no goals a goal?

Quick answer: It can be a goal, or you can learn to do it along the journey, by exploring new methods. I'm always learning new things (like having no goals) without setting out to learn them in the first place.

Another question from a reader: So how do you make a living?

Answer: Passionately! Again, not having goals doesn't mean you stop doing things. In fact, I do many things, all the time, but I do them because I love doing them.

No hard-n-fast goals, just list of interests, do them with heart

Tips for living without goals

I am not going to give you a how-to manual for living without goals — that would be absurd. I can't teach you what to do — you need to find your own path.

But I can share some things I've learned, in hopes that it will help you:

- **Start small.** You don't need to drastically overhaul your life in order to learn to live without goals. **Just go a few hours without predetermined goals or actions.** Follow your passion for those hours. Even an hour will do.
- **Grow.** As you get better at this, start allowing yourself to be free for longer periods — half a day or a whole day or several days. Eventually you'll feel confident enough to give up on certain goals and just do what you love.
- **Not just work.** Giving up goals works in any area of your life. Take health and fitness: I used to have specific fitness goals, from losing weight or bodyfat to running a marathon to increasing my squat. Not anymore: now I just do it because I love it, and I have no idea where that will take me. It works brilliantly, because I always enjoy myself.
- **Let go of plans.** Plans are not really different than goals. They set you on a predetermined path. But it's incredibly difficult to let go of living with plans, especially if you're a meticulous planner like I am. So allow yourself to plan, when you feel you need to, but slowly feel free to let go of this habit.
- **Don't worry about mistakes.** If you start setting goals, that's OK. There are no mistakes on this journey — it's just a learning experience. If you live without goals and end up failing, ask yourself if it's really a failure. You only fail if you don't get to

where you wanted to go — but if you don't have a destination in mind, there's no failure.

- **It's all good.** No matter what path you find, no matter where you end up, it's beautiful. There is no bad path, no bad destination. It's only different, and different is wonderful. Don't judge, but experience.

And finally

Always remember: the journey is all. The destination is beside the point.

‘A good traveller has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving.’ ~**Lao Tzu**

the lost art of solitude

“I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers.” ~**Henry David Thoreau**

Post written by Leo Babauta.

You don't need to be a monk to find solitude, nor do you need to be a hermit to enjoy it.

Solitude is a lost art in these days of ultra-connectedness, and while I don't bemoan the beauty of this global community, I do think there's a need to step back from it on a regular basis.

Some of my favorite activities include sitting in front of the ocean, still, contemplating ... walking, alone with my thoughts ... disconnecting and just writing ... finding quiet with a good novel ... taking a solitary bath.

Don't get me wrong: I love being with loved ones, and walking with a friend or watching the sunset with my wife or reading a book with my child are also among my absolute favorite things in the world.

But solitude, in these days as much as ever, is an absolute necessity.

The Benefits of Solitude

The best art is created in solitude, for good reason: it's only when we are alone that we can reach into ourselves and find truth, beauty, soul. Some of the most famous philosophers took daily walks, and it was on these walks that they found their deepest thoughts.

My best writing, and in fact the best of anything I've done, was created in solitude.

Just a few of the benefits I've found from solitude:

- time for thought
- in being alone, we get to know ourselves
- we face our demons, and deal with them
- space to create
- space to unwind, and find peace
- time to reflect on what we've done, and learn from it
- isolation from the influences of other helps us to find our own voice
- quiet helps us to appreciate the smaller things that get lost in the roar

There are many more benefits, but that's to get you started. The real benefits of solitude cannot be expressed through words, but must be found in doing.

How to Find Solitude

You start by disconnecting.

Take every means of connecting with others, and sever them. Disconnect from email, from Facebook and Twitter and MySpace, from forums and social media, from instant messaging and Skype, from news websites and blogs. Turn off your mobile device and phones.

Turn off the computer ... unless you're going to use the computer to create, in which case, shut off the Internet, close your browser, and shut down every other program used to connect with others.

The next steps depend on which of two strategies you use:

1. Holing yourself up. This can be done in your office, by shutting the door and/or using headphones and the calming music of your choice. If possible, let coworkers know you can't be disturbed during a certain block of your day. Or it can be done at home, by finding a quiet space, shutting the door if you can, or using headphones. The

key is to find a way to shut out the outside world, including co-workers or those who live with you.

2. Getting away. My favorite way to find solitude, actually. Get out the door, and enjoy the outdoors. Take a walk, find a park or a beach or a mountain, find a quiet coffee shop, find a shady spot to rest. People watch, or nature watch.

Other tips:

- Try taking a quiet, relaxing bath from time to time.
- Curl up with a good novel.
- If you're married with kids, ask your spouse to give you some time off to be alone, and then return the favor. Make it a regular swap.
- Take a walk every day.
- Get into work earlier, and work in quiet.
- Have a nice cup of tea.
- Try a regular time each day when you're disconnected.
- Consider limiting the stream.
- Trouble with self-control? Use one of these tools.
- No time for solitude? Try these tips.
- Try sitting still, and focusing on your breath as it comes in and goes out. As your mind wanders to thoughts of the past and future, make a patient note of that, then gently return to your breathing.

“I live in that solitude which is painful in youth, but delicious in the years of maturity.” ~**Albert Einstein**

focus: limiting the stream

‘Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.’ ~**Henry David Thoreau**

The stream of news, information, and messages we get these days is enough to drown us. It’s staggering in its volume.

It’s a wonder anyone can find any focus with an information stream like that.

The Stream of Distractions

The more connected a person becomes on the Internet, the more distractions they face in their day. Just a couple decades ago, most people’s distractions consisted of the phone, the fax machine, incoming memos and paperwork, solitaire, and actual people in their offices.

These days, people who work online face much more than that:

- email (perhaps the biggest problem for most people)
- instant messaging
- Twitter
- Facebook
- online forums
- blogs
- other social networks
- news sites
- phones & cell phones
- text messages
- Skype
- podcasts
- Google alerts
- mobile device notifications (iPhone, Blackberry, etc.)
- mobile apps
- videos
- online music
- online shopping
- Internet radio

- paperwork
- online games
- solitaire
- internet TV
- ebooks

And more.

Why and How to Limit the Stream

With so many distractions, it's impossible to truly focus on the important. We try to drink the stream, but it's too voluminous and neverending to take in this way.

Some people think this is just a part of their work, or their lives, and that there's nothing wrong with being connected. It's a part of doing business, they say.

However, there's no one way to do business, and this book is about finding a better way. A saner way. I'm just one example of many people who have managed to do business online, have managed to stay connected, but who are able to limit the stream and make conscious decisions about how to be connected and how much information we consume.

We do it consciously, with intent. Social networks, blogs and news sites you read, different ways to communicate and consume information ... these tend to build up as you spend time online. You build them up without much thought, but you end up being consumed by what you consume.

I suggest becoming more conscious of this, and choosing what you consume and how much you communicate carefully. Limit your stream to only the most essential information and communications, and you'll free up hours of time for creating and doing amazing things.

I also suggest starting from scratch. Assume that nothing is sacred, empty your plate, and only put back on it what you absolutely need or love. Let the rest fade away.

Make an Important Admission

It's crucial that you admit to yourself: you can't read and consume everything. You can't do everything, respond to everything. Not only would the attempt take up all of your waking hours, but you'd fail. There's too much out there to read, too many people to potentially connect with and respond to, too many possible projects and tasks to actually complete.

It's impossible. Once you admit this, the next logical argument is that if you can't do and read and respond to everything, you must choose what you'll do and read and respond to, and let the rest go.

Let the rest go. This is unbelievably important. You have to accept this, and be OK with it.

An Information Cleanse

If you look at information and communication as a form of mild (or sometimes not-so-mild) addiction, it can be healthy to force yourself to take a break from it.

Go on a mini-cleanse. Start with something that's not so scary: perhaps a day, or even half a day. Do this once a week. Later, as you get used to this, try a 2-3 day cleanse, and maybe even work your way up to a week.

Here's how to do the cleanse:

- Don't check email or other types of digital inboxes.
- Don't log into Twitter, Facebook, or other social networks or forums.
- Don't read news, blogs, subscriptions.
- Don't check your favorite websites for updates.
- Don't watch TV.
- Don't use instant messaging of any kind.
- Do use phones for as little time as possible, only for essential calls.
- Do send an email if necessary, but try to avoid it, and don't check your inbox if you do.

- Do use the Internet for absolutely necessary research. Be vigorous about this rule.
- Do spend your time creating, working on important projects, getting outside, communicating with people in person, collaborating, exercising.
- Do read: books, long-form articles or essays you've been wanting to read but haven't had the time for.
- Do watch informative or thought-provoking films, but not mindless popular movies.

You could make a personalized list of your dos and don'ts, but you get the general idea. Again, start with half a day or a day — something manageable. Do it once a week, and gradually expand the time you spend on the cleanse.

Reducing the Stream

If you've done the cleanse, you now know the value of disconnecting, and you know that you can live without having to check your streams of information and messages all day, every day.

You've cleaned your plate. Now it's time to figure out what to add back on it.

Give it some thought: what are the most essential ways you communicate? Email? Skype? Twitter? Cell phone? IM?

What are the most essential information streams you consume? What blogs? What news? What other reading or watching or listening?

What can you cut out? Can you cut half of the things you read and watch? More?

Try eliminating at least one thing each day: a blog you read, an email newsletter you receive, a communication channel you don't need anymore, a news site you check often. Take them out of your email or feed inbox, or block them using one of the blocking tools mentioned in the "Focus Tools" chapter.

Slowly reduce your stream, leaving only the essentials.

Using the Stream Wisely

Just as importantly, reduce the time you spend using the essentials. If email is essential, do you need to be notified of every new email right this second? Do you need to be in your inbox all day long?

Place limits on the time you spend reading and communicating — a small limit for each channel. Only check email for 30 minutes, twice a day, for example (or whatever limits work for you). Only read the limited number of blogs you subscribe to for 30 minutes a day. Only watch an hour of TV a day (for example).

Write these limits down, and add them up for a grand total of what you plan to spend on reading, consuming, communicating. Is this an ideal amount, given the amount of time you have available to you each day? The smaller the overall limit, the better.

the zen of doing

“Before enlightenment; chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment; chop wood, carry water.” ~**Zen proverb**

Post written by [Leo Babauta](#). Follow me on [twitter](#) or [identica](#).

In the chaos of the modern world, there is a beauty in simply doing.

We're buffeted wildly by whatever emails, conversations, news, events, demands, that are going on around us. Our minds become a constant deluge of thoughts dwelling in the past, worries of the future, distractions pulling us in every direction.

But all of that melts away when we focus on just doing.

It doesn't matter what the doing is: sitting, walking, writing, reading, eating, washing, talking, snuggling, playing. By focusing on the doing, we drop our worries and anxieties, jealousies and anger, grieving and distraction.

There is something profound in that simplicity. Something ultimately heart-rendingly breath-takingly gorgeous.

“When walking, walk. When eating, eat.” ~**Zen proverb**

You are in the middle of your day today, and you're caught up in the sandstorm of thoughts, feelings, to-dos, meetings, readings, and communications of this day.

Pause. Breathe. Let all of that fade.

Now focus on doing one thing, right now. Just choose one thing, and clear away all other distractions. Seriously, clear it all away. Turn off your Internet. Stop reading this article (OK, read a couple more sentences, then close your browser!).

Let all thoughts about anything other than the doing also fade away. They'll come up, but gently make note of them, and then let them go. And return to the doing.

If you're washing a dish, do it slowly, and feel every sensation. If you're eating a fruit, taste it, feel the textures, be mindful of your hunger or lack of it. If you're writing something, pour your heart into that writing, become the writing, inhabit the words.

Just do.

The rest of the world becomes meaningless distraction. It's just you, and your doing.

And you realize: this is all that matters. In this, there is everything.

“Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine.” ~**Shunryu Suzuki**

The Ultimate How to Get Lean Guide

Post written by [Leo Babauta](#).

At the moment, I'm in the last phase of my Bellyfat Challenge — I've lost a good amount of fat but I have about 10 pounds to go (or so).

I'm enjoying getting lean, but those last few pounds are always the toughest.

And so, I've called in some experts.

Last week, I [shared my favorite fitness bloggers](#) and, in turn, the fitness blogs they read. This week I've called on them for tips on getting lean.

Now, let's look at the question I've posed to them:

- I asked for their top tips for getting lean. Not every tip, just the best.
- Assume the person isn't obese but has a bit of a spare tire
- Assume the person already exercises regularly and tries to eat "healthy" most of the time.

So, if you have a lot of fat to lose, this guide won't be for you. I'd suggest some other posts:

- [4 Simple Steps to Start the Exercise Habit](#)
- [How to Make Exercise a Daily Habit](#)
- [Five Simple Exercise Programs for Beginners](#)
- [The Building Blocks of a Super Healthy Diet \(with a sample meal plan\)](#)
- [A 12-Step Program to Eating Healthier Than Ever Before](#)

- **When Eating Alone, Go Strict and Low Calorie.** My rule of thumb is to eat lower calorie meals when I am eating alone. When I am not around friends and family, I treat eating as purely functional and eat pretty bland. This gives me much more wiggle room when I do meet up with friends or family. It works really, really well in keeping the calories down while still enjoying good food and couple of beers in a social situation.
- **Go Into Your Workouts in a Fasted State.** Your body is in either a “fed” or “fasted” state. When your body is in a fed state it primarily uses carb-energy for fuel. It is the body’s preferred method of energy. When your body is in a fasted state it releases HGH. This hormone helps release body fat from stored fat cells into the bloodstream so you can use that for energy instead of stored “food energy”. Intense exercise also raises HGH levels. When you combine exercise with this fasted state, you create a great synergistic condition for fat loss. It works extremely well. Obviously you can’t overdue this and fast for way too long or exercise too hard, but done strategically this works wonders.
- **Avoid Insulin Spikes.** When insulin levels are high, HGH levels are low. Insulin is a “storage” hormone. It helps store the nutrients from the foods you eat. A high level of insulin means a high level of storage (not what you are after if weight loss is your goal). You can avoid insulin spikes by eating foods with a low GI rating. Another method is to never eat carbs by themselves. If you eat a bit of fat and protein with your carbs there is less of a chance of a large spike in insulin. That is why I would recommend a bit of cream cheese or butter on a bagel than eating a bagel alone. I make it a point to never eat carbs without some fat or protein.

- **The Amount of Meals Per Day Doesn't Matter.** I think people should stick to what feels natural as far as how often they eat. Some people do better with 6 small meals and some do better with 2-3 meals. It really is the total calories that matter as far as weight loss goes. The idea that your metabolism will drop if you skip meals is slightly "old school"...research has proven that idea to be out dated. I am not saying that 6 meals per day is bad either, but it certainly isn't necessary. If you do eat 3 times per day they have to be much smaller portions than the person who likes to eat 3 times per day. I have always been able to reach my lowest body fat percentage on 3 meals or less per day. It kills me to eat tiny portions!

3. Zen to Fitness. Chris shares all around good advice for getting fit and finding balance in life. Here are his tips:

- **Stick to wholefoods 80% of the time.** Nothing from a packet (lean meat, fruit, vegetables nuts and seeds. If your a vegetarian eat more protein packed legumes in place of the meat. Cutting out grains and dairy is also big for fat loss)
- **Go to bed slightly hungry** (works a treat for leaning out).
- **Increase the intensity of your workout** and aim to break a sweat (Checkout Crossfit.com for inspiration and Turbulence Training programs).
- **Relax more** to bring down stress hormones and burn fat (Meditation, Visualisation, Deep Breathing).
- **Make sure you're getting 7-9 hours of deep sleep** each night.
- **Have a few cups of High Quality Green Tea** a day.

How Not to Hurry

“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.” ~ **Lao Tzu**

Post written by Leo Babauta.

Consider the above quote from Lao Tzu, (perhaps mythical) father of Taoism: how can it be true?

Is it possible to never hurry, but to get everything done?

It seems contradictory to our modern world, where everything is a rush, where we try to cram as much into every minute of the day as possible, where if we are not busy, we feel unproductive and lazy.

In fact, often we compete by trying to show how busy we are. I have a thousand projects to do! Oh yeah? I have 10,000! The winner is the person who has the most insane schedule, who rushes from one thing to the next with the energy of a hummingbird, because obviously that means he's the most successful and important.

Right?

Maybe not. Maybe we're playing the wrong game — we've been conditioned to believe that busier is better, but actually the speed of doing is not as important as what we focus on doing.

Maybe we're going at the wrong speed. Maybe if we are constantly rushing, we will miss out on life itself. Let's let go of the obsession with speed, and instead slow down, stop rushing, and enjoy life.

And still get everything done.

Let's look at how.

A Change of Mindset

The most important step is a realization that life is better when you move at a slower, more relaxed pace, instead of hurrying and rushing and trying to cram too much into every day. Instead, get the most out of every moment.

Is a book better if you speed read it, or if you take your time and get lost in it?

Is a song better if you skim through it, or if you take the time to really listen?

Is food better if you cram it down your throat, or if you savor every bite and really appreciate the flavor?

Is your work better if you're trying to do 10 things at once, or if you really pour yourself into one important task?

Is your time spent with a friend or loved one better if you have a rushed meeting interrupted by your emails and text messages, or if you can relax and really focus on the person?

Life as a whole is better if you go slowly, and take the time to savor it, appreciate every moment. That's the simplest reason to slow down.

And so, you'll need to change your mindset (if you've been stuck in a rushed mindset until now). To do this, make the simple admission that life is better when savored, that work is better with focus. Then make the commitment to give that a try, to take some of the steps below.

But I Can't Change!

There will be some among you who will admit that it would be nice to slow down, but you just can't do it ... your job won't allow it, or you'll lose income if you don't do as many projects, or living in the city makes it too difficult to go slowly. It's a nice ideal if you're living on a tropical island, or out in the country, or if you have a job that allows control of your schedule ... but it's not realistic for your life.

I say bullshit.

Take responsibility for your life. If your job forces you to rush, take control of it. Make changes in what you do, in how you work. Work with your boss to make changes if necessary. And if really necessary, you can eventually change jobs. You are responsible for your life.

