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Shaping minds, shaping the world

Centre for Positive Psychology public lecture series 2016

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A Simplified Way to Wellbeing

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THE GEELONG THREE BREATHS EXERCISE

- Breath One. Take a deep breath. Notice your physical body and any points of pain or tension. Breath out slowly and release any tension away.
- Breath Two. Take a deep breath. As you breathe out think about what you are grateful for right at this very moment. Say to yourself "Right now I am grateful for... ".
- Breath Three. Take a deep breath. As you breathe out think what intentional state you want to be in right now. Say to yourself "My intention right now is to be (kind, open minded, relaxed, critical, curious etc)... ".

A SIMPLE AGENDA

- The idea
- Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI's)
- Links between simplifying and wellbeing
- Ways to simplify
- Applause or mockery

THE IDEA

THE IDEA

- Wellbeing and happiness activities add to life – they ask people to do more, be more
- They mostly work, but their efficacy is largely determined in research settings over the short term
- People say to me they stop activities because they become "too busy" – not because they don't work
- So maybe: Asking people to do less and simplify may be a path to wellbeing, and a sustainable one

Two Possibilities

- Can doing less and simplifying in itself positively impact wellbeing?
- Can doing less and simplifying increase the benefits of current wellbeing activities?

What if we have got it wrong?

Do we need to go back to school?

Positive Psychology Interventions - PPI's

Positive Psychology Interventions

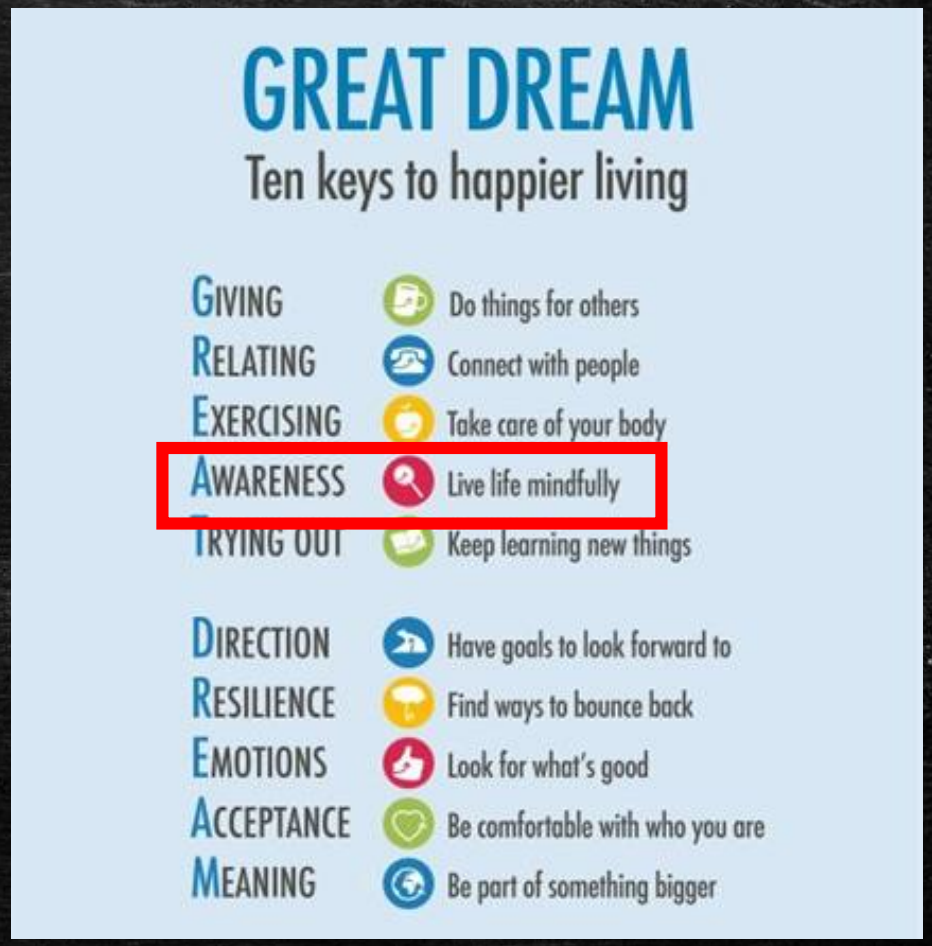
- PPI's are strategies, exercises and activities designed to promote happiness and wellbeing

PPI EXAMPLES

- Three good things
- Use your strengths
- Flow
- Gratitude visit
- Forgiveness letter
- Cultivate optimism
- Savouring
- Kindness
- Mindfulness
- Compassion
- Resilience
- Purpose and meaning

