

4 MINIMALIST LESSONS I LEARNED FROM LIVING IN A VAN



Like a snowflake, no two definitions of minimalism are the same. To some, minimalism means empty spaces and blank walls while to others, it means owning less than 100 things. But we can mostly agree that a minimalist lifestyle starts with getting rid of stuff and is therefore inherently defined by removal.

You'd think that doing a KonMari of all your belongings is the only road to minimalism. But I don't think that minimalism has to be concerned with the disposal of stuff. As someone who tries to live a zero waste lifestyle, I don't want to toss something only to have to replace it again.

Instead, my ideology of minimalism centers on mindful consumption. While zero waste teaches us to use what we already have, minimalism reminds us to put thought into what we bring into our lives.

Becoming a Minimalist

When I moved into my boyfriend's Econoline van for a year, I became a minimalist more out of necessity than out of a resolve to consume mindfully. In the confines of 40 square feet and literally not having room for new things, I learned to make do with what I already owned. If I really wanted to bring something into the van, I had to consider whether it was worth giving up another precious inch of living area.

I valued space as much as I valued my belongings and striking a balance between the two was a perpetual challenge. Mindful consumption starts with questioning impulses. Whenever I thought that I needed to buy something, I usually just needed to slow down. And learning to slow down compelled me to live a more mindful life overall.

Why Minimalism?

Minimalism is good for the planet because when we buy less stuff, we use fewer resources. But minimalism can also improve our quality of life by telling us to solve problems with subtraction instead of addition. Addition of stuff just solves one problem with another, and in the end, distracts us from the things that really bring us happiness.

"A little simplification would be the first step toward rational living, I think."

-Eleanor Roosevelt

The simplicity in minimalism saved me time, money and mental bandwidth. Here are some of the lessons in minimalism I learned from living in a van for a year:

Minimalism Takes Maintenance

You can kickstart a minimalist lifestyle with a massive purge of your belongings. But keeping tchotchkes at bay is a perpetual chore. Sell your furniture, donate most of your wardrobe, live like a monk, and stuff will still accumulate. You can blame our consumerist world and the little bit of hoarder spirit that lives in all of us.

When I moved into the van, my belongings consisted of some clothes that fit into a four square foot cubby, some cookware, and basic toiletries. But excess shows up quickly in small spaces, and seemingly innocuous keepsakes piled up before my eyes.

Minimalism is a habit, not an action. You're not a minimalist if you get rid of everything, once. You have to learn how to say "no" over and over again, and what to say "no" to. The good news is that this gets easier with time, as you learn to sort your real wants and needs from your reactive wants and needs. You'll suffer from less decision fatigue and have the mental clarity to keep making choices aligned with your minimalist goals.

Most Things That You Think You Need Are Actually Clutter

Like air, we expand to fit our container. The more space we have to occupy, the more space we will occupy. If your container is a van, you can only expand so much. Rather than modifying my shopping habits to fit the space, the space modified my shopping habits.

At the outset of my life in the van, I thought that I needed much of the stuff I'd had back in my apartment, like a tea kettle. I needed a vessel dedicated only to boiling water. But that tea kettle did not fit well into our tiny kitchen cubby and its awkward spout and handle got in the way. The inconvenience of working around the tea kettle outweighed its luxury, and I got rid of it.

Excess is confrontational in a van, so it's really easy to pick out the clutter. But larger dwellings are less encouraging of minimalism. You can put something down and forget it for years. Living in a house or an apartment, you have to modify your shopping habits to fit your minimalist goals, because your space won't do it for you.

The key is to define what clutter is to you. I usually think of clutter as anything that detracts from your peace of mind. But if an overpacked closet of vintage clothes, a box of childhood mementos, or a room filled with boutique house plants doesn't bring you any twinge of anxiety, then by all means, hold on to all of it. Just don't let your physical stuff turn into mental clutter.

You Should Own Things That Spark Joy and Some That Don't

Thus far, I've made it sound like living in a van solicits strictly utilitarian ownership decisions. Yes, I generally only buy items that will serve a dual purpose. But my possessions aren't all practical by the standard definition.

I have a pair of shoes that are useless in every sense other than that they make me happy. They look out of place in every situation. They're wrong for every weather forecast. But they bring me joy when I wear them. Owning too many pairs of impractical shoes would dilute the joy that this pair brings me, and too much of a good thing can become its own form of punishment.

But “does it spark joy” should not be the definitive question to ask yourself when deciding to keep something. You need some things that don’t spark joy. In the van, the extra spark plugs did not spark joy, nor did the tool box or set of roadside flares. At the same time, a sequined dress might spark joy, but I will absolutely never wear it, and it will taunt me every time I look in the closet.

You can definitely own things that spark joy, but do so with discretion. Don’t own things out of fear of losing them. Surround yourself with things that bring you peace and that you think are beautiful. Function is important, but so is beauty. Use minimalism to highlight the beautiful things that you choose to keep.

“You can put yourself in the way of beauty” – Cheryl Strayed

We Need A Lot Less Than We Think We Do

The exciting world of modern appliances makes it easy to forget that living can actually be pretty simple. Capitalism has convinced us that we need a lot of tools which we probably don’t. I’ve found myself browsing air fryers and toaster ovens, only to ultimately decide that most cooking can be done over a normal two burner stove. Even if we don’t shun all cool new gadgets, it’s a good practice to consider the raw function they’re meant to serve and whether we can get by without.

I never thought that I could live without a refrigerator. But when our van’s mini fridge drew too much power, we replaced it with a cooler- which I rarely used, because filling it with ice was a major hassle. It turns out that many whole foods and dried foods don’t need refrigeration, especially if you don’t buy or cook in excess. Storing leftovers is convenient, but often leads to food waste. When I only bought and cooked what I needed, rarely did any food get tossed out.

If you’ve ever been on a wilderness backpacking trip, you know that less can give you more. Multipurpose tools and high quality gear will allow you to survive in relative comfort. If we distilled the needs in our everyday lives as we do when planning a camping trip, then most purchases would be made based on how essential they are rather than how extra they are.

“Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify, simplify!” – Henry David Thoreau

Minimalism is a way to physically express and live by your values. It’s the first step to shaping a world that you’d like to live in, even if you’re starting with a space as small as a van.