If you live in a city where everyone rushes, realize that you don't have to be like everyone else. You can be different. You can walk instead of driving in rush hour traffic. You can have fewer meetings. You can work on fewer but more important things. You can be on your iPhone or Blackberry less, and be disconnected sometimes. Your environment doesn't control your life — you do.

I'm not going to tell you how to take responsibility for your life, but once you make the decision, the *how* will become apparent over time.

Tips for a Slower-Paced Life

I can't give you a step-by-step guide to moving slower, but here are some things to consider and perhaps adopt, if they work for your life. Some things might require you to change some major things, but they can be done over time.

1. **Do less.** Cut back on your projects, on your task list, on how much you try to do each day. Focus not on quantity but quality. Pick 2-3 important things — or even just one important thing — and work on those first. Save smaller, routine tasks for later in the day, but give yourself time to focus. Read more.
2. **Have fewer meetings.** Meetings are usually a big waste of time. And they eat into your day, forcing you to squeeze the things you really need to do into small windows, and making you rush. Try to have blocks of time with no interruptions, so you don't have to rush from one meeting to another.
3. **Practice disconnecting.** Have times when you turn off your devices and your email notifications and whatnot. Time with no phone calls, when you're just creating, or when you're just spending time with someone, or just reading a book, or just taking a walk, or just eating mindfully. You can even disconnect for (gasp!) an entire day, and you won't be hurt. I promise. *Go to different room.*

4. **Give yourself time to get ready and get there.** If you're constantly rushing to appointments or other places you have to be, it's because you don't allot enough time in your schedule for preparing and for traveling. Pad your schedule to allow time for this stuff. If you think it only takes you 10 minutes to get ready for work or a date, perhaps give yourself 30-45 minutes so you don't have to shave in a rush or put on makeup in the car. If you think you can get there in 10 minutes, perhaps give yourself 2-3 times that amount so you can go at a leisurely pace and maybe even get there early.
5. **Practice being comfortable with sitting, doing nothing.** One thing I've noticed is that when people have to wait, they become impatient or uncomfortable. They want their mobile device or at least a magazine, because standing and waiting is either a waste of time or something they're not used to doing without feeling self-conscious. Instead, **try just sitting there, looking around, soaking in your surroundings.** Try standing in line and just watching and listening to people around you. It takes practice, but after awhile, you'll do it with a smile.
6. **Realize that if it doesn't get done, that's OK.** There's always tomorrow. And yes, I know that's a frustrating attitude for some of you who don't like laziness or procrastination or living without firm deadlines, but it's also reality. **The world likely won't end if you don't get that task done today.** Your boss might get mad, but the company won't collapse and the life will inevitably go on. And the things that need to get done will.
7. **Start to eliminate the unnecessary.** When you do the important things with focus, without rush, there will be things that get pushed back, that don't get done. And you need to ask

yourself: how necessary are these things? What would happen if I stopped doing them? How can I eliminate them, delegate them, automate them?

8. **Practice mindfulness.** Simply learn to live in the present, rather than thinking so much about the future or the past. When you eat, fully appreciate your food. When you're with someone, be with them fully. When you're walking, appreciate your surroundings, no matter where you are. Read this for more, and also try The Mindfulist.
9. **Slowly eliminate commitments.** We're overcommitted, which is why we're rushing around so much. I don't just mean with work — projects and meetings and the like. Parents have tons of things to do with and for their kids, and we overcommit our kids as well. Many of us have busy social lives, or civic commitments, or are coaching or playing on sports teams. We have classes and groups and hobbies. But in trying to cram so much into our lives, we're actually deteriorating the quality of those lives. Slowly eliminate commitments — pick 4-5 essential ones, and realize that the rest, while nice or important, just don't fit right now. Politely inform people, over time, that you don't have time to stick to those commitments.

Try these things out. Life is better when unrushed. And given the fleeting nature of this life, why waste even a moment by rushing through it?

Remember the quote above: if nature can get everything done without rushing, so can you.

Email Sanity: How to Clear Your Inbox When You're Drowning

Post written by Leo Babauta.

The beauty of an empty inbox is a thing to behold. It is calming, peaceful and wonderful.

An inbox that is overflowing with actions, urgent calls for responses, stuff to read ... it's chaos, it's stressful, it's overwhelming.

A friend recently posted:

“Help! I’m drowning in email!”

Let’s look at how to get your head above water first, and then how to get safely to dry land.

Head Above Water

You need to give yourself some breathing room. A flooded inbox is overwhelming, and you don’t know where to start. So here’s where we’re going to start:

- 1. Create an “actions” folder or label in your email.** This is where you’re going to store any emails that you need to take action on (other than just replying or filing or whatever).
- 2. Pick the most important.** Go through your inbox and check off 10-15 that are the most urgent action emails, and file them in this new folder. If you don’t get to the sections below right away, you can at least work from this folder for now.
- 3. Temporarily archive.** Now create a “temp” folder. File everything that’s still in your inbox into this temp folder. Everything. You’re going to get these out of the way and not worry

about them at the moment. We'll get to these, but it gives you a little breathing room.

4. Set a new policy. Every new email that comes in will follow the rules in the next section. No more allowing your inbox to pile up.

New Emails

So what to do with new emails that come in? Set some rules, and commit right this minute to ruthlessly sticking to them:

1. Process from the top down. When you open up your email, process the inbox completely. Start with the top email in your inbox, and open it. Take one of the following actions, in this preferred order: (1) delete (use this liberally), (2) archive (in case you want to look it up later), (3) quick reply (four sentences or less) and then archive, (4) put on your to-do list for action (if you don't have a list, start one now) and then file in your "action" folder. This last item includes long replies (which should be as rare as possible). If you take one of these four actions, you should dispose of every email.

2. Go to the next email and take quick action, and so forth.

Don't spend longer than 20 seconds on any one email, and even then you should only do that if you're doing a quick reply or adding the item to your to-do list. If you process this quickly, you'll be done with your inbox in minutes.

3. Only when you've processed should you start worrying about the to-do items. You can choose to do those now, or later. Don't start doing the to-do items when you're processing.

4. Newsletters, etc. You're never going to read all those newsletters, notices from services, catalogs from companies, and so on that regularly get delivered from your inbox. So go into your "temp" folder and delete all of them right now. All of them. And whenever new ones come in — emails that are not from real people directed just for you — you're going to go to the bottom of the email

and click on the “unsubscribe” link. Every single one of them should have an “unsubscribe” link — if not, mark as spam. It only takes 10 seconds to click on the unsubscribe link and then go to the new page and hit the unsubscribe button. And if you do this for every single one, you’ll soon get a lot less email.

Follow these four rules and you’ll never have a full inbox again.

Stop the Flood

OK, things should feel a bit more manageable now. Now we want to set some long-term policies so that you get fewer emails from now on.

Here’s what to do:

1. **Unsubscribe from everything.** This was talked about in the section above, but just in case you missed that, go back and read the newsletters item. You don’t need newsletters flooding your inbox.
2. **Stop sending so many emails.** The more emails you send, the more you’ll get. Use email as little as you possibly can. Call people if you can, or walk over and talk to them. If those aren’t possible, see if you can figure it out for yourself. If you send an email that doesn’t require a response, say so.
3. **Send shorter emails.** They’re more likely to get read and acted on, and it’ll take less of your time to write them. **Try sticking to 4 sentences or fewer.**
4. **Check email less often.** Set times each day, and only check email on those times. When you do, process your inbox to empty using the rules above.
5. **Filter out notifications.** If there are notifications you do want to see, create a folder or label for them, and create a filter (Gmail is great for this) so that the notifications go straight to that label/folder and skip the inbox.
6. **Set policies.** Put up policies on your website or send the policies

out to the people you work with. These policies should be aimed at reducing the number of requests you get. For example, if requests are coming to you that should be going somewhere else, put that in your policies. If people should deal with things through a different channel than email, say it in the policies. Try to figure out your most common types of emails, and find solutions so you don't have to respond to all of them.

7. Post FAQs. Similarly, if you get a bunch of questions regularly, post the answers publicly so that you don't have to repeatedly answer them by email. It'll save you a lot of time.

Processing the Old Emails

You're going to want to return to your "temp" folder, when you have the time, and start processing it. Some steps:

1. Process it in chunks if there are too many to do now. Just do it for 5 minutes and then come back later.

2. When you process, follow the rules for processing your inbox above (under the "New Emails" section). Start at the top, take quick action on each email, moving it out of the temp folder as fast as you can.

3. Feel free to mass delete emails. If you know you'll never reply or act on emails, just check a bunch of them off and delete or archive. You can get big chunks done at once this way. Give yourself the freedom to let these go — and just worry about what you need to do from this point on.

Weekly statuses directly on wiki (not the weekly report to manager)

the barefoot philosophy

“Empty-handed I entered the world
Barefoot I leave it.
My coming, my going –
Two simple happenings
That got entangled.”

~ **Kozan Ichikyo**

Post written by Leo Babauta. Follow me on twitter or identica.

Yesterday morning I ran a few miles in my Vibram Fivefingers, designed to mimic barefoot running (see my guide to barefoot running).

And then I took off the minimalist Fivefinger shoes, and ran completely barefoot for half a mile. It was liberating.

Later, I walked for a couple of hours, taking my sandals off for a good part of the walk. Today I walked barefoot once again. There's a sensation to barefoot walking that is light, free, simple, joyful.

Imagine walking barefoot on thick grass, or cool night sand. These are wonderful sensations that shod walkers cannot enjoy.

Going barefoot, I realized, is a perfect metaphor for my philosophy of life: the barefoot philosophy.

When you go barefoot, you become naked, you simplify, you become a minimalist.

It's a hard philosophy to explain, because others often judge it as weird, hippy-like (as if that's bad), unpractical. It's very practical, and while it may indeed be weird, it's also beautiful.

It's the simple life, in a nutshell.

The Barefoot Philosophy, in Bits

To embrace the Barefoot Philosophy, you don't actually have to go barefoot. Again, it's a metaphor for how you might live your life, and these principles can be applied to anything you do.

- **Light:** When you're barefoot, you feel light, and you're not burdened by stuff. In anything in life, if you can be light, it's a wonderful feeling. Think traveling light, or moving to a new city without too much stuff.
- **Free:** Walking barefoot, you feel free, without the restrictions of shoes. The fewer burdens and restrictions you have in life, the freer you are. Think of how easy it would be to pick up and travel, or move, or change jobs, or do something with a friend in the middle of a work day.
- **Naked:** Without shoes, you feel a bit naked, and being naked in public is scary. But it's also an exhilarating feeling, and once you get comfortable with that nakedness, it's kinda fun. Blogging can feel this way — you're putting yourself out into the world, naked, and that's scary at first. Doing anything different, where you expose a piece of yourself, is like being naked. But you get used to it, and it's not so scary.
- **Pleasureful:** The point of walking barefoot is to experience the pleasure of feeling the surface beneath your feet. The sensations are marvelous: cool, warm, textured, plush, smooth, rough. In anything in life, if you can experience the sensations of whatever you're doing, this is a beautiful thing. Think of the sensations of eating, swimming, washing dishes, sitting on a breezy porch, lying in the grass under the sun, kissing in the rain.
- **Aware:** Walking barefoot, you're more aware of the ground you're walking over — when you're shod, you can walk for miles

without really thinking about the surfaces you're traveling over. In anything you do, increasing your awareness of your surroundings is a desirable thing. Think of walking outside vs. being inside a car, or shutting off the mobile device so you can talk to the people around you or pay attention to the beauty around you.

- **Present:** The beauty of walking barefoot is that it brings you back to the present moment. It's hard to be stuck in a perceived slight by someone else earlier in the day, or worry about what might happen later in the day, when you are walking barefoot. In anything you do, if you can stay in the present moment, you will experience life to the fullest, will be less likely to be stuck in anger or consumed by worry or stressed by coming events.
- **Non-conformist:** One of the hardest things about walking barefoot isn't the temperature or possible pain of pebbles, it's the non-conformity of it all — it's being worried that others will think you're a dork, or homeless, or some kind of dangerous radical. And yet, I've learned to embrace my non-conformist side, to relish in being a bit different, to be proud I'm not one of the sheep. There's nothing wrong with bucking societal norms, if it's for good reason.
- **Non-consumerist:** The shoe companies would hate it if there were a major barefoot movement, because they're no product they could sell you as a solution. This isn't true of environmentalism — there are tons of green products that are making millions of dollars for corporations. I believe in ditching shoes like I believe in ditching any kind of product that you buy as a solution to life's problems. Life is better with less, not more, and when you think of yourself as a human rather than a

consumer, you're breaking free from the endless cycle of earning and buying and using up.

How to Live a Barefoot Life

The above philosophy is fine, and might appeal to some, but what you want is a practical guide, no?

I'm not going to give it to you. There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, nor is it desirable to live the life prescribed by someone else. The whole point is to do it on your own, without buying one of my books or doing it exactly as I do.

Live this philosophy, in small bits, and see if you like it. It takes some time to adjust to this approach, but it's lovely in the end.

Some things to consider and try, though:

- Try walking barefoot (tips, faq).
- Get rid of a couple boxes of clutter today.
- When you leave your house, take less with you than usual.
- When you find yourself worried about the future or past, breathe, and focus on your breath going in and out.
- When you find yourself wanting to buy something, pause. Then think of how you can live without buying it.
- Take time to fully enjoy a few simple pleasures today: the slow savoring of a small portion of something delicious, watching nature, spending time with a loved one, walking.
- Try some minimalist fun.
- Think of the restrictions you impose on yourself, and see if you can lift a few of them.
- Smile, and breathe.
- Most of all, be present and enjoy life.

The Little But Really Useful Guide to Creativity

“The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources.” - **Albert Einstein**

Post written by [Leo Babauta](#). Follow me on [Twitter](#).

It's easier than ever to be creative, to create, to imagine and make what's imagined become reality.

It's also tougher than ever, with distractions surrounding us in ways never before imagined.

No matter what kind of creative type you are — writer, painter, musician, marketer, blogger, photographer, designer, parent, business owner — you are likely always looking for inspirations, for ways to let loose your creative genius.

And while there are millions of creativity tips on the Internet, I thought I'd share the ones I've found most useful — the ones that I've tried and tested and found to be right.

Here they are, in no order at all:

- Play.
- Don't consume and create at the same time — separate the processes.
- Shut out the outside world.
- Reflect on your life and work daily.
- Look for inspiration all around you, in the smallest places.
- Start small.
- Just get it out, no matter how crappy that first draft.
- Don't try for perfect. Just get it out there, asap, and get feedback.

- Constantly make it better.
- Ignore the naysayers.
- But let criticism help you grow.
- Teach and you'll learn.
- Shake things up, see things in new ways.
- Apply things in other fields to your field, in ways not done before.
- Drink ridiculous amounts of coffee.
- Write all ideas down immediately.
- Turn your work into play.
- Play with kids.
- Get out, move, see new things, talk to new people.
- Read wildly different things. Especially stuff you disagree with.
- Get lots of rest. Overwork kills creativity.
- Don't force it. Relax, play, it will start to flow.
- Allow your mind to wander. Allow distractions, when you're looking for inspiration.
- Then shut them off when you're going to create.
- Do it when you're excited.
- When you're not, find something else to be excited about.
- Don't be afraid to be stupid and silly.
- Small ideas are good. You don't need to change the world — just change one thing.
- When something is killing your creativity, kill it.
- Stop reading creativity advice, clear away everything, and just create.
- Most of all, have fun doing it.

“Sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” - **Lewis Carroll**

Edit Your Life, Part 1: Commitments



Quick note: *Every Wednesday is Simplicity Day on Zen Habits.*

I'm a former newspaper editor, and one of the things I learned was to edit brutally (no sarcastic comments about why I don't do that with my blog posts). Cut out everything that's not necessary, and you've got a more meaningful story.

I highly recommend editing your life.

Today's edit: All the commitments in your life.

Take an inventory of the commitments in your life. Here are some common ones:

- **Work** - we have multiple commitments at our jobs. List them all.
- **Side work** – some of us free-lance, or do odd jobs to take in money. More commitments.
- **Family** - we may play a role as husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter. These roles come with many commitments.
- **Kids** - my kids have soccer, choir, Academic Challenge Bowl, National Junior Honor Society, basketball, spelling bee, and more. Each of their commitments is mine too.
- **Civic** - we may volunteer for different organizations, or be a board member or officer on a non-profit organization.
- **Religious** - many of us are very involved with our churches, or are part of a church organization. Or perhaps we are committed to going to service once a week.

- **Hobbies** - perhaps you are a runner or a cyclist, or you build models, or are part of a secret underground comic book organization. These come with – surprise! – commitments.
- **Home** - aside from regular family stuff, there's the stuff you have to do at home.
- **Online** - we may be a regular on a forum or mailing list or Google group. These are online communities that come with commitments too.

You might have other categories. List everything.

Now take a close look at each thing on the list, and consider: How does this give my life value? How important is it to me? Is it in line with my life priorities and values? How would it affect my life if I dropped out? Does this further my life goals?

These are tough questions, but I suggest seeing if you can eliminate just one thing — the thing that gives you the least return for your invested time and effort. The thing that's least in line with your life values and priorities and goals. Cut it out, at least for a couple weeks, and see if you can get along without it. Revisit this list at that time and see if you can cut something else out. Edit mercilessly, keeping only those that really mean something to you.

Each time you cut a commitment, it may give you a feeling of guilt, because others want you to keep that commitment. But it's also a huge relief, not having to do that commitment each day or week or month. It frees up a lot of your time, and while others may be disappointed, you have to keep what's important to you in mind, not everyone else. If we committed to what everyone else wanted all the time, we would never have any time left for ourselves.

Take the time to edit your commitments, and your life will be greatly simplified. You will thank yourself for it.

Edit Your Life, Part 2: Your Rooms

Every Wednesday is Simplicity Day on Zen Habits.

I'm a former newspaper editor, and one of the things I learned was to edit brutally (no sarcastic comments about why I don't do that with my blog posts). Cut out everything that's not necessary, and you've got a more meaningful story.

I highly recommend editing your life.

Today's edit: The rooms in your house, one at a time.