FRAMEWORKS

connect
keep learning
be active
give
take notice


GREAT DREAM
Ten keys to happier living
GIVING
Do things for others
RELATING
Connect with people
EXERCISING
Take care of your body
AWARENESS
Live life mindfully
TRYING OUT
Keep learning new things
DIRECTION
Have goals to look forward to
RESILIENCE
Find ways to bounce back
EMOTIONS
Look for what's good
ACCEPTANCE
Be comfortable with who you are
MEANING
Be part of something bigger

TERMS

- Positive Psycholo<u>gy</u> Interventions vs. Positive Psycholo<u>gical</u> Interventions
  - Positive Psychology Intervention = (Bolier et al., 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009)
    - Since the start of the Positive Psychology movement
  - Positive Psychological Intervention = (Schueller, Kashdan, & Parks, 2014)
    - Include studies that use the same intervention strategies and target the same outcomes but do not explicitly reference "positive psychology"

PPI'S IN THE REAL WORLD

- Hone et al (2015) – "…synthesizing efficacy trials of PPIs reveals little evidence that these interventions translate into sustained programmes of behaviour change when applied beyond the tightly controlled conditions of the laboratory or psychology classroom setting".
- Parks et al (2012) - "…researchers have yet to offer persuasive evidence that happiness activities, as they are actually used in real-world settings, are beneficial".

PPI'S IN THE REAL WORLD

But hey, got to start somewhere, right?

LINKS BETWEEN SIMPLIFYING AND WELLBEING

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- But first some context:
  - In Western Society there is a movement toward cutting away non-essential parts in our lives
  - The underlying trend seems to be one of getting rid of unnecessary clutter, both in time (too busy agendas: slow living) and in space (too much stuff: simple living, decluttering)

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- This movement has different names in different countries:
  - Anglo-Saxon world = "Voluntary Simplicity" and "Simple Living"
  - Australia and New Zealand = "Downshifting"
  - Germany = "Simplifying"
  - The French-speaking world = "Décroissance" (Decrease)
  - Italy ="Slow" movement

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- A 2014 Euromonitor study lists "simplifying" as one of the top 10 consumer trends
- A 2013 Global Consumer Trends Survey found that a majority of consumers are looking for a simpler life: Two-thirds say they are actively trying to simplify their current lives
- Alexander and Ussher (2012) estimate that there are approximately 200 million active participants in the global simplicity movement (20%-30%)
- Survey of 12,000 New Zealanders this week - Two-thirds said there are "not enough hours in the day" – 67% (was 59% in 2012)

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Dictionary: Simplify = "to make less complex or complicated; make plainer or easier"
- By simplifying I mean:
  1. Make things less complicated
  2. Doing less (in quantity) – e.g., To-do list from 8 things to 5 things
  3. Prioritising (in quality) – e.g., Ordering those 5 things by importance

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- A commonly cited definition of simplifying:
  - "paring down to the essentials of life, what is important to you" (Mazza, 1997)

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- The research base:
  - Scant!
  - A Web of Science search, "exact phrase in title", of academic publications, May 17th 2016:
    - "Voluntary simplicity" (37 articles)
    - "Simple Living" (14 articles)
    - "Slow Living" (4 articles)

All environmental or consumer focused; nothing to do with wellbeing

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Much of this literature on "simplifiers" focuses on who they are, why they became simplifiers, and how they practice simplicity

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Simplifying → Wellbeing
- Materialism and consumerism → Wellbeing
- There are other benefits of simplifying:
  - Simplifying → Behaviour
  - Simplifying → Creativity
  - Simplifying → Money

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Wellbeing:
  - Two empirical studies:
    - Alexander & Ussher (2012), 2268 participants, English speakers (Simplicity Institute – Melbourne University)
    - Pierce (2000), with 211 participants, English speakers

Simplicity Institute
Envisioning a Prosperous Descent

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Alexander, S., & Ussher, S. (2012). The voluntary simplicity movement: A multi-national survey analysis in theoretical context. Journal of Consumer Culture, 12(66).
- <u>What they did</u>:
  - Survey of 2268 participants, English speakers, already "simplifiers"
  - 50 questions – lifestyle, behaviour, motivations, values, income, community, politics, and happiness
  - No control – so a "description of the movement"

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- <u>What they found</u>:
  - Happier now living more simply – 87% happier now than before:
    - 46% much happier
    - 41% somewhat happier
    - 13% about as happy
    - Only 0.3% less happy

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- <u>What they found</u>:
  - Wellbeing was not a motivator, but a consequence

