



The Athena Wellness Podcast  
Episode 037 – What We Can Learn From Minimalism  
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Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

Hello, and welcome to Episode 37. Thank you so much for joining me. What came to mind as I was preparing for this episode was a George Carlin routine. Remember George Carlin? I loved that guy. He was so talented with wordplay and incredibly insightful.

In 1986, he did a bit on "stuff," how your house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it, a place to keep your stuff while you're out getting more stuff, how you have to lock your house to keep people from taking your stuff because they always take the good stuff. And how when you move, you have to do it because you have too much stuff. And when you go on vacation, you take the stuff you really like, and so on. I'll put a link to the YouTube video clip in the show notes.

This is the brilliance of George Carlin, operating on multiple levels. He was entertaining us, making us laugh, seeing our common humanity in our behaviors. But what his commentary was really pointing to was the result of mindless consumption.



And that's what we'll be exploring today, the choices we make when we decide to consume something. It's estimated that the average American home has tripled in size over the past 50 years and contains 300,000 items. And the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that Americans throw away more than 25 billion pounds of reusable textiles each year. That's 70 pounds per American adult.

Let me say upfront: one, I am far from a minimalist. And two, this episode is not about shaming anyone for owning stuff. Quite the contrary. Regardless of where you fall on the "owning stuff spectrum," I believe we're all longing for a bit of space and simplicity. And I think there's a lot we can learn from the minimalist philosophy.

So with that in mind, I invite you to sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence and let's get started.

Let's start with the basics - Minimalism 101. The word minimalism is defined as a style or approach that uses a small number of elements. This concept has been around for centuries, think Buddhist monks. It became part of our contemporary vocabulary, though, in the 20th century in reference to art and design, which are simple in form, but have maximum visual effect. If we relate that definition to the everyday, minimalism, then, is a simple lifestyle of essential elements.

Joshua Becker, who publishes articles on his Becoming Minimalist website, offers this definition: Minimalism is the intentional promotion of the things that bring you joy and the removal of those that do not." Other terms for minimalism include things like mindful living, simple living, tiny living, intentional living, #vanlife, and a myriad of other



things. But there is at least one common thread. The idea of curating the things we own, to best reflect our priorities and vision for our lives.

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Writer Annie Dillard once said, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” Minimalists take this to heart, making it a practice to be intentional on how each day is lived. It’s more than just removing clutter, although that’s where many start. It’s about being mindful of how your time and energy is used, focusing on what adds value and meaning to life, and removing the things and activities that distract.

People have been documenting their journeys to live with less in blogs and podcasts for more than a decade. And here are a few that have been helpful for me. I’ll put links to their websites in the show notes so you can check them out, too.

I already mentioned **Joshua Becker**. He was the first one to share his experience. And his “A-ha” moment came while he was clearing out the garage one weekend while his young son was waiting patiently to spend time to play with his dad. Realizing he wanted to spend time with his family, and all the stuff he was organizing didn’t bring him fulfillment, he set out to change his habits.

**Joshua Fields Millburn** and **Ryan Nicodemus**, who go by the name, The Minimalists, left successful middle management jobs in their 30s to pursue simpler lives. Today, they have a top rated podcast, along with popular books and movies on the subject.

**Colin Wright**, who inspired The Minimalists, changed his lifestyle in his 20s. He pared down his possessions to 50 items and set out to travel the world, letting his blogging audience pick his next destination every four months.



**Leo Babauta** is a father of six and he shares his wisdom through his Zen Habits website, which includes articles, books and coaching.

**Courtney Carver**, whose MS diagnosis prompted her to change her lifestyle, has a website called Be More with Less. Her offerings include online courses and challenges to help streamline your closets and your life.

And **Erin Boyle** is a mother of three and the author of a beautiful book called *Simple Matters*. She shows how the beauty of living simply and sustainably can be done in one of the largest cities in the world. She lives in New York.

Each of these folks has their own way of pursuing minimalism and I found inspiration in each of their approaches. They've taught me there's no one right way to live with less, as well as the value of having more time, space and energy for the things that matter most.

It seems simple enough, doesn't it? Determine which possessions, people and activities are important to you, and let go of what doesn't add value. So what trips us up?