Are you surrounded by clutter in every room in your home? Clutter is visually distracting and stressful — every item that you see demands your mind's attention, and no matter how short that attention is, and despite that it is subconscious, these little distractions add up. It's difficult to have peace and to focus amid this clutter. Add to this the wasted time and energy needed to look for things, to maintain things, and to clean things, and the more clutter you have, the more energy it will take to have it.

So, I recommend that you edit each of the rooms in your house, one per week, until you have de-cluttered your home and made it a peaceful and calming place to be.

Here's how:

- **First, choose a room to do this week.** Don't try to do your whole house at once, as this can be very time consuming (unless you just have a lot of time on your hands — in which case, go for it!). Focus on one room, and try to do 15 minutes a day (unless you get carried away and feel like doing more). Work on one room each week.
- **In the beginning, skip the closets and drawers that are out of sight for now.** We'll tackle those in next week's Edit Your Life. Focus for now on the things you can see.

- **Start with the big things.** Is there too much furniture in the room? If so, edit them. What is necessary, which furniture do you love, which stuff is just too distracting. Also consider removing other big items, like boxes full of stuff.
- **Clear all flat surfaces.** Desktops, tabletops, countertops, etc. Remove all papers, piles of stuff, little junk, knick-knacks, anything. Put it on the floor. Now get a trash bag and two boxes. Sort through everything in your pile(s), one item at a time. Each item should be either thrown away in the trash bag, put in one box to give away (to friends, family or charity), or in the other box to put in another room in the house. Put back only a couple select items on the flat surfaces, such as a family photo or something that functionally belongs there. But as much as possible, leave the flat surfaces as bare as humanly possible. “Stuff” doesn’t belong here — you need to find a drawer, shelf, or container for whatever stuff you’ve removed. When you’re done sorting through the pile, put the recycle box in the trunk of your car and drop it off the next time you go out to do errands. Throw away the trash bag. Take the other box and put the stuff where it belongs elsewhere in the house (don’t put it on flat surfaces unless absolutely necessary!).
- **Repeat this process** for any other “stuff” in the room, including stuff on the floor.
- **Now go around the room, clockwise, and edit what’s left.** This might be stuff on the walls, posted to surfaces like the refrigerator, stuff under tables or desks, etc. Only leave the stuff that’s absolutely necessary. I mostly have blank walls except for a few choice paintings or drawings (by my dad, an artist). All my flat surfaces are bare. It’s nice.
- **Be merciless.** Edit brutally. The more you can get rid of, the better!

OK, your room should look pretty good now. If so, you should feel pretty great! Sit down, relax, look around, and enjoy the peaceful goodness. Savor your triumph.

Now, this editing process is not a destination, but an ongoing process. It won't last long if you don't have a system and develop habits to keep it de-cluttered.

Here's the system:

- **A place for everything, and everything in its place.** An oldie, but valuable nonetheless. Are you about to put something down on a flat surface? Stop yourself. Think about where that item belongs. If it doesn't have a home, find one and stick with it. Always put it in that spot. For example: I have a tray for my keys, wallet, etc., and when I first get in the house, I put these things in this tray. Every time. So I always know where it is. And when I leave, it's as simple as grabbing my stuff from the tray.
- **Have an inbox for your home for ALL incoming papers.** And a filing system for documents you need to keep, from bills to important documents to taxes to kids' report cards. Put all incoming mail, school papers, receipts, etc. into the inbox, and process it once a day (or every other day, but not much longer than that — otherwise you're just creating a pile). When you process, don't leave stuff in a pile to be filed later — file it immediately. Trash other stuff. Pay bills immediately or put them in a bills to be paid folder. Don't leave papers laying around elsewhere.
- **Clean up at night and before you leave the house.** If you've developed good habits, you may not need this, but no one's perfect, and if you have kids, you'll definitely need this, because kids certainly are not perfect at this habit. Just take 5-10 minutes to pick up stuff and make sure your flat surfaces are clear.
- **Every six months (or a year), de-clutter.** Despite your best efforts, new stuff just accumulates. You need to have a regular binging process every now and then.

Edit Your Life, Part 3: Closets and Drawers

Every Wednesday is Simplicity Day on Zen Habits.

I'm a former newspaper editor, and one of the things I learned was to edit brutally (no sarcastic comments about why I don't do that with my blog posts). Cut out everything that's not necessary, and you've got a more meaningful story.

I highly recommend editing your life.

Today's edit: Edit your closets and drawers.

Last week, I talked about a method for editing your rooms, removing the clutter, and only leaving what's necessary. I suggested that you skip the closets and drawers, saving them for later, and only focus on what's visible when you walk in the room. The reasoning is that if you include everything at once, including closets and drawers, it can be overwhelming, while if you only focus on what's immediately visible, you can make a big difference on how you feel about that room with a shorter amount of time dedicated to your editing.

But this week, let's focus on what's not immediately visible. Every room has closets and drawers, and they can easily accumulate junk from years of putting stuff in there and forgetting about them. Out of sight, out of mind, right? **Yes, but every time we open the closet or drawer, we are reminded of that junk and clutter. Let's create simple, stress-free spaces!**

Drawers

Start with drawers, because they're simpler. Take one drawer at a time, and follow these simple steps for each drawer:

1. **Empty everything out of the drawer.** Everything.
2. **Clean out the drawer.** Clear all junk and debris, then clean with a wet rag or use a cleaning product. Make it nice and clean.

3. **Remove all junk** from the pile of stuff (that you took out of the drawer), and toss it.
4. **Now go through the remaining stuff, and sort:** stuff you'd like to give away (put this in a box to give away, and put the box in your car to drop off when you're done), stuff you want to put in other places in the house (do this immediately after you're done), and stuff you want to keep in the drawer. Try to keep related stuff in the drawer — don't have junk drawer. Only keep school supplies, or underwear, or whatever, in that drawer, so you know what belongs there.
5. **Put the stuff back in an orderly manner.** You should have a greatly reduced amount of stuff to put back in the drawer. Don't have too much stuff, or the drawer will still be cluttered. Put it back neatly, in some kind of order — it helps to get a drawer organizer that fits the stuff you're putting in there. This is great for office or school supply stuff, like pens and tape and scissors and paper clips.
6. **Now that it's nice and neat and de-cluttered and simplified, celebrate. And keep it that way!** Never just toss stuff in the drawer. Make sure that it belongs there, and put it back in an orderly manner. This habit might take some time, but it will pay off in less cluttered drawers.

You can either stop after doing one drawer, and tackle the next drawer tomorrow, or keep going if you have the time and energy.

Closets

Now on to closets, which are a little more complicated. **However, to simplify things, start with one section of the closet: one shelf, or the floor of the closet.** For each shelf, follow the same steps as above with the drawers. Do the same with the floor of the closet — in fact, remove everything from the floor and keep the floor clear if at all possible. A clear floor greatly simplifies a closet.

Next would be clothes or other things hanging in the closet. It's best to take all these out, and follow the same basic procedures, **simplifying, tossing, and only putting back what**

is essential. This is a great exercise that will greatly reduce your wardrobe (get rid of clothes you no longer wear or fit!) and simplify the closet.

Closets can be intimidating, so you might tackle one area at a time, and do it every day for a week. Each day should only take 15 minutes or so, if you work quickly and make quick decisions about each item.

Edit Your Life, Part 4: Your Work Space

Quick note: Every Wednesday is Simplicity Day on Zen Habits and for the next few weeks, these posts will be a series called “Edit Your Life,” looking at ways to simplify different parts of your life.

I’m a former newspaper editor, and one of the things I learned was to edit brutally (no sarcastic comments about why I don’t do that with my blog posts). Cut out everything that’s not necessary, and you’ve got a more meaningful story.

I highly recommend editing your life.

Today’s edit: Edit your work space.

If you’re at work, look around you — how many things are on your desk? How many things are up on the walls around you? How cluttered is your computer desktop? Are there piles of things around your desk?

All of these things are visual distractions, and as we are visual creatures, our minds do not let us ignore them. They pull for our attention, and stress us out.

The solution: simplify, edit, minimize.

In my workspace, I have a pretty minimal and clean setup. When I moved in, I stripped everything from the walls but a single, pretty calendar. I have one inbox, that’s usually empty (see: Steps to a Permanently Clear Desk), two photos of my family, a phone, a printer and a computer. Otherwise, my desktop is clear of everything but the document I’m working on at this moment. My

computer has no desktop icons, and I try to have only one program open at a time (unless more than one is absolutely necessary).

It's a clutter-free, distraction-free, stress-free and productive work space, and I highly recommend it to everyone. Your space could have a few personal items, to make it yours, but for the most part, **you want to be able to focus on the task at hand, otherwise your work day will be more stressful than necessary.**

A quick note about productivity: I should write another post about this, but when I write about productivity, it isn't because I think we need to be working machines. In fact, if you've read any of my posts about slowing down and simplicity, you know I believe the opposite. Instead, productivity is important, to me, because if we can get our work done in a shorter amount of time, we have more time for ourselves, our families, and our goals.

Let's edit our work spaces and create a simplified environment:

- **Edit your walls.** Look at all the stuff on the walls around you. What really needs to be there? Chances are, none of it. We put stuff up on the walls to remind ourselves of things, to inspire ourselves, to make ourselves laugh. But it just distracts us. Take it all down, except perhaps for a nice picture (art is good if you have any), and maybe a nice calendar. If you have a sign to remind you to do a goal or habit, leave that up. I have a little sign taped to my computer that says, "DO IT NOW" in big blue letters. It's a distraction, sure, but one that distracts me from my other distractions.
- **Gather up all your papers.** Do you have papers all over your desk? How about stacked on your floor? Gather these all up into one pile, and process them one at a time. This may take awhile if you have a lot of papers, but trust me, it's time well spent. Most of these papers can be trashed, but the important ones need to be filed, with important dates entered in your calendar and actions in your to-do list. File the papers right away. Feel free to toss without mercy, or forward to the appropriate party. Work your

way down the stack, starting from the first document. Take one document at a time, make a decision about how to dispose of it, and do it quickly. Don't put it back to decide on later. Don't make several stacks. Do them one at a time, right away.

- **Edit your knicknacks.** Do you have a bunch of little things on your desk? Photos, cute little animals, candy trays, stuff for pens and paper clips, little signs with funny sayings on them. Get rid of all of them but maybe one or two photos. Pens and paper clips and the like can be put in a desk drawer, neatly in a drawer tray. Most of the other stuff can be tossed, or filed appropriately. This stuff is pure distraction.
- **Find other spaces for things.** If there are things within sight that you need, find a place out of sight for them. Really, there's nothing that needs to be on your desktop (besides an inbox and your electronic equipment like phone and monitor). Everything else can be put in a drawer. The key: find a place for things, and always put them there. That way, they will be easy to find when you need them. Put the things you use most in the drawers closest to you.
- **Edit your computer.** Most people have a desktop cluttered with icons. This is distracting, and it's hard to find stuff. In my My Documents folder, I created five folders: 1. Inbox 2. Actions 3. Incubate 4. Current Projects and 5. Archive. I download everything to 1. Inbox, and try to clear it out at least daily. I work mostly in the 2. Actions folder. Stuff I need to think about or read later goes in 3. Incubate. The other two are self-explanatory. So take everything on your desktop and file it. If there are actions that you need to do, put them in Actions. If there are programs or files you need to access regularly, you can put them in your Start menu (or equivalent), or even better, develop an Autohotkey for it. Then turn off your desktop icons, and get a nice serene desktop pic (I have a Zen garden pic). Another tip: don't have a bunch of programs open at once. Work on one task at a time, and only have the window(s) open that you need to work on that task.
- **Edit your drawers.** Go through drawers one at a time, tossing junk and only keeping what's needed. Organize it, have a place

for everything, and make sure you always put stuff back in its place.

- **Edit your filing system.** Do you file your documents regularly? Can you find it immediately at any time? If so, you're ahead of the game. If not, create a handy reference filing system. Do it simple, from A-Z with simple manila folders. Make sure to have a box of folders and labels on hand so you can make a new file immediately, whenever you need it. Don't have a "To File" pile — just file stuff right away! Your filing drawer(s) should be close at hand so there's no reason not to file something immediately or pull the file if you need it.
- **Don't go and buy a bunch of stuff.** When people start GTD, they go out and buy a Brother labelmaker. If you want to do that, and get some labels and manila folders, that's fine. But otherwise, don't go on an office-supply rampage just to simplify your work space. Remember, we're editing here, not doing a home makeover!

If you do all of the above, you should have a pretty nice and simplified work space now. If you can't do it all at once, that's fine — schedule one-hour chunks over the next 2-3 days and you should be done. When you're done, sit back, look around, and enjoy! It should be immensely pleasing. Now keep it that way!

10 Odd Little Minimalist Things I Do

***Note:** this will be another short, sorta-fun post that's not on the weekly schedule. It's not supremely useful, so feel free to skip this post. :)*

As I noted last week, I consider myself a minimalist. Does that mean everything I do is minimalist? No, but there are some odd little things I do that you might consider minimalist.

Today I felt like taking a minute to share them with you.

1. **No watch.** My watch broke a couple of years ago, and I decided I'd go without it. It saves me from having to put on a watch every day, and I feel much lighter. Plus, it has the advantage of making me less conscious of time, and more conscious of what I'm doing and who I'm with.
2. **No wallet.** This isn't an original idea, of course, but about a year ago I put my wallet in my car's glove compartment. Now I only carry a few bills in cash, my driver's license and my debit card, bound with a clip. My membership cards, discount cards, etc. are stored in my wallet in my glove compartment, and you know what? I never need them. I think I've only gone in the wallet once to get out a card in the last year.
3. **No keys.** I began to simplify my key ring until it just has a few keys: office, home, car and post office box. Then I decided I didn't need to carry them around with me. Now I just leave them in my glove compartment, and only carry around my car's remote key (that little clicker thing that locks and unlocks the car). My pockets are so much emptier.
4. **No cell.** Well, actually, I do own a cell phone. And it's usually in my car. But I just have it for emergencies, mostly because I have kids and want to be available for them. However, I rarely make phone calls and if my kids are with me, I turn the cell off and leave it in the glove compartment. Man, I love that glove compartment.

5. **No bed.** Actually, I have a bed. But it's just a king-sized mattress that sleeps myself, Eva, and our two youngest babies. As our babies sleep with us, we decided it would be safer if the bed was low. Plus, I love the minimalist look of having only a mattress.
6. **No desktop icons.** I think I've mentioned this before, but my computer desktop is completely free of icons. They are just visual clutter, they slow the computer down (it takes extra cpu cycles to draw icons), and they are an inefficient way of organizing or accessing your programs and documents. I use keyboard shortcuts for everything.
7. **No desktop storage.** I don't store my info on my computer's hard drive. First, because I got tired of emailing myself my work files, so I could access them from home, or putting them on a flash drive or uploading them to web storage, or syncing my files. I decided to put everything online, and use online apps so that I could access info from anywhere. And it has made my life so much easier and simpler. I sometimes use desktop apps, but I then transfer it online and delete the file from the hard drive. I still have stuff on my hard drive, of course, but that's just because I haven't bothered to delete my old files — I don't actually use them.
8. **No mobile Internet.** I know iPhones and Blackberries and laptops with WiFi and other such mobile computing is all the rage these days, and I've been sorely tempted myself, but I've opted not to get such a device. The cell phone I mentioned only makes and receives phone calls. Actually, it can send text messages, but I've never done it. I like the freedom of being away from the Internet when I'm out doing something, either alone or with my family. It's liberating to be disconnected.
9. **No cable TV.** I've mentioned this before too, but a few years ago we made the decision to cut out cable TV from our lives. It was partly out of frugality, but also because cable TV tends to run your life. There is so much junk ... er, I mean entertainment ... on cable that you never do anything else. For a few months, we used rabbit-ear antennas to get the few free channels they have here on Guam, but we soon scrapped that too. Now, we watch DVDs,

but not even every night. In fact, we haven't watched a DVD for a few days now. Instead, we do miraculous things like read, and talk, and go outside.

10. **No ipod.** My teen-aged daughter has an ipod. It's almost always hooked into her ear. It makes conversation difficult. I have a cheap mp3 player that I bought for running, but it made running less enjoyable for me. Now, I run with only my thoughts and nature in my head, and I go places without the distraction of constant music. It's nice.

How to Simplify Your Filing System; or, Why Stacking Just Doesn't Work

Every Monday is Productivity & Organization Day at Zen Habits.

Does your filing system include stacks of paper, or is your “To Be Filed” folder overflowing?

If you have trouble with filing your documents, you may need to find a way to simplify your filing system to keep yourself organized.

Filing is something many people have a problem with — you're not alone. But organization can not only make you more productive, it can simplify your life and make it less stressful.

Being organized doesn't take a complicated system for filing. It simply requires that you have a place for everything, and get into the habit of things where they belong write away.

Whether you've got a complicated filing system you'd like to simplify, or whether you have no filing system at all, let's take a look at how to simplify the system and keep things perfectly organized.

1. Reduce before organizing. The first rule to organizing is that you should eliminate the unnecessary before organizing at all. If you've got a filing drawer that's overflowing, or stacks of paper that need filing, it'll take forever to organize — and even then, it'll be hard to find stuff.

Here's how to simplify your papers and files before you organize:

- 1. Put everything in one big pile.** If it can't all go in one pile, make more than one, but look at them as continuations of the first pile. If you have folders that are a mess, take them out and add them to the stack. I recently did this with my home filing system and reduced the files by two thirds. It took about an hour.

2. **Go through them, one at a time.** Pick up each document or folder and decide what needs to be done with them. If you can't see yourself needing it in a couple of months, toss it. Default to toss (or shred, or recycle). Get rid of as much as you can. I've never regretted tossing a document.
3. **Route.** If you can't toss something, try to route it to someone else. Get it off your desk.
4. **File.** If a document is absolutely critical, and you're sure you'll need it again, then it needs to be filed. Let's take a look at how to set up a simple system for doing that.

2. Simple filing. I agree with David Allen's Getting Things Done, which recommends that you use a simple, alphabetical filing system. Just use plain manila folders with labels (you can buy a label maker if you like), creating a file for each client, vendor and/or project.