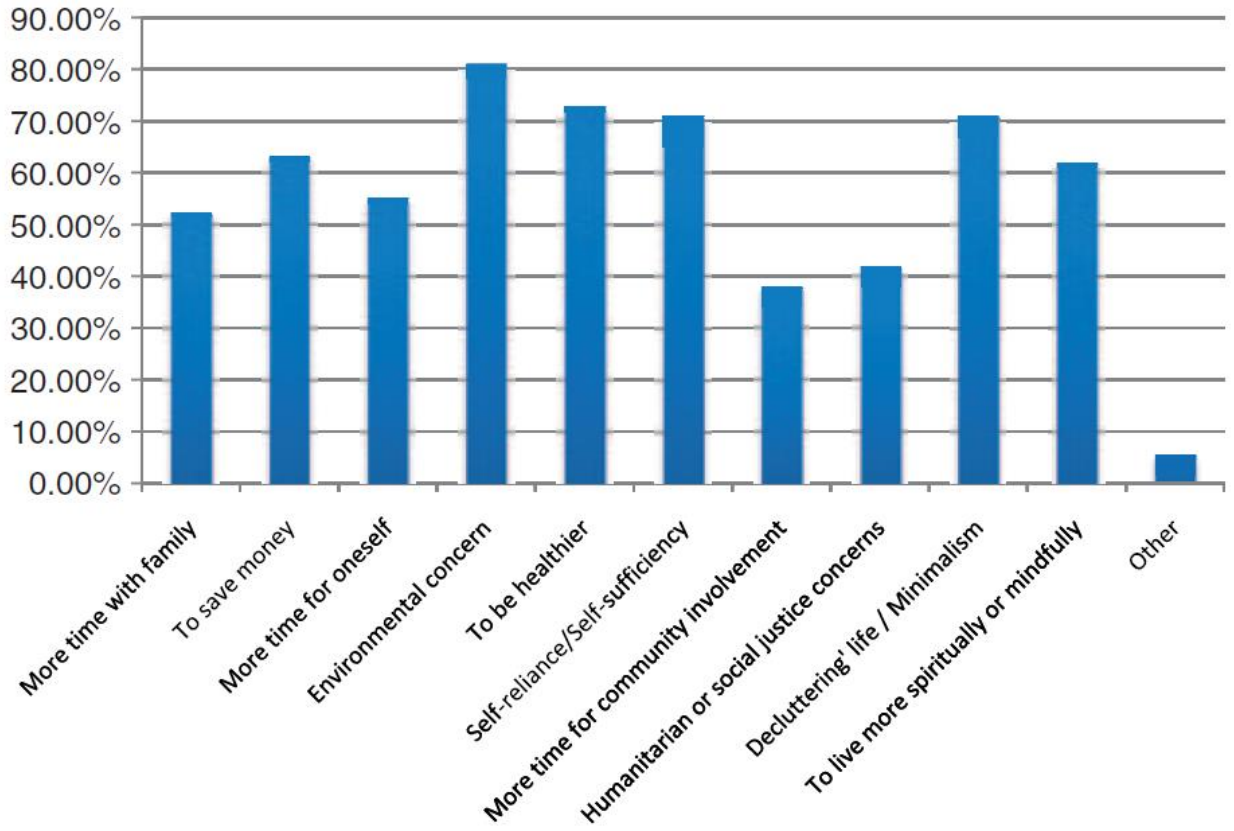


Figure 1. Percentage of participants listing specific motivations for living simply.

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Pierce, L. B. (2000). Choosing simplicity: Real people finding peace and fulfillment in a complex world (1st ed.). Carmel, CA: Gallagher Press.
- <u>What she did</u>:
  - Largely a book of case studies (40 interviews)
  - Three-year online exploratory study of 211 people from 40 states and eight countries
  - Covered: Work life, accommodation, material possessions, leisure time, relationships, environment, community, health, spiritual, nature, transport, etc.

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- <u>What she found</u>:
  - Spent their leisure time on relationships
  - Watched much less TV than average
  - Good diets
  - Deeper relationships
  - Owned less material possessions
  - Many practiced mindfulness
    - In short, they reported doing what we know is related to increased psychological wellbeing

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- But remember:
  - These studies between simplifying and wellbeing:
    - only ask people to recall their wellbeing before they simplified their lives (long memory recall)
    - they do not compare the simplifiers to a control group
    - We don't know how "simple" their lives are
    - They only basic wellbeing outcome measures

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Materialism and consumerism
  - There is a lot of research on the links between materialism, consumerism and wellbeing
    - See Ryan & Dziurawiec (2001), Roberts & Clement (2007) and Sirgy (1998), amongst others...
  - The presence of materialistic / consumerist thinking / behaviour is (negatively) associated with wellbeing in consumers