What comes to mind is the treadmill of our lives. Our routines carve deep grooves into our days with the things we believe we *should* do. We're always processing signals from our environment, our culture and our beliefs. And most of that happens unconsciously. But that can lead to a loss of clarity on our values and our values our guideposts for what matters most to us.



That loss of clarity can lead to a void that we try to fill with external stimuli, purchases, social commitments, media, social media, and other distractions. In order to make conscious choices, an investment in some quiet time is needed. For some, a break from the treadmill of activity we've created for ourselves can feel terrifying. It's in that space we come face to face with ourselves.

I experienced this about 15 or 20 years ago. I wanted to turn the second bedroom in my townhouse I was living in at the time into an office/guest room. Over the years it had turned into a bit of a storage space. So I took a day off from work with the best intentions – clear out that room. I made some progress in the morning, took a break for lunch and went back to continue the job.

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I sat down in the mess that I made sorting through everything and I got so sleepy, like Dorothy in the poppy field in The Wizard of Oz, just paralyzing fatigue. I never experienced anything like that before or since. I was completely overwhelmed and it perplexed me. It's just stuff, right?

**It took me a while but I finally realized what I was really sorting through:**

1. **My habits.** I was embarrassed that this clutter was evidence that my usual disciplined ways had lapsed and I was dealing with the fallout from it.
2. **My history.** Some of the boxes in the closet that I was clearing out contained photographs, which reminded me that my aging parents were getting close to the end of their lives.
3. **My dreams.** I was years away from leaving the corporate world, but longed to feel some passion in how I spent my days. I didn't know what I truly valued or how I could make a difference in the world.



So all the things that I was sorting through brought up a lot of emotions and memories from days gone by. It was all a reminder that the past was gone and I was moving forward. But to what?

Of course, once the room was cleared, painted and redecorated, that day was just another memory. And the joy that I got from spending time in that streamlined room far outweighed the initial clearing effort. But I share that story so you can plan for the emotional stress that will inevitably come should you choose to simplify.

Now let's talk about some of the benefits and challenges of simplifying. Things that simplify your life are no different than what you do when you want your electronics to work better. You empty out the trash, you remove old files and programs. Basically, you're eliminating the distractions that are weighing down the processing productivity and you can feel the benefits immediately. In a similar way, I find that when I'm able to reduce the non-essentials in my life and make deliberate choices in what I consume, the benefits are numerous.

**Here are some things you may begin to notice as you begin to streamline:**

1. **More clarity** on who you are, what's important to you, and what you want to accomplish.
2. This clarity helps you **align with your values** and make intentional decisions on your priorities.
3. The reduced distractions may make it **easier to disengage from technology** and avoid external stimuli overload.
4. You may be **less susceptible to external expectations** through comparison or advertising.



5. You may feel **less desire to own new things** and appreciate and care for what you do have.
6. Your **streamlined home** may start to feel more like a sanctuary and require less upkeep.
7. You'll **save money, time and energy** and become more productive.
8. You'll begin to enjoy **a more spacious schedule** and slower living.
9. You'll enjoy living in **alignment with seasonal rhythms** and the environment.
10. You'll live in a more honest and transparent manner, which brings **depth, freedom, calm and ease**.

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

I would be remiss, though, if I didn't share that there are challenges as well. As I shared with my clearing story, things can feel worse before they get better. Facing the mess is basically facing deferred decisions. And if you can accept that and keep going, it will get easier and you will feel better. It's an ongoing journey with progress, regression and plateaus. The fuel is the freedom that you'll feel and the physical, mental and emotional space that you'll create.

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You may also cause a bit of upset among your family and friends. Whether you're taking the time for a decluttering project, reassessing your relationship with social media, or clearing your social calendar, your choices may not be in line with those around you. The changes you're making will make others look at their lifestyles, and they may not want to tackle that now or ever. All you can do is lead by example, making your life better for yourself.



Lastly, once you've simplified an area of your life, it does require tending and the creation of new habits. For example, now that I have my upstairs the way I'd like it, each night before I go to bed, I make sure that the house is organized, the kitchen is clean, and my work focus areas are set for the next day. That may sound like a lot of work, but it makes for a good night of sleep and I wake up easy, looking forward to the next day.

So what can we learn from minimalism? I'd like to wrap up by sharing **three things to think about**, and **three takeaways**.

First, **things to consider**.