I believe that most people only need one drawer for filing. Now, I'll admit that there are some jobs that require much more than this, but for the average employee (or self-employed person), one drawer is all you need. And if you limit yourself to one drawer, you force yourself to toss out unnecessary files when the drawer gets full.

Don't overthink this. Just create a file, and file it alphabetically. Keep it simple.

3. File immediately. The key to keeping your filing system up to date is to file things right away. When you're processing your inbox, and you run across something that doesn't require action but that you might need to file later, don't put it in a pile to be filed later. Don't put it in a folder labeled "To File" or "Miscellaneous".

Just open your filing drawer (it should be close on hand), pull out the appropriate folder, put the document in it, and file it. That takes about 5 seconds, and then you're done. If you don't do it now, it will start to pile up, and stacking just doesn't work.

Why stacking doesn't work: Because it just piles up and then the pile gets a little intimidating and then before you know it you've got a huge pile that you never want to go through. Then you can't

find anything when you need it, and now you no longer have a filing system. I know some people think that their piles are organized into a kind of system, but piles are inefficient (if you're not working on them at this moment) because you constantly have to re-factor what pile is for what and which documents are in each pile, and when you need a document, it takes too long to find it. Plus, it clutters up your desk, distracting you from your work.

4. Have materials on hand. Always have a big supply of manila folders and labels on hand. If you have a document that needs to be filed for future reference, but no file exists for it yet, you will put the filing off until later if you don't have the materials on hand. You don't feel like getting up to get a manila folder or label every time you need to file something, so you'll put it off. And that will create piles.

So instead, just have the materials in a drawer, for easy access. When you need to make a new file, just put a label on, stick the document in, and file it alphabetically.

5. Reduce your needs over time. Over the last year or so, I've consciously been reducing my filing needs so that I now barely use my filing drawer. Sure, at least once a week I'll pull open the drawer to look at a file, but I file many fewer documents than I used to. I recommend that you do the same, slowly and consciously reducing your filing needs. Here are a few tips for doing that:

- **Store reference information online.** Now when I need to look something up, I press a hotkey combination (I use AutoHotkey to open websites and documents) and the appropriate document opens up with all the info I need. Contacts, budget information, ideas, logs, and much more are all online, so I no longer need hard copies of them and don't need to file them.
- **Reduce incoming paper.** Ask people to email you instead of faxing or sending a document by post. In this age, everything is created on computer, and sending hard copies is outdated. Insist

on digital. Also take steps to stop paper versions of newsletters, magazines and other such regular documents.

- **Stop printing stuff.** Lots of people still print out email or documents they receive, or even documents they create themselves. But then you have two copies of it, you're killing trees, and you now have to file the paper version as well as the digital. And it's much easier to search for digital information when you need it.
- **Analyze other incoming docs.** Every time you file something, ask yourself if you really need a hard copy version of it. Is it available online? Does it really need to be sent to you? Is it better to scan it and store it digitally? Is there any way to eliminate the need for this document? And slowly, one by one, reduce your need for all the incoming stuff.

Simple Living Manifesto: 72 Ideas to Simplify Your Life

“Simplicity is the peak of civilization.” – Jessie Sampter

Post written by [Leo Babauta](#). Follow me on [twitter](#) .

A simple life has a different meaning and a different value for every person. For me, it means eliminating all but the essential, eschewing chaos for peace, and spending your time doing what’s important to you.

It means getting rid of many of the things you do so you can spend time with people you love and do the things you love. It means getting rid of the clutter so you are left with only that which gives you value.

However, getting to simplicity isn’t always a simple process. It’s a journey, not a destination, and it can often be a journey of two steps forward, and one backward.

If you’re interested in simplifying your life, this is a great starter’s guide (if you’re not interested, move on).

The Short List

For the cynics who say that the list below is too long, there are really only two steps to simplifying:

1. Identify what’s most important to you.
2. Eliminate everything else.

Of course, that’s not terribly useful unless you can see how to apply that to different areas of your life, so I present to you the Long List.

The Long List

There can be no step-by-step guide to simplifying your life, but I’ve compiled an incomplete list of ideas that should help anyone trying

to find the simple life. Not every tip will work for you — choose the ones that appeal and apply to your life.

One important note: this list will be criticized for being too complicated, especially as it provides a bunch of links. Don't stress out about all of that. Just choose one at a time, and focus on that. When you're done with that, focus on the next thing.

1. **Make a list of your top 4-5 important things.** What's most important to you? What do you value most? What 4-5 things do you most want to do in your life? Simplifying starts with these priorities, as you are trying to make room in your life so you have more time for these things.
2. **Evaluate your commitments.** Look at everything you've got going on in your life. Everything, from work to home to civic to kids' activities to hobbies to side businesses to other projects. Think about which of these really gives you value, which ones you love doing. Which of these are in line with the 4-5 most important things you listed above? Drop those that aren't in line with those things. [Article here](#).
3. **Evaluate your time.** How do you spend your day? What things do you do, from the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep? Make a list, and evaluate whether they're in line with your priorities. If not, eliminate the things that aren't, and focus on what's important. Redesign your day.
4. **Simplify work tasks.** Our work day is made up of an endless list of work tasks. If you simply try to knock off all the tasks on your to-do list, you'll never get everything done, and worse yet, you'll never get the important stuff done. Focus on the essential tasks and eliminate the rest. [Read more](#).

5. **Simplify home tasks.** In that vein, think about all the stuff you do at home. Sometimes our home task list is just as long as our work list. And we'll never get that done either. So focus on the most important, and try to find ways to eliminate the other tasks (automate, eliminate, delegate, or hire help).
6. **Learn to say no.** This is actually one of the key habits for those trying to simplify their lives. If you can't say no, you will take on too much. [Article here](#).
7. **Limit your communications.** Our lives these days are filled with a vast flow of communications: email, IM, cell phones, paper mail, Skype, Twitter, forums, and more. It can take up your whole day if you let it. Instead, put a limit on your communications: only do email at certain times of the day, for a certain number of minutes (I recommend twice a day, but do what works for you). [Only do IM once a day, for a limited amount of time.](#) [Limit phone calls to certain times too.](#) Same with any other communications. Set a schedule and stick to it.
8. **Limit your media consumption.** This tip won't be for everyone, so if media consumption is important to you, please skip it (as with any of the other tips). However, I believe that the media in our lives — TV, radio, Internet, magazines, etc. — can come to dominate our lives. Don't let it. Simplify your life and your information consumption by limiting it. Try a [media fast](#).
9. **Purge your stuff.** If you can devote a weekend to purging the stuff you don't want, it feels seriously terrific. Get boxes and trash bags for the stuff you want to donate or toss. Here's [my guide on decluttering](#). Here's a [post on starting small](#). More on purging below.

10. **Get rid of the big items.** There's tons of little clutter in our lives, but if you start with the big items, you'll simplify your life quickly and in a big way. [Read more.](#)
11. **Edit your rooms.** One room at a time, go around the room and eliminate the unnecessary. Act as a newspaper editor, trying to leave only the minimum, and deleting everything else. [Article here.](#)
12. **Edit closets and drawers.** Once you've gone through the main parts of your rooms, tackle the closets and drawers, one drawer or shelf at a time. [More here.](#)
13. **Simplify your wardrobe.** Is your closet bursting full? Are your drawers so stuffed they can't close (I'm talking about dresser drawers here, not underwear). Simplify your wardrobe by getting rid of anything you don't actually wear. Try creating a minimal wardrobe by focusing on simple styles and a few solid colors that all match each other. [Read more.](#)
14. **Simplify your computing life.** If you have trouble with too many files and too much disorganization, consider online computing. It can simplify things greatly. [Read more.](#)
15. **Declutter your digital packrattery.** If you are a digital packrat, and cannot seem to control your digital clutter, there is still hope for you. Read [this guide](#) to curing yourself of this clutter.
16. **Create a simplicity statement.** What do you want your simple life to look like? Write it out. [More here.](#)
17. **Limit your buying habits.** If you are a slave to materialism and consumerism, there are ways to escape it. I was there, and although I haven't escaped these things entirely, I feel much freer of it all. If you can escape materialism, you can get

into the habit of buying less. And that will mean less stuff, less spending, less freneticism. [Read more.](#)

18. **Free up time.** Find ways to free up time for the important stuff. That means eliminating the stuff you don't like, cutting back on time wasters, and making room for what you want to do.
19. **Do what you love.** Once you've freed up some time, be sure to spend that extra time doing things you love. Go back to your list of 4-5 important things. Do those, and nothing else. [Read more.](#)
20. **Spend time with people you love.** Again, the list of 4-5 important things probably contains some of the people you love (if not, you may want to re-evaluate). Whether those people are a spouse, a partner, children, parents, other family, best friends, or whoever, find time to do things with them, talk to them, be intimate with them (not necessarily in sexual ways).
21. **Spend time alone.** See [this list](#) of ways to free up time for yourself — to spend in solitude. Alone time is good for you, although some people aren't comfortable with it. It could take practice getting used to the quiet, and making room for your inner voice. It sounds new-agey, I know, but it's extremely calming. And this quiet is necessary for finding out what's important to you.
22. **Eat slowly.** If you cram your food down your throat, you are not only missing out on the great taste of the food, you are not eating healthy. Slow down to lose weight, improve digestion, and enjoy life more. [Read more.](#)
23. **Drive slowly.** Most people rush through traffic, honking and getting angry and frustrated and stressed out. And endangering themselves and others in the meantime. Driving

slower is not only safer, but it is better on your fuel bill, and can be incredibly peaceful. Give it a try. [Read more.](#)

24. **Be present.** These two words can make a huge difference in simplifying your life. Living here and now, in the moment, keeps you aware of life, of what is going on around you and within you. It does wonders for your sanity. Read [tips on how to do it.](#)
25. **Streamline your life.** Many times we live with unplanned, complex systems in our lives because we haven't given them much thought. Instead, focus on one system at a time (your laundry system, your errands system, your paperwork system, your email system, etc.) and try to make it simplified, efficient, and written. Then stick to it. [Here's more.](#)[Another good article here.](#)
26. **Create a simple mail & paperwork system.** If you don't have a system, this stuff will pile up. But a simple system will keep everything in order. [Here's how.](#)
27. **Create a simple system for house work.** Another example of a simple system is clean-as-you-go with a burst. [Read more.](#)
28. **Clear your desk.** If you have a cluttered desk, it can be distracting and disorganized and stressful. A clear desk, however, is only a couple of simple habits away. [Read more.](#)
29. **Establish routines.** The key to keeping your life simple is to create simple routines. A great article on that [here.](#)
30. **Keep your email inbox empty.** Is your email inbox overflowing with new and read messages? Do the messages just keep piling up? If so, you're normal — but you could be more

efficient and your email life could be simplified with a few simple steps. [Read more](#).

31. **Learn to live frugally.** Living frugally means buying less, wanting less, and leaving less of a footprint on the earth. It's directly related to simplicity. [Here are 50 tips](#) on how to live frugally.
32. **Make your house minimalist.** A minimalist house has what is necessary, and not much else. It's also extremely peaceful (not to mention easy to clean). [More here](#).
33. **Find other ways to be minimalist.** There are tons. You can find ways to be minimalist in every area of your life. [Here are a few I do](#), to spur your own ideas.
34. **Consider a smaller home.** If you rid your home of stuff, you might find you don't need so much space. I'm not saying you should live on a boat (although I know some people who happily do so), but if you can be comfortable in a smaller home, it will not only be less expensive, but easier to maintain, and greatly simplify your life. Read about [downsizing your home here](#).
35. **Consider a smaller car.** This is a big move, but if you have a large car or SUV, you may not really need something that big. It's more expensive, uses more gas, harder to maintain, harder to park. Simplify your life with less car. You don't need to go tiny, especially if you have a family, but try to find as small a car as can fit you or your family comfortably. Maybe not something you're going to do today, but something to think about over the long term.
36. **Learn what "enough" is** (*Real estate for me!!*). Our materialistic society today is about getting more and more, with no end in sight. Sure, you can get the latest gadget, and more

clothes and shoes. More stuff. But when will you have enough? Most people don't know, and thus they keep buying more. It's a neverending cycle. Get off the cycle by figuring out how much is enough. And then stop when you get there.

37. **Create a simple weekly dinner menu.** If figuring out what's for dinner is a nightly stressor for you or your family, consider creating a weekly menu. Decide on a week's worth of simple dinners, set a specific dinner for each night of the week, go grocery shopping for the ingredients. Now you know what's for dinner each night, and you have all the ingredients necessary. No need for difficult recipes — find ones that can be done in 10-15 minutes (or less).
38. **Eat healthy.** It might not be obvious how eating healthy relates to simplicity, but think about the opposite: if you eat fatty, greasy, salty, sugary, fried foods all the time, you are sure to have higher medical needs over the long term. We could be talking years from now, but imagine frequent doctor visits, hospitalization, going to the pharmacist, getting therapy, having surgery, taking insulin shots ... you get the idea. Being unhealthy is complicated. Eating healthy simplifies all of that greatly, over the long term. Read about [how to simplify your eating habits](#).
39. **Exercise.** This goes along the same lines as eating healthy, as it simplifies your life in the long run, but it goes even further: exercise helps burn off stress and makes you feel better. It's great. Here's [how to create the exercise habit](#).
40. **Declutter before organizing.** Many people make the mistake of taking a cluttered desk or filing cabinet or closet or drawer, and trying to organize it. Unfortunately, that's not only hard to do, it keeps things complicated. Simplify the process by

getting rid of as much of the junk as possible, and then organizing. If you declutter enough, you won't need to organize at all.

41. **Have a place for everything.** Age-old advice, but it's the best advice on keeping things organized. After you declutter. [Read more here.](#)
42. **Find inner simplicity.** I'm not much of a spiritual person, but I have found that spending a little time with my inner self creates a peaceful simplicity rather than a chaotic confusion. This could be time praying or communing with God, or time spent meditating or journaling or getting to know yourself, or time spent in nature. However you do it, working on your inner self is worth the time.
43. **Learn to decompress from stress.** Every life is filled with stress — no matter how much you simplify your life, you'll still have stress (except in the case of the ultimate simplifier, death). So after you go through stress, find ways to decompress. [Here are some ideas.](#)
44. **Try living without a car.** OK, this isn't something I've done, but many others have. It's something I would do if I didn't have kids. Walk, bike, or take public transportation. It reduces expenses and gives you time to think. A car is also very complicating, needing not only car payments, but insurance, registration, safety inspections, maintenance, repairs, gas and more.
45. **Find a creative outlet for self-expression.** Whether that's writing, poetry, painting, drawing, creating movies, designing websites, dance, skateboarding, whatever. We have a need for self-expression, and finding a way to do that makes your

life much more fulfilling. Allow this to replace much of the busy-work you're eliminating from your life.

46. **Simplify your goals.** Instead of having half a dozen goals or more, simplify it to one goal. Not only will this make you less stressed, it will make you more successful. You'll be able to focus on that One Goal, and give it all of your energy. That gives you much better chances for success.
47. **Single-task.** Multi-tasking is more complicated, more stressful, and generally less productive. Instead, do one task at a time.
48. **Simplify your filing system.** Stacking a bunch of papers just doesn't work. But a filing system doesn't have to be complicated to be useful. Create a simple system.
49. **Develop equanimity.** If every little thing that happens to you sends you into anger or stress, your life might never be simple. Learn to detach yourself, and be more at peace. Read more.
50. **Reduce your consumption of advertising.**
Advertising makes us want things. That's what it's designed to do, and it works. Find ways to reduce your exposure of advertising, whether that's in print, online, broadcast, or elsewhere. You'll want much less.
51. **Live life more deliberately.** Do every task slowly, with ease, paying full attention to what you're doing. For more, see Peaceful Simplicity: How to Live a Life of Contentment.
52. **Make a Most Important Tasks (MITs) list each day.**
Set just 3 very important things you want to accomplish each day. Don't start with a long list of things you probably won't get done by the end of the day. A simple list of 3 things, ones that

would make you feel like you accomplished something. See [this article](#) for more.

53. **Create morning and evening routines.** A great way to simplify your life is to create routines at the start and end of your day. Read more on [morning routines](#) and [evening routines](#).
54. **Create a morning writing ritual.** If you enjoy writing, like I do, make it a peaceful, productive ritual. [Article here](#).
55. **Learn to do nothing.** Doing nothing can be an art form, and it should be a part of every life. Read [the Art of Doing Nothing](#).
56. **Read Walden, by Thoreau.** The quintessential text on simplifying. [Available on Wikisources](#) for free.
57. **Go for quality, not quantity.** Try not to have a ton of stuff in your life ... instead, have just a few possessions, but ones that you really love, and that will last for a long time.
58. **Read Simplify Your Life, by Elaine St. James.** One of my favorite all-time authors on simplicity. Read [my review here](#).
59. **Fill your day with simple pleasures.** Make a list of your favorite simple pleasures, and sprinkle them throughout your day. [List here](#).
60. **Simplify your RSS feeds.** If you've got dozens of feeds, or more than a hundred (as I once did), you probably have a lot of stress in trying to keep up with them all. Simplify your feed reading. See [How to Drop an RSS Feed Like a Bad Habit](#).
61. **But subscribe to [Unclutterer](#).** Probably the best blog on simplifying your stuff and routines (along with Zen Habits, of course!).
62. **Create an easy-to-maintain yard.** If you spend too much time on your yard, [here are some good tips](#).

63. **Carry less stuff.** Are your pockets bulging. Consider carrying only the essentials. [Some thoughts on that here.](#)
64. **Simplify your online life.** If you have too much going on online, here are a few ways to simplify it all. [Article here.](#)
65. **Strive to automate your income.** This isn't the easiest task, but it can (and has) been done. I've been working towards it myself. [Article here.](#)
66. **Simplify your budget.** Many people skip budgeting (which is very important) because it's too hard or too complicated. [Read more here.](#)
67. **Simplify your financial life.** Article from a financial planning expert [here.](#)
68. **Learn to pack light.** Who wants to lug a bunch of luggage around on a trip? Here's an article on [using just one carry-on.](#)
69. **Use a minimalist productivity system.** The [minimal Zen To Done](#) is all you need. Everything else is icing.
70. **Leave space around things in your day.** Whether they're appointments, or things you need to do, don't stack them back-to-back. Leave a little space between things you need to do, so you will have room for contingencies, and you'll go through your day much more relaxed.
71. **Live closer to work.** This might mean getting a job closer to your home, or moving to a home closer to your work. Either will do much to simplify your life.
72. **Always ask: Will this simplify my life?** If the answer is no, reconsider.

