

A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide consisting of two overlapping parallelograms. The front one is blue and the back one is a light green. They are positioned diagonally, with the blue one partially covering the green one.

Essentialism

The disciplined pursuit of less

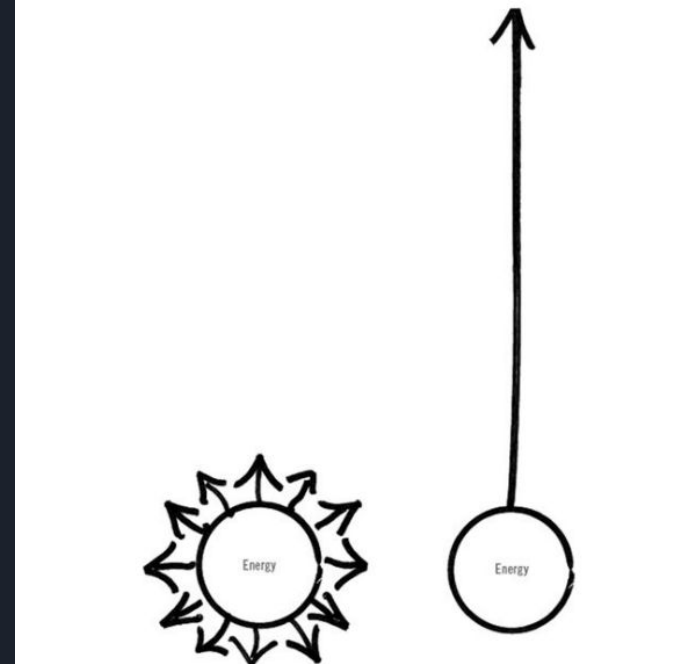


What is Essentialism?

- The disciplined pursuit of less: focusing only on what's most important, and ignoring the rest
 - Not just "do I have the time and resources to do this", but "is this the *most important* thing I should be doing right now?"
 - A lot of people agree with the *principles* of essentialism, but don't follow through with the practice of it. You need *Discipline*.
 - Only a few things *really matter*. Most of the things on our to do lists are just noise that should be ignored.
- Non-essentialists say yes to every request and opportunity, without really considering the value

Why do we need essentialism?

- When we try to do too much, we make millimeters of progress in 100 directions. It's better to focus our effort on the one thing that really matters.
- Trying to do everything is a recipe for burnout
 - You're always busy, but never making progress. You're overworked, but still don't feel productive
 - Essentialism enables us to work less and make more progress
- It's also frustrating for those you're trying to please (e.g. coworkers)
 - Because you're not making progress, others are less satisfied with the quality of your work
 - Counter-intuitively, saying no to requests can make others respect you more, and more satisfied with the quality of your work.
- By doing less, we can do each thing better (plan more, focus more, have more creative energy).
- "If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will"
 - A top regret of the dying is living the life others wanted or expected of you, not a life true to yourself





The paradox of success

1. We have clarity of purpose, so we succeed
2. Success brings increased opportunity
3. We pursue more opportunities and spread ourselves thin
4. We become distracted from what's important, so we fail

This applies at the level of organizations, and individuals

- Startups have few resources, and hyperfocus on a clear goal; they grow, and get more money and more people; they try to do too many things, and so do each poorly
 - When analyzing the collapse of huge corporations, this is a very common reason for failure
- When engineers join a company, they focus on one specific project; they do well, and get a reputation of getting things done; more and more work gets thrown in their direction; they are too distracted to get anything done anymore



Why do we fall into nonessentialism?

- Too many choices: the amount of choices we face in modern life is unprecedented and overwhelming. We're not built for it, and not used to it. We don't have good abilities to filter out the unimportant
 - Decision fatigue: the more choices we're forced to make, the worse the quality of our decision making
- Social pressure: everyone's got opinions about what we should focus on
 - Saying no is awkward, saying yes makes others happy (at least in the moment).
 - It takes courage and compassion to say no to people
- We falsely believe we can "have it all":
 - If we don't make trade-offs intentionally, we're forced to make them unintentionally. We cut away at the margins in a way we'd never chose if we had an intentional strategy



How can we practice essentialism?

It's like cleaning out a closet. You need a spring cleaning, but you also need a daily habit.

The steps of the cycle are:

1. Evaluate: figure out which activities are top priorities, and which you should ignore
 - like choosing which clothes to keep, be ruthless (not "will I maybe wear this one day", but "does it spark joy")
2. Eliminate: actually stop doing the non-essential activities
 - Like taking the clothes to donate. It's no good sorting them out and bagging them up if you never actually drive to the tip. You need a plan for how to get rid of things.
3. Execute: actually do the things that *are* important. You need discipline to keep from backsliding
 - Like creating a daily habit of keeping your closet clean



Mindset principles

- We can choose how we spend our time
- Almost everything is noise, and a few things are exceptionally important
- We can't do it all or have it all. Tradeoffs are inevitable.
 - The questions isn't how can we do it all, it's who will chose what we do and don't do. We can be the one to chose, or we can ignore the problem and let others chose for us.

Essence: adopting an
essentialist mindset





Mindset

It's hard to shift to the essentialist mindset

It's all important -> only a few things really matter

I have to -> I choose to

I can do both -> I can do anything, but not everything



I have to -> I choose to

- Sometimes we make choices to "keep our options open", but this doesn't really help. If we don't like any of the options, we're still stuffed; and if we do like one of the options, we should commit to pursuing that rather than straddling multiple ineffectively
 - The author went to law school to keep his options open (to be a lawyer, teach, write), but did a poor job at all; committing to writing meant dropping out of law school
- Our choices are much broader than we think
 - I could choose to move to the Caribbean -- rationally I know this is true, but emotionally it doesn't feel like an option
 - Often we let defaults replace active choice. By not choosing *not* to do the default, we're still choosing. E.g. by not choosing to drop out of school, I'm choosing to study
 - Often, we have learned helplessness. We internalize external constraints, and when the external constraint is remove, we still believe we have no choice. E.g. dogs experiment
- I can't chose the options, but I can choose from among them
- People who believe they have no choice either totally check out, or become hyperactive and try to "do it all". They don't think they have any choice in what work they're assigned, so they try to do everything they're given
- Choosing is hard, it means giving something up.



It all matters -> only a few things really matter

- Distinguish the "vital few from the trivial many"
- Different activities have different returns on investment. We should be smart where we invest
- Working less doesn't always lead to better outcomes, but working *less but better* does.
 - The author did a paper round as a kid, but swapped it for cleaning cars that pays 6x more. By taking the time to look at his options, his earning increased a lot
 - A couple types defects are responsible for 80% of manufacturing problems; address those, rather than the 100 other defects
 - Warren Buffet makes very few investments, but researches them all very well, and gets a high rate of return.
- "You cannot underestimate the importance of almost everything"



How can I do both -> which problem do I want?

- Trade-offs are an inherent part of life
- Making smart, strategic tradeoffs pays off
 - Doing one thing well is often better than doing 2 things poorly, e.g. missing both deadlines when if you'd said no to one project, you'd have succeeded in the other.
- Have a coherent strategy with a single north star, so you're able to resolve problems if your desires come into conflict
 - "Our company puts employees, customers and shareholders first" -- what about when what's good for the customer is bad for the shareholder?
- Making a trade-off involves asking yourself "which problem do I want"
 - It's unpleasant, but forcing us to weigh the options and chose strategically gives us a better chance at the outcome we want