1. **Start small.** As you know by now, I'm not a proponent of draconian change unless it's called for, such as when there's an immediate health concern. Overall, I've found that when we implement harsh and severe discipline to make a change, it usually has the reverse effect. So set out to make progress, but give yourself the grace and space to work through the emotional elements of simplifying.

When I began the simplifying process, I started in an area that I would see each day: where I kept my daily toiletries, a closet drawer that I used every day, and the kitchen cupboards. If you do something similar, each day when you see that streamline space, you'll want more of your home to feel like that.

Have you ever cleared out your closet and kept walking over to look at it? Not only is it aesthetically pleasing, but it feels good, too. An easy way to get going is by sorting through a small portion of your things, like toiletries or your spice rack. Keep what you love and use frequently and toss what you don't or what's expired.





Over time, you'll build momentum. And pretty soon you'll find yourself making more substantial changes to your home, behaviors, social connections, career, and overall lifestyle.

2. **Think beyond decluttering.** Explore the main driver of what got you in the situation that you find yourself in today. If you're an impulse buyer, reduce exposure to consumption cues, such as TV, emails, social media, ads, catalogs, etc. If you're overscheduled, schedule actual breaks into your day, even for a few minutes at a time, to get up, stretch, take a brief walk, take a few breaths. If you're overwhelmed by what you have or what you have to do, what would be a step toward a more streamlined and calm day?

As I mentioned before, I like to make sure the current day comes to a close by clearing and cleaning up, while preparing with a handwritten list on what's on tap for the next day, including my own self care.

3. **Create guidelines for yourself and celebrate wins.** I've heard of folks who put their credit cards in a bowl full of water and place it in the freezer, rendering the card useless until it's thawed out. It's a way to pause and help scale back purchases and buy more intentionally.

Of course, today, many of our transactions are digital, so it may be easier to put boundaries around spending by removing payment apps from your devices. Perhaps you decide on a waiting period for a new purchase, maybe a week or a month, and then determine if you still want the item. You may decide on a moratorium on upgrading your tech – full disclosure, this advice comes from someone who still loves her iPhone 7.



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Maybe you'll create a rule for yourself that when you do bring something into your house, at least two items need to be removed.

Whatever your guidelines are, please also include a way or ways to enjoy your efforts along the way. Maybe it's putting your savings aside and watching your bank account grow. Maybe it's watching your debt decrease. Maybe it's just pausing to feel the calm in the little space that you've created in your life.

**Now here are three takeaways.**

1. **Living simply is a mindset.** It's an ingrained way of thinking – discerning what you allow into your life and ensuring what you do let in are only those things that add value and are chosen consciously and intentionally. In doing so, you may find more contentment by appreciating what you have and bringing care and intention into your life. You may discover personal power once you realize that others can't sow seeds of discontentment by trying to sell you things that you don't want or need.
2. **Play the long game with a daily practice.** By focusing daily on your true desires and eliminating distractions, your progress is guaranteed. You get to define what success means for you and stop the societal chase for more. The more space you create, the more you will be able to focus on building deeper relationships with yourself and others.



3. **There are no rules, only guidelines that you set that work for you.** What will help align your life so it's working in your favor and not against it? What will help invite space? What will help you evaluate and keep only the things that bring you joy? You may find it helpful to envision and focus on what you're gaining. A home that's uncluttered and peaceful. Or a proactive schedule that doesn't overwhelm, is free of non-essentials and has space for more of what and who you love. Intentional money management that mindfully prioritizes where your resources are spent. Quality relationships with those who positively impact your life and don't drain your energy. A streamlined digital life that supports what matters most to you. And more energy and more creative flow.

21:47

I'd like to leave you with three quotes today.

The first is from Joshua Becker. He says, "The first step in crafting the life you want is to get rid of everything you don't."

The second is from meditation teacher Jon Kabat Zinn. He says, "Voluntary simplicity means going fewer places in a day rather than more, seeing less so I can see more, doing less so I can do more, and acquiring less so I can have more."

The third is from, well, me. I say, "There's power in choosing to live simply, responsibly and intentionally. Living on your own terms is what I call *wholehearted living*. That is, feeling good so you can do the things that light you up with the people you love."



Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

If you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcript of this episode, visit [www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast](http://www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast).

Until next time, be well!