A Guide to Creating a Minimalist Home

Post written by [Leo Babauta](#). Follow me on [Twitter](#).

I can't claim that my home is completely minimalist, but it surely isn't cluttered, and most people I know would call it a pretty minimalist home.

One recent visitor saw my kitchen and remarked, "I've never seen a kitchen that looked so clean, so clear of *stuff*!" Well, I do my best to keep it clean, but the key is to remove the unnecessary stuff.

For example, on the floor of my kitchen/dining room area are just a few essentials: dining table (clear of any clutter), chairs, some counter stools, a high chair, a step stool for the kids. On the counters are only the toaster, coffee maker and microwave.

Is this kind of minimalist home devoid of character and fun and life? Some might think so, but I get a strange satisfaction, a fulfillment, at looking around and seeing a home free of clutter. It's calming, and liberating, and just nice.

Benefits of a Minimalist Home

I could probably go on for awhile about this, but let me just list a few key benefits:

1. **Less stressful.** Clutter is a form of visual distraction, and everything in our vision pulls at our attention at least a little. The less clutter, the less visual stress we have. A minimalist home is calming.
2. **More appealing.** Think about photos of homes that are cluttered, and photos of minimalist homes. The ones with almost nothing in them except some beautiful furniture, some nice artwork, and a very few pretty decorations, are the ones that

appeal to most of us. You can make your home more appealing by making it more minimalist.

3. **Easier to clean.** It's hard to clean a whole bunch of objects, or to sweep or vacuum around a bunch of furniture. The more stuff you have, the more you have to keep clean, and the more complicated it is to clean around the stuff. Think about how easy it is to clean an empty room compared to one with 50 objects in it. That's an extreme example, of course, as I wouldn't recommend you have an empty room, but it's just to illustrate the difference.

What a Minimalist Home Looks Like

This would vary, of course, depending on your taste and how extreme of a minimalist you want to be. I am a minimalist, but not to any extreme. But here are some characteristics of a minimalist home:

- **Minimal furniture.** A minimalist room would only contain a few essential pieces of furniture. A living room, for example, might only have a couch, another chair or love seat, a coffee table, a minimalist entertainment stand (not a huge one with a bunch of shelves), a television, and a couple of lamps. It could even contain less (couch, chairs, and coffee table, for example). A bedroom might have a simple bed (or even just a mattress), a dresser, and perhaps a night stand or book shelf.
- **Clear surfaces.** In a minimalist home, flat surfaces are clear, except for one or two decorations (see next item). There are not a whole bunch of knick knacks, and definitely not stacks of books or papers or other items.
- **Accent decorations.** A home completely clear of things would be a bit boring, actually. So instead of having a coffee table

completely free of any objects, you could have a simple vase with a few flowers, for example. Or a clear desk might just have a family photo. An otherwise empty wall might have a tasteful piece of art (I use my dad's artwork, as he's a great artist).

- **Quality over quantity.** Instead of having a lot of stuff in your home, a minimalist would choose just a few really good things he loves and uses often. A really nice table, for example, is better than 5 pieces of press-board furniture.
- **Examples.** The photo at the top of this post is a nice example of a minimalist home (it's not my home, but I wish it were). [See more photos](#) of that lovely home. [Traditional-style Japanese homes](#) are another great example of minimalism, as is [this nice spread](#).

How to Create a Minimalist Home

There are actually no set steps to making your home minimalist, except to change your philosophy and shoot for the ideals in the previous section above. But here are some tips that I would offer to anyone trying to shoot for minimalism:

1. **One room at a time.** Unless you're just moving into a place, it's hard to simplify an entire house at once. Focus on one room, and let that be your center of calm. Use it to inspire you to simplify the next room, and the next. Then do the same outside!
2. **Start with furniture.** The biggest things in any room are the furniture, so you should always begin simplifying a room by looking at the furniture. The fewer pieces of furniture, the better (within reason, of course). Think of which furniture can be eliminated without sacrificing comfort and livability. Go for a few pieces of plain, simple furniture ([example](#) of a minimalist coffee table) with solid, subdued colors.

3. **Only the essentials.** Whether looking at your furniture or anything else in the room, ask yourself if the item is truly essential. If you can live without it, get it out. Try to strip the room down to its essentials — you can always add a few choice items beyond the essentials later.
4. **Clear floors.** Except for the furniture, your floors should be completely clear. Nothing should clutter the floor, nothing should be stacked, nothing should be stored on the floor. Once you've gotten your furniture down to the bare essentials, clear everything else on the floor — either donate it, trash it, or find a place for it out of sight.
5. **Clear surfaces.** Same thing with all flat surfaces. Don't have anything on them, except one or two simple decorations (See Tip 9 below). Donate, trash or find an out-of-sight storage spot for everything else. It will make everything much, much more minimal-looking.
6. **Clear walls.** Some people hang all kinds of stuff on their walls. No can do in a minimalist home. Clear your walls except for one or two simple pieces of nice artwork (see Tip 8 below).
7. **Store stuff out of sight.** This has been mentioned in the above tips, but you should store everything you need out of sight, in drawers and cabinets. Bookshelves can be used to store books or DVDs or CDs, but shouldn't have much else except a few simple decorations (not whole collections of things).
8. **Declutter.** If you are clearing flat surfaces and the floor, and storing stuff in cabinets and drawers, you'll probably want to declutter your storage areas too. You can do this in a later stage if you want. See [How to Declutter](#) for more.

9. **Simple artwork.** To keep a room from being boring, you can put a simple painting, drawing or photo, framed with a subdued, solid color, on each wall if you want. Leave some walls bare if possible.
10. **Simple decorations.** As mentioned in the above tips, one or two simple decorations can serve as accents for a minimalist room. A vase of flowers or a small potted plant are two classic examples. If the rest of your room has subdued colors, your accents could use a bright color (such as red, or yellow) to draw the eye and give a plain room a splash of energy.
11. **Plain window treatments.** Bare windows, or simple, solid colored curtains, or simple, wooden blinds are good. Too much ornate stuff around the windows is clutter.
12. **Plain patterns.** Solid colors are best for floor coverings (if you have any), furniture, etc. Complex patterns, such as flowers or checkers, are visual clutter.
13. **Subdued colors.** As mentioned in Tip 9 above, you can have a splash of bright color in the room, but most of the room should be more subtle colors – white is classic minimalist, but really any solid colors that don't stress the eyes is good (earth colors come to mind, such as blues, browns, tans, greens).
14. **Edit and eliminate.** When you've simplified a room, you can probably do more. Give it a couple of days, then look at everything with a fresh eye. What can be eliminated? Stored out of sight? What's not essential? You can come back to each room every few months, and sometimes you'll discover things you can simplify even more.
15. **Place for everything.** I've discussed this in other posts, but in a minimalist house, it's important that you find a place for

everything, and remember where those places are. Where does your blender go? Give it a spot, and stick with it. Aim for logical spots that are close to where the thing is used, to make things more efficient, but the key is to designate a spot.

16. **Sit back, relax, and enjoy.** Once you've simplified a room, take a moment to look around and enjoy it. It's so peaceful and satisfying. This is the reward for your hard work. Ahhhh. So nice!

A Guide to Escaping Materialism and Finding Happiness

Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city. – George Burns

Every Thursday is Happiness Day on Zen Habits.



Money can't buy you love. It can't buy you happiness either.

Today's materialistic world often urges us to buy the coolest gadgets, the trendiest clothes, bigger and better things, but **research shows that possessions and purchases don't buy us happiness**. According to an article on CNN:

By and large, money buys happiness only for those who lack the basic needs. Once you pass an income of \$50,000, more money doesn't buy much more happiness, [according to a happiness studies].

So while we are being pushed towards materialism, it's for monetary gain by corporations, not for our own happiness. Unfortunately, it's hard to escape the trap of materialism, and find happiness in other ways than buying stuff online or finding joy in the mall.

But it's possible. Here's a guide to finding a materialism-free life and discovering true happiness.

Escaping Materialism

All around us, there are messages telling us to buy stuff. On the Internet (blogs included), we see continuous advertising trying to

get us to purchase a product or service. It's the main reason for television, and movies are continually made with products placed throughout, so that we aren't always sure what is advertising and what was put in there by the director.

Flip on the radio or open up a newspaper or magazine, and you're bombarded by more advertising. Go to a shopping center/mall, and the urge to buy comes from every direction.

This message to continually buy, buy, buy ... and that it will somehow make us happier ... is drilled into our heads from the days of Happy Meals and cartoons until the day we die. It's inescapable.

Well, almost. You could go and live in a cabin in the woods (and that actually sounds nice), or you could still live in our modern society, but find ways to escape materialism.

Here are some suggestions:

- **Limit television.** Do you really enjoy watching TV for hours? Think about which shows you really, really love, and only watch during that time. When the commercials come on, go do something else. Or use Tivo to watch TV. You can even give up cable TV entirely, if you're brave — I have, and it's one of the best things I've ever done.
- **Eschew the news.** Journalists will never tell you this, but if they're completely honest, they'll confess that the most important part of any news company, from TV or radio news to Internet or print news, is the advertising division. It's the division that pays the paychecks of the rest of the company. The news is important in driving traffic to the advertising. So when you're watching or reading news, you're really being sucked in to advertising. Try this instead: boycott the news for a week. I've

done it for about two years, and it hasn't hurt me a bit. In fact, it's helped me a lot.

- **Limit Internet reading.** I'm not saying you should cancel your cable Internet subscription or anything. I love reading blogs. But find just those that you truly love reading, that give you the most value, and limit your reading to those. And just do it once a day, for 30 minutes or so. If you can do that, you've gone a long way towards tearing yourself away from advertising.
- **Give up magazines for books.** Magazines are also designed with advertising in mind. And they rarely give you much value. Try reading an ad-free book instead. It's a much better use of your time.
- **Don't go to the mall or Walmart.** The only purpose of these places is for you to spend money. If you just want a place to spend your Saturday afternoon, find a place where you don't need to spend money to have fun — a park or a beach, for example. If you need to buy something, go to a single store (not the mall) and go in and get what you need. Don't browse and walk around looking at stuff. You'll get sucked in.
- **Monitor your urges.** When you're online, or watching TV, or at a store, keep track of the number of times you want to buy something. Keep a little notebook or index card, and just put tally marks. Once you become more aware of your urges to buy things, you can start to control them. If you could control them, limiting your consumption of media (see above tips) isn't really necessary — although I would argue that it still gives you a better quality of life.
- **Use a 30-day list.** If you still really want to buy something, put it on a list, and write down the date you added the item to the

list. Now tell yourself you cannot buy that item for 30 days. It might be difficult, but you can do it. When the 30 days have passed, if you still want it, then buy it. But you can't buy anything (besides essentials like groceries) without putting it on the list for 30 days first. Many times, our urges to buy something will pass during this waiting period.

- **Declutter.** I find it pretty amazing to see all the crap I buy over a period of years, when I go through my closets and other possessions and start getting rid of stuff I don't use or want anymore. It's a gratifying process, and at the same time, it makes me realize how useless all our consumer shopping is. I don't need any of the stuff! When you do this, you may be less likely to buy more stuff. Especially if you enjoy the decluttered look of your house as much as I do.
- **Find other forms of entertainment.** There are other things to do besides watch TV or movies or read magazines or newspapers or the Internet. Try playing sports or exercising, or playing board games or creating art or writing or reading a book. Try doing fun things with your kids or visiting relatives and other loved ones. Try volunteering with a charity. I'm sure you could come up with 100 free or cheap things to do.
- **Buy used.** When you get the urge to buy something, and you're convinced that it's needed, try finding it used instead of new. Look in thrift shops or garage sales or flea markets or similar places.

A True Path to Happiness

So, if you're able to escape materialism, how can you find true happiness? There are many ways, and each of us is different, but here are some things I suggest trying:

- **Grateful list.** Make a list of things about which you're grateful in your life. Give thanks for them daily.
- **Think positive.** Try eliminating negative thinking from your life, and thinking positive instead.
- **Small pleasures.** Make a list of small things that give you great pleasure. Sprinkle them throughout your day. Notice other small pleasures as you go through your day.
- **Kindness.** Practice random acts of kindness and compassion. Do it anonymously. Help those in need. Volunteer. Make someone smile.
- **Love.** Make an intimate connection with your loved ones. Develop your friendships. Spend time with them, converse, understand them, make them happy.
- **Health.** Exercise and eat healthy — it sounds trite, but it can bring great happiness to your life.
- **Meaning.** It's often useful to find meaning, either through a church or spiritual way, or through those we love in life or through the things we're passionate about. Give yourself a purpose.
- **Flow.** Eliminate distractions, and really pour yourself into whatever you're doing. If it's writing an article, like this one, really put yourself into it, until you forget the outside world.
- **Know yourself.** Become attuned to what brings you happiness. Study yourself. Learn about what you love, and about your ability to love. Increase your capacity for compassion.

Creating a minimalist workspace — from Zen Habits

We are delighted to have Leo Babauta of [Zen Habits](#) as a guest columnist today. Please give him a warm welcome and check out his awe-inspiring website afterward. We thank Leo for being a part of our month of sharing.

How minimalist is your workspace? An uncluttered workspace is a thing of beauty.

I write a lot about minimalism on [Zen Habits](#), including guides to [creating a minimalist home](#), [minimalist housework](#), and [beating clutter entropy](#).

On Unclutterer, my favorite feature is the [Workspace of the Week](#), with its cool setups.

Today, I thought I'd share my pretty minimalist workspace, and share some thoughts on how to go about creating one of your own.

What's a minimalist workspace?

That question will have different answers for each person. There can be no single definition. The ultimate minimalist workspace, I think, would be to have no desk or papers or computer or anything of the kind — just yourself. You'd think, and talk, and maybe sit on the floor.

Of course, that won't work for most of us, so it's more useful to look at our minimum requirements, and focus on creating a workspace that addresses these essentials and nothing more.

So the first step is for you to consider your requirements for working, and what's essential to your workflow. If possible, streamline and simplify that workflow and those requirements. Then, once you've got that down to a minimum, see what the minimum setup would be for those essentials and your workflow. Eliminate everything unnecessary.

What are your requirements?

It's interesting to note that what you think your requirements are

might not be the minimum. They might just be what you're used to doing.

Taking myself as an example: I used to work with tons of paper, files, sticky notes, and all the usual office tools (pens, pencils, notebooks, pads, stapler, hole puncher, whiteout, calendar, personal organizer, etc.). But then I realized that it's possible to work without paper, and I've eliminated the need for all that stuff. In fact, as I've eliminated paper, I've eliminated the need for drawers.

Now, you might not have that luxury, and I'm not saying you need to go that extreme. Your needs may be different than mine — but the point is to see if it's possible to change the way you work, so that you still get the essentials done, without all the same requirements. It's worth some thought at least — and if you make changes, as I did, you might find that changing things in small increments is better. I didn't do away with paper altogether. I did it in steps, eliminating different needs for paper one at a time.

My Minimalist Setup



Basically, I have an iMac and a table. No need for papers, files, drawers, other tools.

I work from home these days, and I do everything online. I do have a phone (elsewhere in my house, so it doesn't disturb me) and a cell phone (also elsewhere), but I don't have a PDA, an iPod, a printer (though my wife has ordered one for her needs), a scanner, a fax machine, or anything like that. I don't print anything and I don't use fax (an outdated technology).

On my computer, I mostly just use Firefox, as I do nearly everything online. I also use text programs for writing (TextEdit, WriteRoom mostly) and a couple other utilities such as CyberDuck for uploading files, Quicksilver for everything, and GIMP for photo editing.

All my organizing needs are taken care of on the computer: Address Book, Gmail, text files for to-do lists and errands and ideas and projects, Gcal for scheduling.

Tips for Creating Your Own Minimalist Workspace

You won't need to have my setup, but once you've determined your minimum needs, here are some tips for making your workspace as minimalist as possible. Not all tips will work for you, so pick and choose which ones will work best for your workflow.

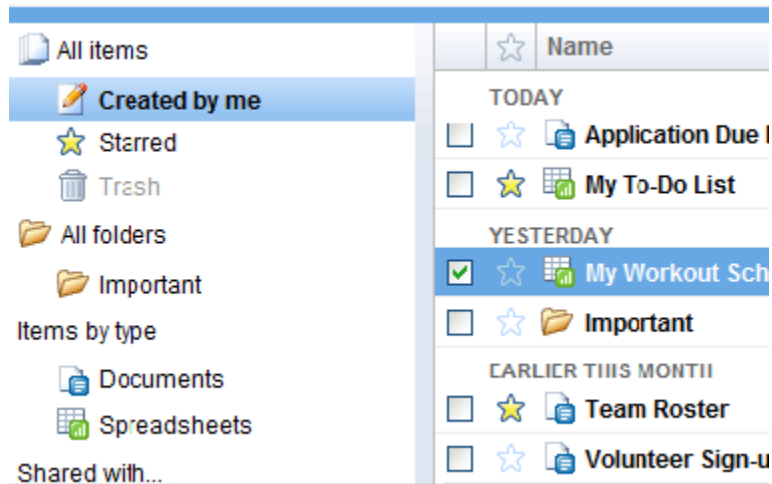
1. **Have one inbox.** If paper is a part of your life, keep an inbox tray on top of your desk and make sure ALL papers, including phone messages and sticky notes, go into this tray. You might have to train your co-workers if they're not already used to this. Don't leave papers scattered all over your desk, unless you're actually working on them at this moment. You might also have a "working file" folder for papers you're working on but not at this moment, but put this working file in a drawer, so that it's out of the way. Clear out your inbox each day — nothing should go back in there after you process them. It's not a storage bin, but an inbox. Read more on [clearing your inbox](#).
2. **Clear your desktop.** Aside from your computer, your inbox tray, your phone, and maybe a nice photo of a loved one, there should be nothing on top of your desk. No papers (again, unless you're working on them), no notes, no stapler or pens or other junk. Clear as much of it off as humanly possible. If you want to include a couple other essentials, you should, but be sure they absolutely must be there. Keep it as clear as possible, as a clear desk is a relaxing workspace.