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Kasser, T. (2009). Psychological need satisfaction, personal well-being and ecological sustainability. *Ecopsychology, 1(4), 175–180.*
- <u>What he did</u>:
  - Compatibility of ecological sustainability and wellbeing
- <u>What he found</u>:
  - Ecological degradation can interfere with the satisfaction of needs for safety/security, competence, relatedness, and autonomy, thus causing lower wellbeing
  - Ecologically sustainable environments and behaviour can promote satisfaction of these four needs and thus higher wellbeing

Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- Behaviour (choice / persistence):
  - Schrift, R. Y., & Parker, J. R. (2014). Staying the course: The option of doing nothing and its impact on postchoice persistence. Psychological Science, DOI: 10.1177/0956797613516801.
  - <u>What they did</u>:
    - Tested the influence of a 'do nothing' option on people's commitment to a task
    - For example, 1) Do task A, 2) Do task B, or 3) Do nothing

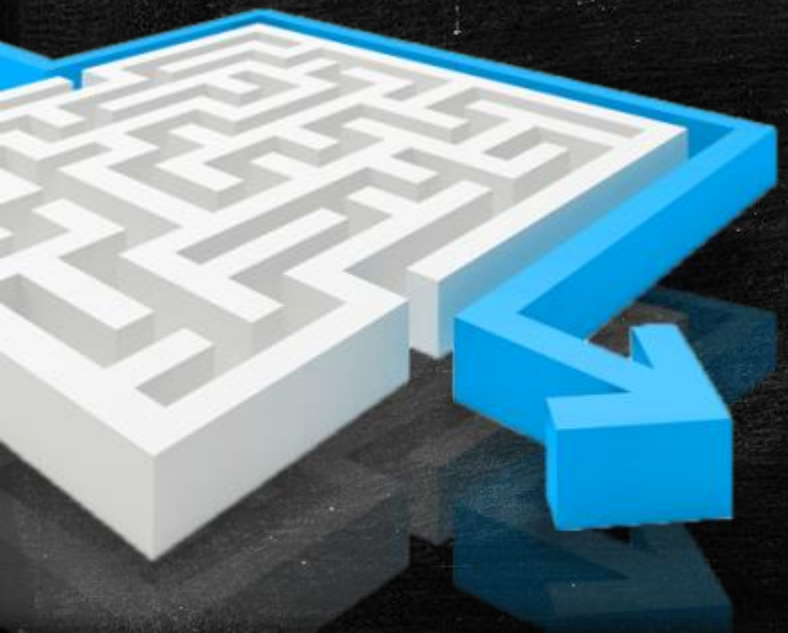
Links between simplifying and wellbeing

- <u>What they found</u>:
  - Simply offering people the option to 'do nothing' can have a surprising influence on how committed they subsequently become to that choice over time
  - "...choosing from a set that includes a no-choice (do nothing) option informs individuals that they prefer the chosen path to other paths..."
  - The small act of including a 'do nothing' option increased participants' commitment to the task by, on average over 40 per cent

WAYS TO SIMPLIFY

Ways to simplify

- Stop
- Easy messaging
- Slow down
- Use technology: lists, reminders
- Prioritise
- Strategic laziness



