

The many reasons why less is more for the people choosing modest lives

April 6 2017, by Teresa Belton



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The idea of a life lived modestly is gaining traction. Ten years ago, Samantha Weinberg, a mother of two young children, [spent a year not shopping](#). Her aim was to reduce her environmental impact. The next year, Mark Boyle, founder of the online Freeconomy community, [embarked on a life](#) without money in order to sever his connection with

it. Since then, others have joined this ["Not Spending" movement](#).

Going against [social norms](#), pledging to cut dependence on cash, makes everyday tasks [a challenge](#)

Frugality has its limitations. Not everyone is able-bodied enough to cycle, and if we all started foraging for wild food it would deprive non-human species of nutrients and disrupt local ecosystems. While minimalism has found new converts, [especially in Japan](#), this extreme approach is unlikely to go mainstream.

Simply happy

Perhaps a more realistic hope is for a steady rise in the number of people who discover that pursuing non-material riches brings greater happiness than the getting and spending of money. In fact, significant numbers of ["voluntary simplifiers"](#) have been choosing and enjoying lives of material simplicity for decades.

In researching my book [Happier People Healthier Planet](#), I investigated the lives and histories of people who had actively chosen modest consumption. They included a wide range of annual incomes, from welfare benefits of £9,000 to the salary of a civil service lawyer. While diverse in character, many had developed habits for growing food and cooking from scratch, choosing UK holidays, buying second-hand, recycling and repairing, walking or taking public transport. And, of course, they had a lack of interest in acquiring "stuff".

Concern for the environment was predictably the most common motivation. In the words of one woman, Joan, 62:

We have only one planet, it is beautiful and I want the future generations to enjoy it. My assessment (via the Women's Institute) said I used resources

[at the rate of 2.4 planets](#). *I am trying to change this.*

But the environment was by no means the only motivation. Some people looked at the gross inequalities in the world: "When many people live on less than \$1 a day it is immoral to consume just because you can," said Alison, a 42-year-old mother of three who found pleasure in using skill and ingenuity to make things.

There was also a more general abhorrence of waste, and several people I spoke to had been struck by the greater happiness evident in communities they encountered in materially impoverished parts of the world.

The needs of others was also a common concern among the 94 participants in the study, as was their marked desire to make a difference, with frequent involvement in campaigning and volunteering. Many conveyed a sense of being a tiny part of a huge human and [natural world](#) in which they had a part to play. Ruth, 63, who lived with her partner in a hut on a large smallholding, told me:

I believe in personal responsibility, so I must live according to my moral code. Also it's fun, life is good when I remember I am part of a wonderful whole, I don't fill the universe.

She relished the wildlife which shared her land.

Books, films and education were influential for others, such as 38-year-old Michael who changed his London lifestyle after hearing Helena Norberg-Hodge, the [founder of Local Futures](#), speaking [on localism](#) in Ladakh, India. It prompted Michael to start work with a nearby environmental charity and introduce new leisure activities close to home, including beekeeping, winemaking and a choir.

Personal reasons

For most, it was not formal education but personal experience that shaped their [life](#) choices, most often through other people. For many, it came from loving, supportive families with similar values; for others, it sprang from unhappy childhoods, or inspiring friends or acquaintances who showed a different way of being. Bereavement, accident, illness or other personal crises had led quite a number to rethink their priorities.

Half had always lived like this, attributing their choice to personality, or to having been brought up in the war or in a household with a make-do-and-mend outlook. Half had deliberately changed their ways in adulthood, some due to a growing environmental awareness, but others because they discovered that a simpler life made them more contented or less stressed, or that non-materialistic goals were more fulfilling. Overall, the modest consumers' life satisfaction was unusually high.

It was common to opt for time over money. Clive, a self-employed decorator and floor-sander, for instance, said:

The more creative and resourceful I am the less I have to work. I love it. I am surrounded by interesting people and have time to do the things that give life meaning.

For him, such things were meditation, playing the violin, cooking for friends and helping Palestinian olive farmers with their harvest.

Religion was an occasional influence. Luzie, a Quaker scientist, explained that peace was her motivation as conflicts arise over control of resources. Some put up resistance to the pressures of advertising and fashion. But for many, modesty was a very personal inclination, developed out of direct experience of the joys to be found in all sorts of non-materialistic sources, such as contact with the natural world. Many

had first experienced in childhood the enjoyment to be found in the creativity, nature, music, gardening and so on that they now valued so highly.

The variety and abundance of the modest consumers' everyday lives leaves the dominant focus on money, shopping, luxury, ease and image-enhancement looking futile. Individuals whose lifestyles are shaped instead by improvement of themselves and society and by a close affinity with their environment do seem to offer a more rewarding, more sustainable vision of how life can be lived, and the diversity of their motivations and backgrounds should encourage others to join them.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

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