3. **Get rid of knick-knacks.** This goes with the above item, but many people don't even think about all the little trinkets they have on top of their desk. They're usually unnecessary. Toss 'em!
4. **Clear the walls.** Many people have all kinds of stuff posted on their walls. It creates visual clutter. Get them off your walls. If it's a reference guide, put it on your computer and set up a hotkey so you can call the guide up with a keystroke when needed.
5. **Clear your computer desktop.** Many people also have tons of icons on their computer desktop. It's the same principle as a real desktop — clear it of everything unnecessary, so you can have a nice simple workspace. Keeping icons on your desktop is usually inefficient. It's hard to find them among a jumble of files. If they're necessary to open many times a day, file them away and use a hotkey to call them up. Quicksilver for Mac or Autohotkey for Windows are my favorite programs for this.
6. **Re-examine your paper needs.** I started doing this a little over a year ago, and one by one, I realized I could eliminate my different needs for paper. **I stopped printing stuff out to read (duh!)** and just kept it on the computer. Yeah, that's obvious. I also stopped keeping paper copies of files I had on the computer, as they just took up more space. Also fairly obvious, perhaps. I also asked people to stop faxing me stuff, and to email it instead. That should be obvious, but I think a lot of people ignore this step. I also asked people to stop sending me paper memos, and use email instead. Stop circulating documents by paper. I stopped bills and notices coming in by paper that I could get online. I stopped catalogs and newsletters coming in by mail. I still get some mail, but for the most part I toss it. You might not be able to eliminate paper, but you can probably reduce it.
7. **Eliminate unnecessary tools.** Think about each tool you have in your desk, in your work area, and even in your office. Do you need a stapler and hole puncher? Do you need all those pens? Do you really need a fax machine? Or a scanner? You might not have control over all these types of tools, but if you do, eliminate the ones you don't really need, maybe one at a time.
8. **Simplify your filing.** As mentioned above, it's unnecessary to keep paper copies of files you have on your computer or can access online. Back stuff up online if you're worried about losing them. Having stuff digitally makes them searchable, which is much better

than filing. Just archive, and search when necessary. If you do need paper files, keep them alphabetically and file immediately, so that you don't have a huge "to be filed" pile. Once every few months, weed out unnecessary files.

9. **Go through each drawer.** One drawer at a time, take out all the contents and eliminate everything you don't need. It's much nicer to use drawers if you can open them and see order. Have a designated spot for each item and make sure to put those items back in that spot immediately, every time.
10. **Use a minimalist desk.** As mentioned above, I just use a table, as I don't need drawers. While you might not want to go to that extreme, you can find desks without too many drawers or contraptions or designs. Simple as possible is best.
11. **Clear the floor.** There should be nothing on your floor but your desk and chair. No files, no boxes. Keep it clear!

Cyber Minimalist: How to Work (Almost) Completely Online



A couple of days ago, I did [a little post](#) that mentioned how I don't use my hard drive to store my files, and that all my files are online. Well, that drew so much interest that I've decided to provide more detailed information on the topic.

In the past year, I've decided to simplify my computing life and my work needs by trying to work, as much as possible, with online apps and online storage.

I was tired of emailing myself files between home and work computers, or uploading files to web storage and syncing them between computers, or loading them onto flash drives. I'd forget where a file was, I'd spend a lot of time transferring files and organizing things, my two computers were never completely in sync, and it was just too complicated for a minimalist like myself.

Enter online apps, and my newfound simplicity.

Now, my computing life is much simpler than ever before. I use online apps as much as possible — admittedly, my needs are much simpler than most people's needs, but that's intentionally so, as I've learned that most of the stuff I did was not essential. I've slowly

reduced my needs, so that online apps can take care of the majority of what I do.

When Online Computing Would Work For You

I must stress that this online solution I've been using is not for everyone. It may not meet your needs. If not, move on — I'm not saying everybody should follow what I'm doing.

But there might be some who would benefit from online solution. Here are some reasons you'd store your files online and use online apps:

- **You use multiple computers.** If you carry a laptop everywhere, then you don't have the problem of transferring or syncing files. But if you have more than one computer, you might consider my solution.
- **Your needs are simple.** If you use desktop software that cannot be replaced by online apps, my solution is probably not for you. You might still consider online storage. If you're a writer, however, or you deal mostly with word processing apps, spreadsheets, and other common apps, you might be able to get away with what I do.
- **You do a lot of online work.** If you're a blogger, like I am, or some other type of web worker, and you meet the criteria above, online solutions would be perfect for you.

My Online Solution – How I Work

Let me stress, again, that this is my solution. Your needs will be different. You will want to alter your solution to fit your needs. But I offer the following as an example of how you could work online with a minimalist approach to computing:

1. **Word processing and spreadsheets.** It wasn't long ago when I did a little analysis of my work and realized that the

majority of it was done with word processors such as MS Word and AbiWord, and spreadsheets such as Excel or Calc. I decided to try using Google Docs for these needs, and though it was a little off-putting at first, I've since learned to embrace the minimalism of Google Docs and Spreadsheets. They don't have half the features of their Microsoft counterparts, but you know what? I don't need those missing features. Formatting not as pretty? I've become all about the info, not the formatting. Printing not as pretty? I rarely print now. And sharing docs with others is so much easier now.

2. **Blogging.** Of course, almost every blogger uses an online app for publishing his blog. I use WordPress, and it's simple to use and powerful enough for my needs. I save a post, add a photo, and those things don't need to be saved on my hard drive.
3. **Photos.** I've embraced Google's Picasa, and uploaded all my photos onto my free Picasa account. Yes, I'm a Google freak, and others have problems trusting a company like Google, but I don't.
4. **Email.** This is one of my most heavily used apps. While in my last job we were required to use Outlook, I've since been freed to use Gmail, and I'll never go back. Boy is it so much nicer. And as I tend to clean out my Gmail every now and then, I doubt if I'll ever come close to the storage limit. The nice thing is that as soon as I email a file to someone, I can delete it from my hard drive, as it's now stored in Gmail.
5. **Archive and search.** This is one of the most beautiful reasons to use online apps: the simplicity of organization. While I used to have a structure of directories and subdirectories for the files on my hard drive (as nearly everyone does, I think), now I don't

worry about folders or even tagging. I archive, and then search when I need a file. That's it. It works just as well in Gmail as Google Docs as Picasa as WordPress. No need for filing. It took me awhile to get used to this method, but now I love it. Need to find a document I saved a few months ago? No need to root through folders to find it. Just search. It's beautiful.

6. **Desktop apps.** I do use desktop apps, for some work. For example, AbiWord or DarkRoom for minimal word processing, Photoshop or Gimp for photo editing, AutoHotKey for keyboard shortcuts, some graphics programs, and some specialty apps for my day job. However, I usually use them for a single task, save the file, upload it or email it immediately, and then delete the file from my hard drive.
7. **No hard drive organization.** Again, as soon as I save a file my hard drive, I transfer it online (to Google Docs, Gmail, Picasa, WordPress, etc.) and then delete it from the hard drive. This means that I no longer need to organize files on my hard drive. I still have my old files — I've been afraid to delete them, although I will probably do so within a couple of months. But no new files are kept on my hard drive.
8. **Firefox.** Of course, the desktop app I use the most is my browser. And for my money, that's Firefox. (Opera, Safari, Camino and other browser fans will disagree, and that's OK — this isn't a debate about the best browser.) Since I do almost all of my work online, Firefox is just about always open, and one thing I love is the shortcuts that give me fast computing all day long. I have keyword bookmarks for every app and site I use often, so opening up a site or app is as simple as typing a couple of letters and pressing enter. Same thing for my common

searches on Wikipedia, Flickr, Amazon, IMDB, and much more — they all have very fast keywords, so searches are easy. And Firefox's extensions have helped me tremendously, including Greasemonkey, Google Toolbar, and more.

9. **Offline work.** There are times when I shut down Firefox and open a desktop app such as DarkRoom or AbiWord, just so I can work without the temptation of being connected. I find it peaceful to disconnect, and not have to worry about distractions. But when I'm done with that task, such as writing an article, I'll save it into Google Docs and delete the original.
10. **Calendar and to-dos.** I use (surprise) GCal for my online calendar needs, and my to-dos have found a number of good online tools. (I've migrated between Backpack, Tracks, Vitalist, and others, depending on my mood. Right now, I'm using my Moleskine pocket notebook.) There are other online apps I use, most notable among them Google Reader.

Update: Frequently Asked Questions

There were a bunch of excellent questions in the comments that I thought I should address in the article itself, as many readers don't read all the comments, and I didn't want to have to deal with the same questions over and over.

1. **What about backups?** I don't actually do backups for the most part. All the companies I use to store my information online backup the information themselves. However, even if there were a problem, I wouldn't miss any of the information, really, except my blog. And I do backup my blog. However, if you wanted to backup your information, it wouldn't be hard to do it yourself — you could use your hard drive or web storage in a different

location, and just save new or modified files every day or once a week.

2. **What about privacy?** This is a real issue for some people, and I won't deny it. However, I don't really think Google employees (or whatever company I'm using) have time to read through everyone's files, and even if they read mine, I don't have anything secret in my documents. If that's an issue for you, for whatever reason, online work would be more difficult. You could encrypt files — maybe only those that you really want to protect.
3. **Capture and calendaring when I'm not at my computer.** I use my Moleskine pocket notebook. I don't keep that many appointments — again, it's the minimalist in me. I might have one per day, and often less. I don't like to keep a full schedule, and I avoid meetings like the plague. I've developed a sort of judo technique to meetings. I do take meetings, but rarely. Anyway, you could use your cell phone or other mobile device to do calendaring on the go if you like.
4. **Being hostage to your Internet Provider.** This can also be a very real issue for some people. It hasn't seemed to be an issue for me. However, things are looking better on this front. With Google Gears, many web apps are soon going to have an off-line mode, so even if you get disconnected, you can continue to do your work. Zoho Office apps just got that capability, I believe.
5. **What's the objection to using the space on your hard drive?** None really, except for what I said near the beginning of the article: I use multiple computers, and I need to access the information from anywhere. Using online apps allows me to do that. Also, having my info online makes organization much easier (see discussion above about archive and search). There's no need

for a central organizational structure anymore, whether you're using Google or Mac OSX.

6. **But what if not everything I do can be done online?** It's true that many apps are not offered online, and also that most online apps do not have all the features of desktop apps. First, this is why I simplified my needs — I've learned that I don't need all the features of desktop apps. Sure, MS Word has 27 million more features than Google Docs, and so does Excel, but I don't use them, and for me, they just add to bloat and slowness. For others who need them, the online solution wouldn't be ideal. Second, I do use desktop apps for certain things, like photo editing, as I mentioned above. But then I upload the file online, delete the copy on my hard drive, and don't worry about it after that. Again, this might not work for everyone, but it works for me.

Final note: I should have had this in the original article, but here's the key issue: if working online would be more complicated for you, don't do it. For me, it has meant a simplification and minimalization of my computing life, and I really enjoy that minimalism. Others have more complicated needs, or have issues with privacy, backups, security or the quality of their connections. Those people shouldn't use an online solution, as I do, because it would be *more* complicated for them. And that's the final test — what is simpler and makes more sense for your situation?

Haiku Productivity: The Fine Art of Limiting Yourself to the Essential

Every Monday is Productivity & Organization Day at Zen Habits.

I've been wanting to write this post for a little while now, about an experiment I've been doing. For a few months, I've been purposely binding myself.

Not as a way to hamstring myself, but as **a way to make me focus on fewer, but more important things**. As a way to allow myself to do more in less time.

I'm sure you've heard of the Pareto principle, known also as the 80/20 rule. While I don't think that the percentages of that rule are exact, the principle is true: you should focus on the few things that get you the most benefit.

But while that's nice in principle, in practice it's hardly ever done. Why? Because we have too much thrown at us at once, and we're too busy juggling everything coming at us to take a minute and evaluate what's essential, what gets the most benefit for the least amount of effort, and what we should really focus on.

There's no systematic way to focus on the essential stuff, and eliminate the rest.

Until now. I've developed a system I call **Haiku Productivity**, based on some good ideas by others (and I won't be able to name them all, but know that I am indebted). The key to Haiku Productivity is to limit yourself to an arbitrary but small number of things, forcing yourself to focus on the important stuff and eliminate all else.

Haiku: Limited but powerful

To understand this simple concept, think about the form of the haiku (the common version, at least): it's poetry in 17 syllables, with

3 lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables (I know there are variations and this is only a rough definition, but that's not important to this article). The point is that the form of the haiku is extremely limited, to a small number of lines and syllables.

What this does is forces the poet to focus on only those words that mean the most to the poem. While other forms of poetry can go on for pages, haiku are short and compact. As a result, haiku can be some of the most powerful poems in any language.

With such a limited form, you cannot just use any amount of words you want to express a concept. You have to focus on one small but essential concept, and as a result you accomplish a lot with a few syllables. That's what Haiku Productivity is.

Limited but Productive

So how does this apply to productivity? Well, if you think this will allow you to accomplish twice as many tasks, you're wrong. You'll accomplish fewer tasks. But you will most likely be more effective, because you will have to choose only the essential tasks — the ones that will give you the most benefit for your limited time.

What are the other benefits of Haiku Productivity, besides increased effectiveness? Besides forcing you to focus on essential tasks that have a large Return on Investment (ROI), it forces you to eliminate the non-essential tasks. No other system forces you to do that. It forces you to make the best use of your time. It forces you to limit the time you spend on things, which means you have more time for other things that are important to you, and you are able to focus on what you want to focus on, instead of everything coming at you.

It simplifies your life and makes you less stressed out.

Haiku Productivity: Place Limits on Everything

For those who enjoyed Zen To Done (ZTD), this is an extension of those concepts.

The rule of Haiku Productivity is: **put limits on everything you do.**

That's it. One rule. What are the things you do? It's different for everyone, but common ones might be: email, RSS feeds, goals, time wasters, tasks.

What limits should you set? It's different for everyone. And it's arbitrary (there are no logical limits for anything — it's necessarily arbitrary) but based on your own experience and experimentation.

Here are the limits I've set for myself that seem to work — but remember that they will be different for you. And also note that while there's a nice order to these, that's mostly coincidence (I put them in a nice order), and there is no need to keep an order like this.

1 Goal: The number of goals I'm allowed to have at any one time. I can only really focus on one goal at a time ... any more than that and I lose focus and energy.

2 times to process email: If I only allow myself to check email twice a day, I cannot let email control my life. It makes me much more efficient. When I process email, I process to empty. Now, there are other times during the day when I have to send email, such as emailing a post to one of my editors. At that time, I might respond quickly to one or two emails, but I don't process my email during that time.

3 MITs: I choose three Most Important Tasks for each day, and focus completely on these. Any more than that and I might not get them all done.

4 batch tasks: Aside from MITs, I also give myself 4 smaller tasks that I try to batch all at once. This usually takes me 30-60 minutes at the end of the day.

5 sentence emails: I got this idea from Mike Davidson, whose article came at a perfect time as I was limiting other things in my life, and was also trying to keep my emails short at that time. His 5-sentence rule (no email can be longer than 5 sentences) fit in perfectly with everything else I tried to do, and I've adopted it. It forces you to write only what's essential. I broke the rule at first, but

I've been pretty good lately. This rule also limits the amount of time you spend replying to email, and makes processing a breeze.

6 RSS posts: I've been adjusting this as I've experimented, but I've settled on reading 6 posts per day. The method: I open my Google Reader in list view, scan through the headlines, and choose just 6 to read, opening them in new tabs. I then "Mark All as Read" and go and read my 6 posts in further detail. It has made RSS reading super fast.

7 minutes of wasted time: This is just for fun, but when I've done a task, I reward myself with 7 minutes of being able to do anything I want. That means I can read a humor site, or go and read comments on this blog, or look through Delicious or Digg or a forum, or whatever I want. For only 7 minutes. Then I get back to work. This allows me to have a little fun sprinkled throughout my day, but limits it. I set a timer. Totally works.

10 RSS feeds: While I've talked about reducing my RSS feeds before, I got the idea of only having 10 feeds from a friend, Ann, who bested my 16 feeds (at the time) with only 10 of her own. I thought that was a great idea, and now I only allow myself to subscribe to 10 feeds. That means I have to choose the 10 that give me the absolute best info for the time I spend reading them.

100 things: Actually, I haven't done this, but it was one of the inspirations for this post, so I had to list it. It's also something I'd like to try out in the near future. I don't think it'll be that difficult for me, as I doubt I have much more than 100 things. But anyway, the gist is that blogger Dave Bruno decided to do a 100 thing challenge, where he keeps only 100 personal items (not counting books, and not counting non-personal items such as dishes, cleaning supplies, etc.). Read the entire series. 100 things is, of course, an arbitrary limit, but again, that's the idea: set a goal and try to limit yourself to it.

Again, your limits and the things you limit will vary depending on your situation. I am in no way suggesting that you adopt these

limits. But by restricting yourself to a small number of things, you force yourself to focus only on the essential.

It'll make a world of difference. Give it a try, and let me know what you think.

27 Great Tips to Keep Your Life Organized

Every Monday is Productivity & Organization Day at Zen Habits.

It's a rare person among us who doesn't feel the need to get more organized. I consider myself fairly organized, for example, but there are times when I get a little lax about my organizational rules, and there's always room for improvement.

And if you're already organized (read: you're an organizational freak), chances are, you like to read about others' organizational systems.

As such, there should be something for everyone on this list.

A couple of weeks ago, I asked all of you for your best organizational tips and tools. And you responded in force, with some great stuff. What follows are some of the best of the tips (tools will be in another post), edited for brevity and consistency.

I must emphasize: these are not my tips, but yours, and when you see the word "I" it refers to the reader writing the tip, not me. Names have been removed to protect the innocent.