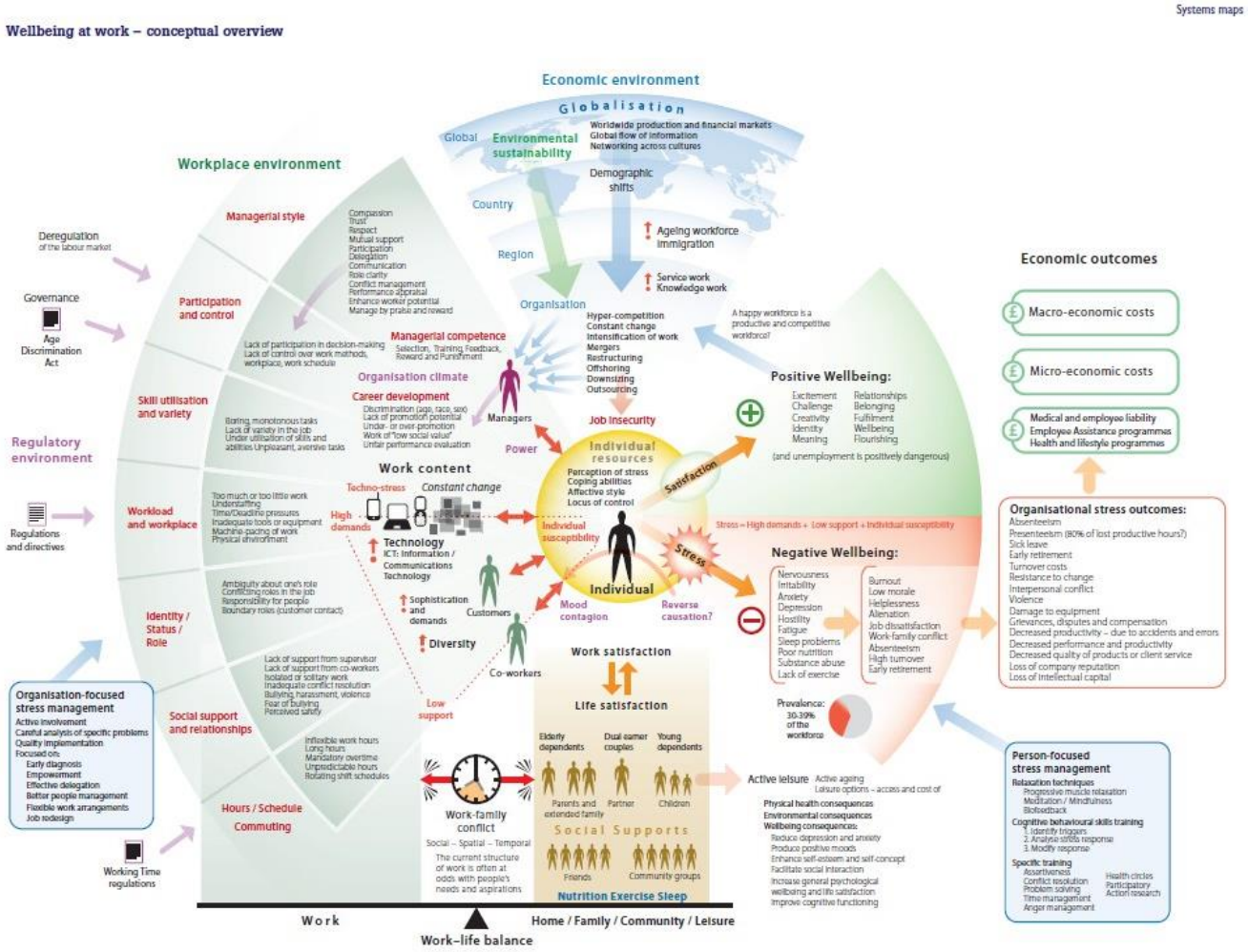
WAYS TO SIMPLIFY - 1-STOP

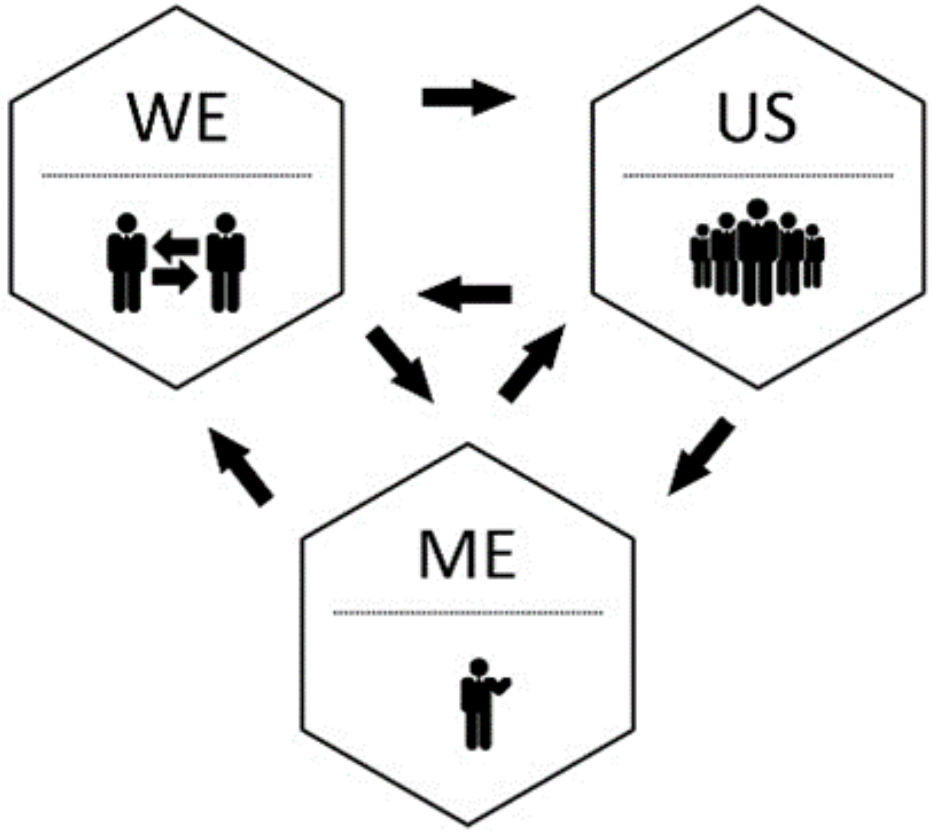
Video

Ways to Simplify - 2 - Easy Messaging

- Parenting: Love them, teach them stuff, keep them safe
- Relationships: Other people matter (Chris Peterson)
- Positive Psychology: Make life better (Tim Lomas)
  - They are sticky shortcuts that make things less complicated

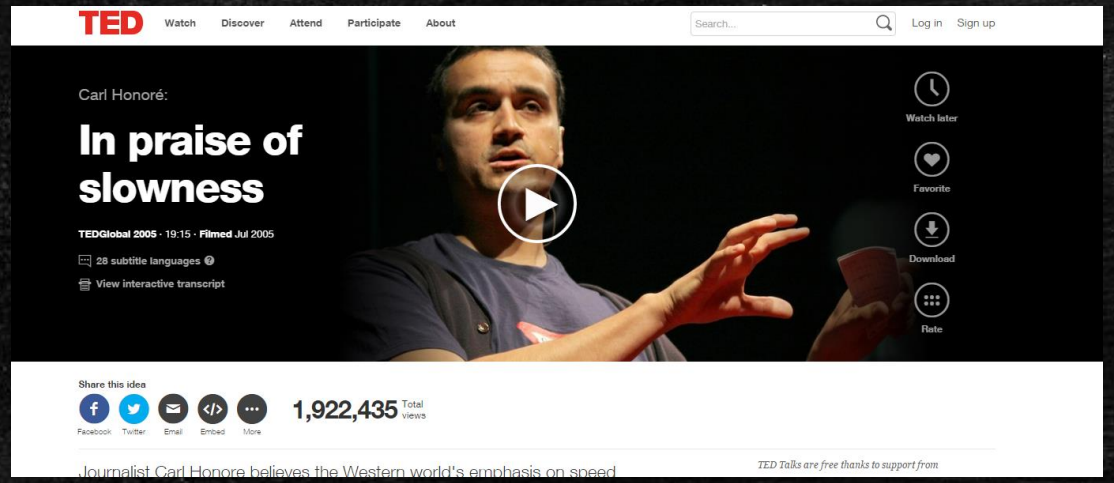
WAYS TO SIMPLIFY - 2 - EASY MESSAGING

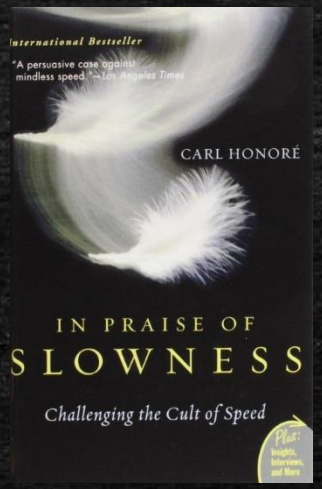




WAYS TO SIMPLIFY - 3 - SLOW DOWN

- "These days even instant gratification takes too long" – Carl Honore
- Slow stretch





WAYS TO SIMPLIFY - 3 - SLOW DOWN

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SLOW DOWN

Getting More out of Harvard by Doing Less

Dear Harvard student,

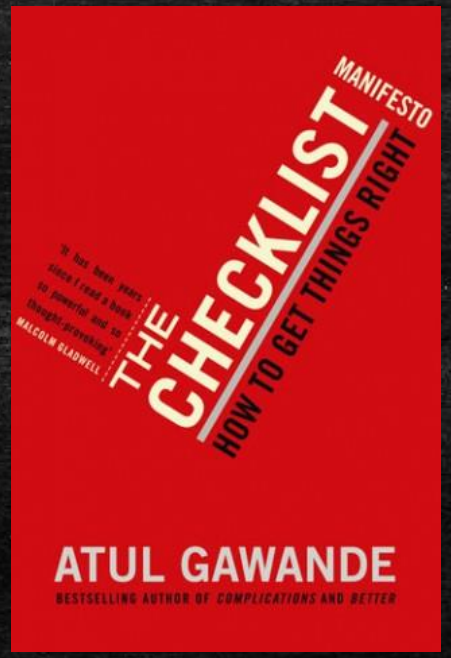
Students arriving at Harvard have gained admission by participating and excelling in a variety of academic and nonacademic activities in their secondary schools. We hope that you will continue to cultivate many of the qualities that distinguished you in your precollege years — your pursuit of excellence, your strength of character, and your ability to balance your academic drive with participation and success in extracurricular activities.