1. **3 Most Important Tasks.** Writing down and making mental note of my top 3 tasks to get done for the day. Everything else seems to fall into place if I do that.
2. **An easy and workable task list, or to do list.** While I love all of these handy web 2.0 apps, computer software, very neat gadgets like palms and really cool cell phones, they just don't work for me. I'm a lazy woman, with an even lazier attitude. I might put a task in Remember the Milk, another task in my palm, one in my Gcal and send another text to my phone. With all of these different ways of doing things, I end up spending

much more time trying to organize my to do list, or consolidate it, that I don't get much actually done.

3. **Keep ubiquitous capture device.** It might not be the same device for every location (I have a moleskine for work, but use my mobile for inspiration on the fly) but just being able to write stuff down when you think about it is key for me.
4. **Choose one tool and stick with it.**
5. **Do one thing at a time.**
6. **Do it now.**
7. **Make use of the word no.**
8. **Use the recycling bin/trash basket.** Organizing unnecessary items is wasted energy. It is amazing how much more in control I feel just by ridding myself of now outdated articles I'd like to read "someday," or countless meeting notes from which relevant action items have already been extracted.
9. **A (good) place for everything, and everything in its place.** By finding places that are easy to get to for all the things I use most often, and places that are pretty easy to get to for the things I use less often, I spend less time dreading doing things and more time actually doing things. And the place for things you never use is elsewhere (trash can, place that accepts donations, etc.).
10. **Simplify, simplify, simplify!**
11. **Put it away now.** The single, simplest thing I do to stay personally organized is to put whatever tool, item, clothing, bag, hairbrush etc., away immediately after using it. I always know where everything and anything is so I never waste time looking for something. Very efficient. I could tell a stranger where to find anything in my home.
12. **Keep a to-do list that syncs with your mobile phone**(so you can add stuff as and when you remember it). And make sure every item has a due date.
13. **Change.** It obsoletes unimportant things. It brings down any method or idea that isn't timeless. It brings up newer and more important things that you and others can't resist anymore.

Best of all: it's an organizing tool that operates itself. You simply have to embrace it.

14. **Divide material into red, yellow, blue and green plastic file folders.** For example, anything that has to be done today (paperwork to be given to a client, bills to be mailed) go in the red folder. Contact material or anything related to customer field support goes in the yellow folder. Your mileage may vary as to how you organize your briefcase, and like me you may also have project-specific manilla file folders as well, but dividing stuff up into just four color coded folders is a huge help.
15. **Flylady.net.** She helped me realize that I needed to apply GTD principles to my home life and not just work. I had work under control using checklists, projects and next actions. I tried the same system at home and failed. Then about a month ago I discovered flylady.net courtesy I believe one of your blog posts. Wow, what a difference. My house is clean and so is my desk at work. Many if not most of her basic ideas are just like GTD in a slightly different perspective (control journal, baby steps) and also concrete methods for accomplishing next actions (2 minute hot spots, 15 minute timers). Her most useful tip was to put my daily/weekly lists into shiny page protectors in my control journal. I use a dry erase marker and voila no more killing trees or not doing my list because I can't print it (or want to avoid the hassle). The best thing about this, I am more relaxed, my blood pressure is finally dropping and I feel less stressed.
16. **Unapologetically take control of your time and priorities.**
17. **Sort at the source.** My favorite organizational tool is my post office box. I visit it once a week (usually Saturday), stand at the counter in the lobby and sort my mail. I use the P.O.'s trash bin. What comes into my house is only what I need to have. Bills and letters and checks go into my inbox (which by the way is a box with a lid that is wrapped in lovely fabric and has a yellow bow on it so it looks like a present sitting on my desk). Reading material goes on the table by my chaise lounge which is where I do all my reading.

18. **A sheet of paper, a calendar and a white board.** I've found that the easiest way to organize myself, my days and so forth is a good paper calendar, a sheet of paper that I divide into four sections and a medium sized white board. For my paper the top left section is my actual running to do list for today. The top right section is my running grocery list, or list of things I must purchase. The bottom left is for notes such as calls I made, who I spoke to, appointment dates. The bottom right is whatever I need to move to another day. If I'm told to call back on Monday, then I note that on the calendar. As for the white board, the kids can make notes (Can I spend the night at Brian's on Friday? Grandma called), and I can jot down things as I think of them to be added to tomorrow's to do list. My calendar, and the white board are in the same location, so I can transfer short notes if need be. I carry my paper task list with me everywhere, so I can make notes at any given moment.
19. **Color coding.** I'm a visual person, and I find that color-coding my various lists and calendars minimizes the time I have to spend looking at them. This worked especially well when I was in school: I dumped every class syllabus into Outlook, and then color-coded every class period (blue for paper due, yellow for quiz, red for test, etc). It took awhile to set up, sure, but then for the rest of the semester I only had to glance at Outlook to get a very clear idea of what kind of week I was going to have.
20. **One binder.** I use a binder cleverly labeled "@ 2007" with the following divisions:
- @ Today – With my Emergent Task Planner from davidseah.com;
 - @ Week – The remaining days of the week ETP's as a skeleton;
 - @ Year – All my historical sheets;
 - @ Diet – Which tracks what I have eaten for the day;

- @ Fitness – Which tracks my workout routine for the day. My binder is with me all the time and it has helped me become a better employee, family member and relationship guy.
21. **Write down, execute and tidy up on the way.** These are my organization bible. I've been living that way since more than two years and I can say that I'm an organized person.
 22. **A little whiteboard on my bedroom wall.** I have it separated into two sections, a "todo" and a "today". "Todo" is a list of general things I have to do, like get my car inspected, buy someone a present, etc. Then "today" is what I need to do, obviously, today! Things can be moved back and forth as appropriate. I find having a specific list for today helps push me to get the important things done in a timely manner. I also keep two things permanently on the "today" part, which are meditation and exercise. This seems to help.
 23. **Note cards.** One can write tasks on them — one per card, or in a list (depending on the type of task in question; I do both). When doing one per card, the stack serves as an easy prioritization scheme. But wait, there's more: They can be arranged on cork boards, shared, annotated, torn up and rearranged. They can be used as placeholders, as mini-white boards and as tokens to model ideas. They are easy to carry around, and to attach to other documents. Further, different colors allow for a visual representation of different kinds of todo's (as can different annotations). Finally, they are cheap and most importantly of all: easy (much easier than software) to reconfigure as needs and projects change.
 24. **Never rely on a single point of failure.** I've seen people pay \$1,000 to hear speakers at a conference and only have one pen to take notes. It's a great feeling when one thing breaks, gets lost, or runs out of power, and you have another one in reserve!
 25. **Have.. less.. stuff.**

26. **Delegate.** Learn to trust people with critical tasks in all areas of your life. When you learn to effectively delegate tasks you actually find that it is easier to keep the stuff you cannot delegate better organized.
27. **You control your life.** Whatever electronics or paper you use, make them work for YOU not the other way around. Does Outlook really have to stay checking your email every 5 minutes? Maybe, but I bet you'll get a whole lot more done if you check it a few times per day. That goes for the Blackberry too! After all, there are so many tools, and one to fit everyone – so use what works, but make it work for you!

20 Great Tools to Keep Your Life Organized

Every Monday is Productivity & Organization Day at Zen Habits.

It's the ultimate quest of anyone trying to become more organized or productive: the ultimate organizing tool.

And while that perfect tool may be different for each person, depending on your needs, the following list should have something perfect for just about anyone.

Last week I shared some of the best organizing tips from you, the readers, and it was a hit. So this week, I'd like to share some of the best reader-submitted organizing tools. *Note: This time, I rewrote the entries, so any references to the word "I" are referring to me, not to the reader who submitted them.*

Let me please say that you should not try to adopt too many of these tools, and you certainly shouldn't waste too much time trying them all out. Pick one or two that appeal to you, and go with them. If they don't work, you can always choose another, but it's important that you focus on the doing, not the tools.

1. **Google Calendar**. Along with Gmail and Google Reader, Gcal is my favorite Google application — allows you to keep your life organized easily, intuitively, with no hassle or slow interface.
2. **A notepad and a pen**. Classic, and perfect. The Moleskine is a popular pocket notebook (I use it, because of its aesthetic appeal), but any cheap notebook works.

How to Build Muscle and Lose Fat

This is a guest post by Mehdi, author of StrongLifts.com.

After my previous post 7 Ways to Build the Exercise Habit, Leo asked me to write an 8-week program to build muscle and lose fat.

However, I believe that to have long-term success, the plan must become your lifestyle. It must become a habit.

Therefore this article is not an 8-week program. It's a list of simple ways to build muscle and lose fat. Tips that worked for me and my readers. And guess what: you will be able to build muscle and lose fat in 8 weeks using these tips.

Build Muscle. The fastest way to build muscle is to get stronger. The stronger you are, the stronger you'll look. Get into strength training. Do barbell exercises that hit several muscles at the same time: Squats, Deadlifts, Overhead Press, etc.

Start with an empty barbell. Learn the exercise technique. Increase the weight gradually. If you don't know where to start, check out the Beginner Strength Training Program: it takes 3 times 30 minutes a week.

Nutrition. You need solid nutrition to get stronger and build muscle. Keep the nutrition healthy and you'll lose fat. Some tips:

- **Protein.** 1g/lbs daily. Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, etc.
- **Fat.** Balance omega 3, 6 & 9 intake: fish oil, saturated fat & olive oil.
- **Veggies.** All kinds, especially green fibrous veggies.
- **Fruit.** Also all kinds. Eat veggies and/or fruits with every meal.
- **Water.** 1 liter per 1000 calories you expend.
- **Whole grain food.** Oats, rice, pasta, breads, ...

Eat foods that come in their natural state. Avoid anything that comes out of a box. Avoid trans-fats. Limit junk food consumption

to once a week. Quit drinking soda. These simple tips will make a big difference in a very short time.

Lose Fat. Strength training will build muscle while decreasing your body fat. Eating healthy will further decrease your body fat. If you need to lose a lot of fat or if you're impatient, these tips are for you:

- **Cardio.** Do 30 minutes of cardio after your strength training. Three times a week at moderate intensity will do. The goal of cardio is to burn fat, not to exhaust yourself. You should breathe heavier than when at rest, but not gasping.
- **Cut calories.** Track your food intake using Fitday. Start eating 18x your current body-weight in lbs. One week later: cut 500kcal. Check the balance one week later again. Did you lose weight? If you did, keep eating the same amount of calories. If not: cut another 500kcal.

Whatever you do: don't starve yourself. Fat is emergency storage for your body. If you don't eat your body will hold the fat and burn muscles. That's the opposite of what you're after. Only cut calories if you don't progress.

Women. Building muscle, losing fat and strength training for women is same as for men. The only difference is women have other hormonal profiles than men. Meaning women will always have less muscle mass and more body fat than men.

But the approach is the same. Follow these tips and you'll get results. You won't get bulky if you don't overeat and stay away from steroids.

Vegan & Vegetarian. Leo is a vegan, and other readers of Zen Habits are also vegans or vegetarians. You'll find plenty of examples of vegans and vegetarians who built muscle. It can be done. But you might have less results than meat-eaters.

Red meat contains saturated fat and cholesterol which raises your testosterone levels. Testosterone is needed for muscle. Ask your doctor for a blood-test. Eat red meat for 2 months. Do another blood-test. Compare testosterone levels.

Eat lots of dairy products: milk, eggs and cheese if you're vegetarian. Don't let the fact that you're vegan or vegetarian serve as excuse. You can build muscle.

Motivation. The best way to keep yourself motivated is to set goals & track your progress. The classic scale is not your best tool. Here are better ways.

- **Fat measurements.** Measure your body fat weekly using a fat caliper.
- **Pictures.** Take pictures every 4 weeks.
- **Blood test.** Check health improvements.
- **Strength stats.** Keep a training journal. More strength is more muscles.
- **Weigh scale.** Only use it once a week. Each Friday for example.

I advise you to keep an online journal. Put it on [Zen Habits Forums](#) or on [StrongLifts.com Forum](#). You'll get feedback & you won't feel alone anymore in what you're trying to achieve.

Expectations. Don't believe the hype in the magazines. You won't get ripped in 8 weeks. However you can build muscle and lose fat in 8 weeks.

As I wrote in the leading: 8 weeks is a start. It learns you that you can transform your body if you want to. One of my readers lost [40lbs fat & built 20lbs muscle in 10 months](#) at age 55. You can do it. If you want to. Persist and you'll get there.

- **Challenge:** Just like with the fatty foods, try another 30-day challenge with the sweets. See if you can go the whole month without sweets! Or try a more gradual approach, and have less each day.
- **Cheat day:** If you try a month without sweets, I suggest a cheat day. For me, it's Saturday, when I can eat whatever desserts I want. Interestingly, I don't eat as many desserts on my cheat days as I used to. It's not like I pig out, although I don't restrict myself either.
- **Alternatives:** Come up with a list of alternatives to sweets, stock up on them, and get rid of the sweets in your house. For example, if you usually have a candy bar for a snack, have fruits or veggies instead. Often we just want something to munch on.
- **Drinks:** If you drink sodas or juices, cut out those calories by drinking water, exclusively (except perhaps for a single cup of coffee in the morning).
- **Whole grains:** If you haven't yet, look for whole grain alternatives to things you might be eating, including cereal, bread, brown rice, etc.

Handbook for Life: 52 Tips for Happiness and Productivity

Post written by [Leo Babauta](#). Follow me on [twitter](#) .

This is something I've been wanting to write for some time — a Handbook for Life. Now, is there any handbook that can be a guide to every single person? Of course not. This is just a list of tips that I think will help many people in life — some of them common-sense tips that we often forget about. Consider this guide a reminder.

It'll also become apparent from the links in this handbook that I've written about this stuff before. In essence, this site is a bigger version of this handbook. But I wanted to put them all in one place, as a handy little guide. I hope you find it useful.

How to use this handbook

This handbook is not meant to be a step-by-step guide, nor should you adopt all the tips below. Certainly not all at once. That would be overwhelming. Here are a couple tips for adopting the tips:

- **Pick and choose** the tips that will be most useful to you. There are 52 tips here — not every single one will be useful to every person. I hope you'll find 10 that are useful, or that are reminders of something you've been wanting to do.
- **Don't do them all at once.** Choose one tip to do first, and then do them one at a time. Focus on one first, and then the next. It's too hard to try to adopt a bunch of changes at once.
- **Experiment.** Try out a tip, and if it doesn't work, try another. Life is an experiment, after all.
- **None are guaranteed.** But many are very likely to bring happiness.

- **Also, these are not in any order.** Some of the most important are buried below.

52 Tips for Happiness and Productivity

1. **Try rising early.** It's not for everyone, I'll admit. It may not be for you. But I've found it to be an amazing change in my life. It has made the start of my days much more positive, and I now have time for writing, exercise, and silent contemplation. I talked about this recently in my post [10 Benefits of Rising Early, and How to Do It.](#)
2. **Do less.** This is both a happiness and productivity tip. Doing less will make you happier, because your life won't be so hectic and filled with stress. You will have time for things that give you pleasure, for the loved ones in your life, for life itself. It's also a productivity tip: if you focus on the essential tasks, the big ones, the ones that will give you the most return for your time, and eliminate the rest, you will actually be more productive. You'll get fewer tasks done, but you will be more effective. See [How to Pare Your To-do List Down to the Essentials.](#)
3. **Slow down.** Many new readers to this site have read my productivity articles and think that I'm all about being hyper-productive. I'm not. Long-time readers know that I am about a simpler way of life. Unfortunately, in my free-lance blogging, other websites usually ask me to write about productivity, so the preponderance of my productivity writing has given the impression, I think, that I think people should be churning out work at an amazing rate, to the exclusion of all else. Actually, I feel that **life is much more enjoyable if you slow down**. By doing less, you can actually get more done, even if you work more

slowly. And when you're not working, you should definitely try switching to slow mode. Drive slower (it is so much more relaxing), walk slower, eat slower. See [Slow Down to Enjoy Life](#) for more.

4. **Practice patience.** I've talked about how I'm trying to develop patience in my parenting article, [How to Become a Patient Parent](#), but these tips really apply to everyone. If you easily lose your temper, you can become more patient with these tips. Once you've developed this skill (and it's a skill, like everything else, not an unchangeable inborn trait), your life will become much saner and you will be much happier.
5. **Practice compassion.** This may be the most important tip of all, in my opinion. If you were to choose any of these, I would choose this one. The first part of compassion is empathy — and this ability to understand how others feel can be developed through practice. Start by imagining the suffering of a loved one. Understand their pain, the emotions they go through, and why they would react the way they would. By doing this exercise a number of times, you are developing a skill that can be applied to others — for every person you see, try to understand what they are going through. Try to learn and understand more about their background, and why they react the way they do. Once you've developed this invaluable skill, learn the other half of compassion — acting on your understanding, and helping others, alleviating their suffering, acting with kindness. This one thing can bring true happiness to your life, and the lives of those around you.
6. **Find your passion.** Another indispensable tip. This might be the second on my list of priorities. Find something you love to

do, and your life will become immensely improved. You will love your work, the thing that you spend 40 hours (or more) a week doing. You will become more productive, procrastinate less, be less stressed. You will produce something you are proud of, and happy about. Read [this article for some practical tips](#).

7. **Lose weight.** This only applies, of course, if you are overweight. But losing your extra fat (and when I say lose weight, I mean lose fat), decreases your health risks (obviously), makes you look better, and in general is very likely to increase your happiness about yourself. I actually recommend that you learn to be comfortable and happy with how you look now, and not feel negative about yourself even if you are overweight. However, I've found that losing weight (at least for me) is a great way to feel better about your body. Do not make this an unhealthy obsession, however — lose weight gradually, and enjoy the process. See the next two tips for the best methods for doing this.
8. **Exercise.** Make this a daily habit. Exercise not only helps you lose weight, but for me, it's made me feel so much better. I actually enjoy exercise now. It's a time of contemplation for me, and I feel so much better about myself afterwards. See [Top 42 Exercise Hacks](#) and [How to Make Exercise a Daily Habit](#) and [7 Ways to Build the Exercise Habit](#).
9. **Eat healthy.** I don't recommend dieting. It's too restrictive and you usually fall off it at some point. I do recommend changes to your diet, however — ones you make gradually, and that can be sustained for life. It not only helps lose weight, but really, once you start eating healthier, it is actually much more enjoyable. See my [Top 15 Diet Hacks for more](#).