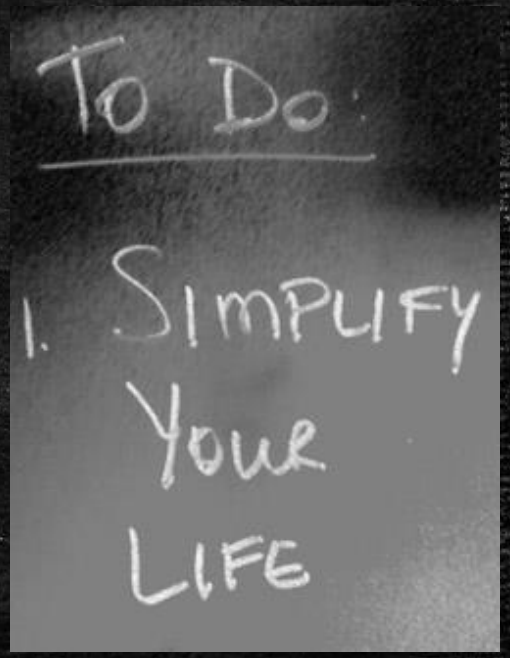
And yet college is different from high school in important ways, and some habits acquired in anticipation of applying to college may not serve you as well while you are here. You may

...gradually spend more of your time on fewer things you discover you truly love.

Ways to Simplify - 4 - Use Technology

- Lists
- Reminders (esp for timeouts)





BLOG POST

- "Our brains are designed to create, not hold onto, content. It is essential to extract information and file it away into easily retrievable documents. Evernote is my savior and there is a physical notebook in every cranny of my house. When possible, I also outsource tasks that require self-control.... I tie many daily activities to environmental triggers... My life has a series of automated routines which increase my efficiency – paradoxically, this offers me the greatest time and space for spontaneity and serendipity"

Todd Kashdan

WAYS TO SIMPLIFY – 5 – PRIORITISE

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	1 **ACTIVITIES** • Crisis • Pressing problems • Deadline-driven projects • Fire fighting	2 **ACTIVITIES** • Prevention • Relationship building • Planning (incl meeting preparation) • Personal development The majority of your work should be in this quadrant – do what you can to minimise tasks moving into quadrant #1
NOT IMPORTANT	3 **ACTIVITIES** • Some phone calls • Some meetings • Some emails • Some reports • Interruptions The tasks in this quadrant should be avoided as much as possible	4 **ACTIVITIES** • Some phone calls • Some meetings/emails • Time wasters • Recreation The tasks in this quadrant should be limited to avoid wasting too much productive time but can help to reduce stress

Ways to simplify - 5 - Prioritise

- Prioritising also means you will need to:

Say "No"

What you don't do can be more important than what you do do

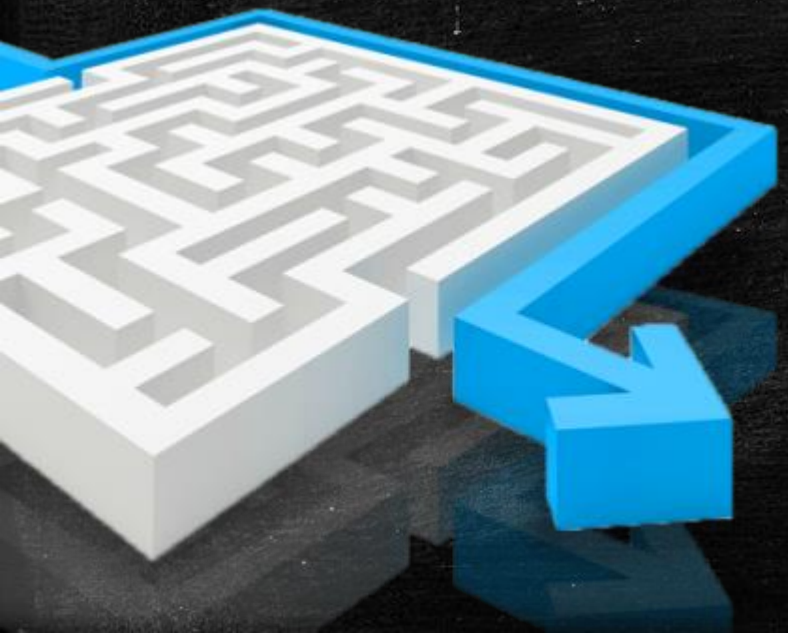
FEEDBACK

WAYS TO SIMPLIFY - 6 - STRATEGIC LAZINESS

- You can't use your strengths all the time
- Avoid shallow work (be lazy), spend time doing deep meaningful work you're good at

Ways to simplify - summary

- Stop
- Easy messaging
- Slow down
- Use technology
- Prioritise
- Strategic laziness
- Bonus: Read more about simplifying

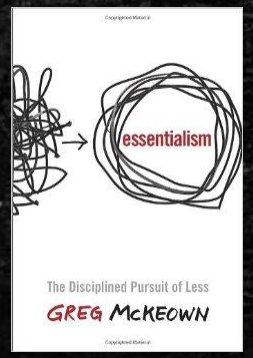


WAYS TO SIMPLIFY - READ MORE

- The Joy of Less, A Minimalist Living Guide: How to Declutter, Organize, and Simplify Your Life (2010) - Francine Jay
- Do Less: A Minimalist Guide to a Simplified, Organized, and Happy Life (2014) - Rachel Jonat
- The Happiness Track (Chapter 4 "Get more done by doing more of nothing) (2016) – Emma Seppala
- Voluntary simplicity: Toward a way of life that is outwardly simple, inwardly rich (1981) – Duane Elgin
- Living the simple life: A guide to scaling down and enjoying more (1996) - Elaine St. James

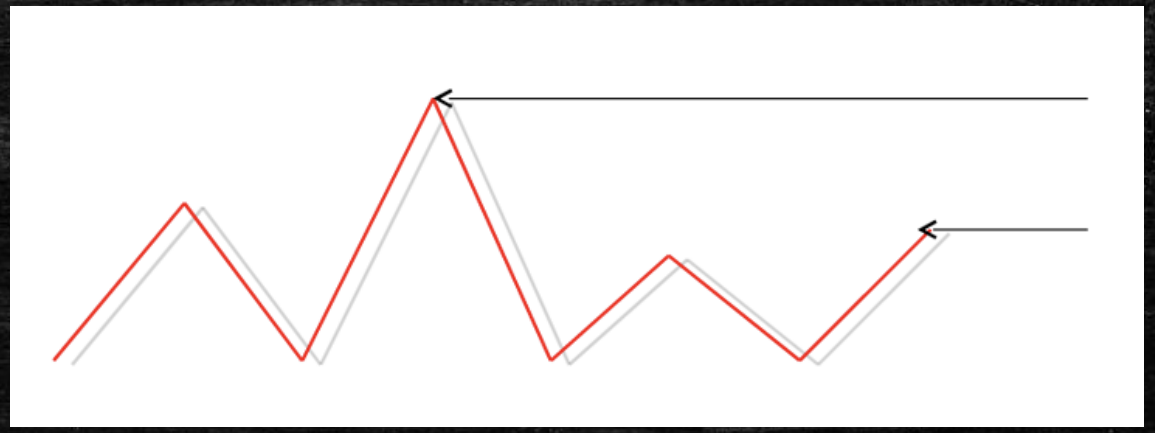
WAYS TO SIMPLIFY - READ MORE

- Alexander, S., & Ussher, S. (2012). The voluntary simplicity movement: A multi-national survey analysis in theoretical context. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 12(66).
- Choosing simplicity: Real people finding peace and fulfillment in a complex world (2000) –Linda Pierce
- The circle of simplicity: Return to the good life (1997) - Cecile Andrews
- Essentialism: The disciplined pursuit of less (2014) - Greg McKeown



SUMMING UP

- Peak-end theory states that people's judgments of their overall experience (like of this talk) is greatly influenced by the peak of their experience, and how it ends. It has to do with our memory of experiences...



SUMMARY

- My argument has been that simplifying (including stopping stuff and doing less) is novel and largely unexplored pathway to wellbeing
- It's possible that people don't want to add extra activities to a life that is already busy, but are longing to simplify

SUMMARY

- Simplifying may be an easier and more effective pathway to sustained wellbeing, and may make our PPI's more effective

I think this is an empirical question worth testing

FURTHER RESEARCH

- Which types of wellbeing are impacted? Eudemonic (meaning), Hedonic (pleasure)?
- How much less is needed?
- Which aspects of life to simplify provide the best wellbeing return?
- Is simplifying always beneficial?
- How long do the simplifying benefits last?
- Cross-cultural simplicity?
- Lifespan development and simplicity?
- Faith and simplicity? (monks, nuns)

LINDSAY

Video

APPLAUSE OR MOCKERY

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Shaping minds, shaping the world

Thank you

Go forth and simplify!

These slides at: www.aaronjarden.com

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