10. **Meditate.** OK, you might be like me — not into New-Age stuff. But meditation can actually be a very simple method for relaxing, for bringing calm, for returning yourself to sanity, for contemplation. My friend Scott Young wrote a good post about doing that here.
11. **Get organized.** This one's not necessary. You could go through life wonderfully messy, searching for stuff, enjoying the search. But I've tried disorganized, and I've tried organized. The second is much more enjoyable to me. Read How to Never Lose Anything Again for a start on the subject, as well as how I keep my family organized.
12. **Think positive.** Another one of the most important tips on this list, thinking positive — as cliché as it might sound — is one of the single best changes you can make in your life that will lead to so many more positive tips. As I wrote about here, learning to think positive was the skill that turned my life around. It makes everything else on this list possible. Read more about it here.
13. **Simplify your finances.** Cut down on the number of accounts you have, cut down on your credit cards, spend less, reduce your bills. Make your finances automagical. Simplifying your finances greatly reduces your stress. Also see 10 Habits to Develop For Financial Stability and Success.
14. **Simplify your life.** Another of my top tips. I've greatly simplified my life, in many ways, and I can say that having less stuff in my life, and less to do, has greatly increased my enjoyment of life. De-clutter, simplify your commitments, simplify your work space, simplify your wardrobe, simplify your rooms.

15. **Accept what you have.** The problem with many of us is that we always think that we'll be happy when we reach a certain destination — when we get a certain job, or retire, or get our dream house. Unfortunately, it takes awhile before you get there, and when you get there, you might have a new destination in mind. Instead, try being happy with where you are, with who you are, and what you have. To do that, instead of comparing what you have with other people, or with what you want, compare yourself those who have less, with those who are going through tragedy, with those who are struggling. You will see that you actually are extremely blessed. And this can lead to more happiness with your current situation.
16. **Envision your ultimate life.** What would your ultimate life be like? Where would you live, what would you do, what would you do with your days? Come up with a clear picture of this, and write it down. Now, one step at a time, make it come true. Some ways of doing that follow.
17. **Set long-term goals.** Your vision of your ultimate life will help you come up with long-term goals. Of those goals, pick one to accomplish within the next year, and really focus on that. Now, pick one medium-term goal to achieve in the next few months that will get you further toward your longer-term goal. Now decide what you can do this week, and today, to get you to your medium-term goal. Just choose one thing at a time, focus on it, make it happen, and then choose the next thing to focus on. See Think About Your Life Goals.
18. **Review goals.** Setting goals is important, but the key to making them a reality is actually reviewing them (at least monthly, but weekly is better) and taking action steps to make

them come true. Again, focus on one at a time, and really focus on them. Read Review Your Goals Weekly.

19. **Life mission.** Related to envisioning your ultimate life, but different — it's important that you think about how you would like to be remembered when you die — so you can start living the life that leads to that now. Live with purpose in life, and wake up every day with that purpose in mind. Read the Key to Dying Happy for more concrete steps.
20. **Plan your big tasks for week and day.** Give purpose to your day by determining the three most important things you can do with your day, and making those a priority. Do the same thing with your week to increase your productivity: pick out the big tasks you'd like to accomplish this week, and schedule those first. See Purpose Your Day and Plan Your Big Rocks First.
21. **Maintain focus.** One important key to achieving your goals is to maintain focus on them. To do this, again, it's important that you select one goal at a time. This will prevent your focus from spreading too thin. It's also important that you give yourself constant reminders of your goal, so you don't lose that focus. Put up a poster of your current goal, or print it out and put it out somewhere visible, and send yourself emailed reminders. However you do it, find a way to maintain a laser-sharp focus, and the goal will come true.
22. **Enjoy the journey.** Goals are important, but not at the expense of happiness now. It's important to maintain a balance between going where you want to go, and being happy as you go there. It's easy to forget that, so be sure to remind yourself of this little, but important, tip as you make your journey.

23. **Create a morning and evening routine.** These are two great ways to add structure to your day, make sure you review your goals and log your progress, and get your day off to a great start. An evening routine, for example, could be a great way not only to wind down from a long day and review how your day went, but to prepare yourself for your next day so the morning isn't so hectic. Your morning routine is great way to greet the day, to get some exercise or meditation or quiet contemplation, or to get some writing or other work done.
24. **Develop intimate relationships.** It's great to have a special someone, of course, but intimate relationships could be found with anyone around you. If you have a significant other, be sure to spend time each day and each week with that person, to work on your relationship and communicate and continue to bond. But if you don't, there's no need to despair (if in fact you are) ... intimate relationships can be developed with friends, other family members, kids, roommates, classmate, co-workers. Every single person we meet is a fellow human being, with the same desires for happiness, for food and shelter, for an intimate connection. Find that common thread, be open and sincere, find out more about each other, understand each other, and give love. This can be one of the most important things you do.
25. **Eliminate debt.** Financially, this is a huge way to relieve stress and make you feel much more secure. I suggest that you get rid of your credit cards (if you have a problem with credit card debt or impulse spending) and create a snowball plan for yourself. It may take a couple of years, but you can get out of debt.

26. **Enjoy the simple pleasures.** You can find these everywhere. Food (I love berries!), sunsets, sand between your toes, fresh-cut grass, playing with your child, a good book and a warm bed, dancing in the rain, your favorite music. You could probably make a list of 20 simple pleasures right now, things you enjoy that you could find every day. Sprinkle those little pleasures throughout your day. It makes the journey much more enjoyable.
27. **Empty your inbox and clear your desk.** This might take a little while to do at first, but once you've emptied your inbox and cleared off your desk, it doesn't take long to keep them clear from then on. It's a simple habit that's vastly rewarding. I get an inordinate amount of pleasure from having a clean desk. I recommend you give it a try.
28. **Build an emergency fund.** This is standard-issue financial advice, I know ... and yet it is extremely important. I cannot stress how important it is to have at least a tiny emergency fund in the bank. You often hear that you should have six months saved up. Don't be intimidated by that. Start out with just a hundred dollars if you can. Cut back on a few things. Then build it up, every payday. Once you have, let's say, \$1,000, it will make a huge difference in your life. It's not much, and you should still add to it every paycheck, but at least now you're not living paycheck-to-paycheck, and if an unexpected emergency comes up you can pay for it, rather than not paying other bills and falling behind. It's a simple step, but it will mean a lot.
29. **Keep a journal.** This is not one of the more important tips, but I can attest that it's rewarding. I, for one, have a bad long-term memory, and by writing things down, I can look back

and remember what happened a month ago. I just started this a couple months ago, actually, but it's been awesome. I started an online journal, something I call the one-sentence journal, and my goal is to just write one sentence a day. Sometimes I write two or three, but the idea is the same — just get one or two things down that happened that day, so I can always look back on it later.

30. **Use the power of others.** Achieving your goals can be difficult, but using the power of others makes it much more likely to happen. For example, put positive public pressure on yourself by announcing your goal on your blog. Or join an online forum, or a group in your neighborhood, that you can count on for support. I have a mailing list for the May Challenge here on Zen Habits, for example, and our group has helped me stick to my goal of daily exercise even when I started to falter — and the rest of the group can tell you they've experienced similar success because of the positive power of the group.
31. **Read, and read to your kids.** I read all the time — it's one of my favorite things to do in the world. I love to curl up with a good novel (or even a trashy one) and I can waste away an afternoon with a book. And I'm passing on my love of reading to my kids, by reading to them every day. I love spending time with them this way, and we all enjoy the stories we share together through books. See [Best All-time Children's Books](#).
32. **Limit your information intake.** In our lives today, we get a tremendous amount of information through email, blog feeds, reading websites, paperwork, memos, newspapers, magazines, television, DVDs, radio, mobile phones and Blackberries. Not only can this be overwhelming, but it can be distracting and can fill up your life until you have no time for

more important things. Go on a media fast to get control over your information intake, and to simplify your life

33. **Create simple systems.** Once you've simplified your life, the way to keep it simple is by creating systems for everything you do regularly. Create an efficient system for laundry, mail and paperwork, errands, your workflow. Anything, really. See ways to Streamline Your Life and to make your mail and paperwork painless.
34. **Take time to decompress after stress.** There will inevitably be times in your life when you go through high stress. Perhaps several times a week. To maintain your sanity, you need to find ways to decompress. Here are some great ways to do that.
35. **Be present.** Time can go by extremely quickly. Before you know it, your life has passed you by. Your kids are grown and your youth is gone. Don't let your life slip by — enjoy it while it's here. Instead of dwelling in the past or thinking about the future, practice being in the here and now. Here are some practical tips for being present.
36. **Develop equanimity.** Keep your sanity through all the challenges that life throws at you. Rude drivers, irritating co-workers, mean commenters on your blog, inconsiderate family members. This takes a bit of practice, but you can let these things slide off you like you're Teflon. Try these practical tips.
37. **Spend time with family and loved ones.** One of the things that can lead to the greatest happiness, make this a priority every week, every day. Clear off as much time as possible to spend with those you love, and truly enjoy those times. Be present as you do it — don't think about work or your blog or what you need to do. Read this for more.

38. **Pick yourself up when you're down.** There will always be times in our lives when we get a little down, even depressed. Take action to get yourself out of your slump. Here are some great ways to do that.
39. **Don't compare yourself to others.** This is hard to do, but it can be a great way to accept who you are and what you have. Whenever you find yourself comparing yourself to a co-worker, a friend, or someone famous (those models on magazines with amazing abs), stop. And realize that you are different, with different strengths. Take a minute to appreciate all the good things about yourself, and to be grateful for all the blessings in your life.
40. **Focus on benefits, not difficulties.** If you find yourself struggling to do something, or procrastinating, stop thinking about how hard something is, or why you don't want to do it. Focus instead on what benefits it will have for you, what opportunities it will create — the good things about it. By changing the way you see things, you can change how you feel about them and make it easier to get things done.
41. **Be romantic.** If you have that special someone, find little ways to be romantic. It can do wonders to keep your relationship alive and fresh. It doesn't take tons of money, either. See these ideas to get you started.
42. **Lose arguments.** I know someone who just celebrated his 50th anniversary, and I asked him for his secret to a long and happy marriage. He told me, that if I ever get into an argument with my wife, to just shut up. What he meant, I think, is that I shouldn't try to be right in every argument. I think this is a reminder many of us need, not just the married ones. But instead

of just giving up the argument, instead of trying to be right, instead seek to understand. Really try to understand the other person's position, to see it from their point of view. This little tip can lead to much happiness.

43. **Get into the flow.** This is both a happiness and productivity tip. Flow is the term for the state we enter when we are completely focused on the work or task before us. We are so immersed in our task that we lose track of time. Having work and leisure that gets you in this state of flow will almost undoubtedly lead to happiness. People find greatest enjoyment not when they're passively mindless, but when they're absorbed in a mindful challenge. Get into that flow by first doing something you are passionate about, and second by eliminating all distractions and really focusing on the task before you.
44. **Single-task.** I don't believe in multi-tasking, at least not on a day-to-day basis. Instead, focus on one task at a time. This leads to greater productivity and less stress. You can't go wrong with that kind of combination. See [these tips for more](#).
45. **Be frugal.** This is a habit, rather than a goal. It is a way of living, a different mindset, and the best way to live within your means. It doesn't mean being cheap or forsaking pleasure, but it does mean finding less expensive ways to do things, learning to live with less (and be happier in the process), and controlling impulse spending. I don't have a single article to give you as reference, but frugality is a recurring theme on Zen Habits.
46. **Start small and slow.** Regular Zen Habits readers know that I advocate starting slow with any goal or habit change, and starting with a small goal rather than a big one. Why small? Because it's something you are sure to achieve — and once you

do achieve it, you can use that success to push you to further success. It's a simple technique, but it really works. Start slow when you start exercise, or other similar activities — there's no need to rush it in the beginning, to overdo it. You have the rest of your life!

47. **Learn to deal with detractors.** We all face detractors in our lives. They are the naysayers who, even if they are well-intentioned, will make us feel unworthy, or that you cannot achieve a goal. They will tease or be negative. In order to achieve your goals, you need to learn how to deal with these detractors and overcome this common obstacle. Read [these tips for some ideas](#).
48. **Go outdoors.** These days, too many of us spend so much of our time indoors, especially if our jobs and our ways of having fun are all online. Our kids are often just as bad or worse, with so many ways to watch TV, surf the internet or play video games. Get them and yourself outdoors, appreciate nature, the beauty of the world around us, and the fun of physical activity. See [this article for more ideas](#) (to do with or without kids).
49. **Retire early.** This isn't a sure way to become happy — you can retire and be bored out of your mind and unhappy — but it's surely a cool goal. And if you do something meaningful with your life, such as volunteer and help others, it can be a way to be really happy. It's not an easy goal, either, but you can retire early by cutting back on your living expenses, increasing your income, and investing the difference. The more you can do of all three, the fast you'll retire. And that's a truly liberating idea.
50. **Savor the little things.** Sure, the big things can bring big pleasure, but there are so many more little things in our lives.

Savor them when they come up. It's a way of practicing being present — stop and notice what you're doing right now, what's around you. And take time to enjoy it. Read [this article for more](#).

51. **Be lazy.** There's a time to be productive, and there's a time to be plain ol' lazy. I like the latter, and do it every chance I get. Does that make me a lazy person? Probably not, but even if it does, I don't care. It makes me happy, and the kids love being lazy with me.
52. **Help others.** While finding pleasure in life is one way to be happy, doing something that is more than you, that helps others to be happy or to suffer less, is even more rewarding. I suggest you find a good cause or two and volunteer some of your time. You don't have to commit to big chunks of your life, but just volunteer for a couple of hours. All of us can find a couple of hours in a week or a month. If you do this, you will find out how tremendously happy this will make you. You might even become addicted.

Top 10 Productivity Hacks – Overview

We all need a productivity boost now and then — sometimes throughout the day. We each want to be productive for very personal reasons — to accomplish more, to make more money, to get done earlier to make more time for our personal lives, to accomplish our goals. But whatever the reason, these Productivity Hacks will do the trick.

Here they are, in reverse order (click on links for more on each):

#10: Take care of your Most Important Things first. Your Most Important Things for the day — the things you most need to accomplish that day — should take priority over everything else. However, we all know that fires come up throughout the day, interruptions through phone calls and email and people dropping by, new demands that will push the best-laid plans aside. If you put off your MITs until later in the day, you will end up not doing them much of the time.

Try to get all three of your MITs done before moving on to anything else. If you can do that, the rest of the day is gravy!

9: Wake up early. Decide what you'd like to accomplish each morning, and build your morning routine around that. Like to exercise? Put that in there. Healthy breakfast? Go for it. Check email? Fine. The mornings are a fresh start, peaceful and free of ringing phones and constant email notifications. If you get your Most Important Things done in the morning, the rest of the day is just gravy. (see How I Became an Early Riser.)

8: Simplify information streams, crank through blogs & email. Think about all the information you receive (email, blogs, newsletters, mailing lists, magazines, newspapers and more) and edit brutally. You will drastically reduce the time you spend reading. For everything else that begins to come in after your editing process, ask yourself if you really need to be getting that information regularly. Most of the time the answer is

no. Now, after this process, you should be left with less to read. **Here's the next step: crank through it all, really only reading the really interesting ones.**

Editing and cranking through the information you receive can free up a lot of time for more important things — like achieving your goals.

7: Declutter your workspace; work on one thing at a time. The decluttering your work space part of it is simply to remove all extra distractions, on your desk and on your computer. If you've got a clean, simplified workspace, you can better focus on the task at hand. (See [more on how to do this.](#))

Now, with distractions minimized, focus on the task at hand. Don't check email, don't work on five projects at once, don't check the stats on your blog, don't go to your feed reader. Work on that one task, and work on it with concentrated focus until you are done. (See [How NOT to Multi-task.](#)) Then celebrate your achievement!

6: Get to work early; work fewer hours. My best days come when I get into work early, and begin my work day in the quiet morning hours, before the phones start ringing and the din of the office begins its crescendo to chaos. It is so peaceful, and I can work without interruption or losing focus. I often find that I get my [MITs](#) done before anyone comes in, and then the rest of the day is dealing with whatever comes up (or even better: getting ahead for the next day).

Added bonus: you skip rush-hour traffic.

But just as productive is the second part of the tip: **leave early and work fewer hours.** It's paradoxical, but if you work fewer hours, and know that your time is limited, you will be more focused. Then you have more hours to yourself! Everyone wins.

5: Avoid meetings; when you must meet, make it effective. I find it best to say no to meetings up front. I just say, "Sorry, I can't make it. I'm tied up with a project right now." And

that's always true. I've always got projects I'm working on that are more important than a meeting.

Now, you probably won't be able to get out of most meetings, so here are some tips for making meetings more effective.

4: Avoid unnecessary work. If we just do any work that comes our way, we can be cranking out the tasks, but not be productive at all. **You're only productive if you are doing work that moves you towards a goal.** Eliminate non-essential tasks from your to-do lists, and start to say no to new requests that are non-essential.

If you do not take these steps and speak up, and say no, then you will be overloaded with work that you simply do not need to do. Cut out the non-essential tasks, and focus on those that really matter.

3: Do the tough tasks first. You know what those tasks are. What have you been putting off that you know you need to do? Sometimes when you put things off, they end up being things you don't really need to do. But sometimes they are things you just gotta do. Those are your tough tasks.

Do them first thing in the day.

2: Work off-line as much as possible. To increase your productivity, disconnect your Internet connection. Have scheduled times when you're going to check your email, and only let yourself check your blogs or surf the web when you've gotten a certain amount done. When you do go online, do it on a timer. When the timer goes off, unplug again until the next scheduled time.

You'll be amazed at how much work you'll get done.

1: Do something you're passionate about. This might not seem like the normal productivity tip, but give it a thought: if you really want to do something, you'll work like hell to get it done. You'll work extra hard, you'll put in even more hours, and you're less likely to procrastinate. It's for work that you don't really care about that you procrastinate. Read the full post for tips on how to find your dream job and do work you truly care about.

