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JOHNSON



PUT YOUR LIFE ON A DIET

# PUT YOUR LIFE ON A DIET: LESSONS LEARNED FROM LIVING IN 140 SQUARE FEET

GREGORY JOHNSON

# 3

## Cutting Calories from Your Livable Space

**You know you have reached perfection of design not when you have nothing more to add, but when you have nothing more to take away.**

**—Antoine de Saint Exupéry**

IT'S BEEN SAID that activism must begin at home. For those of us who are concerned about the environment and desire to have a positive impact on the world, the realm in which we have the most immediate influence is in our own home and daily living. While that may not seem as far-reaching as working with a global organization, the “think globally, act locally” approach to activism is really quite powerful, because it conveys an example that others can learn from and copy.

## **Starting or joining environmental initiatives in your community is a good way to broaden your impact, but you shouldn't overlook your own home.**

If your first priority of activism is in simplifying your home and life, your impact in other areas can be greater since you'll likely have more time and money and you will be living what you espouse.

Although my home is only 7 x 10 feet, it doesn't feel cramped. The home was custom-built for my own needs. Since I'm about six feet tall (183 cm), the ceiling rafters are an inch or two above my head with the ceiling above those beams. This feels like just the right amount of headroom. Having windows on all four walls ensures that, in whatever direction I'm looking, my view is expansive. In fact, sitting at my desk, looking out my east window, my peripheral vision includes the 180-degree view through the north and south windows as well. It

actually feels roomier than most homes. Rooms in an apartment or home typically have windows in only one or two directions, and the view and natural light (a natural mood enhancer) are usually limited, increasing the demand for electricity for artificial lighting.

You may be thinking: *How could I ever live in a house the size of yours? I feel crowded in the house I'm already in. There's no way!* You may never live in a house the size of mine, but I promise you that you can simplify your life enough to be happier, less stressed out, and more conscious of the things you buy. With homes, there's no such thing as one size fits all, and it is difficult to settle on an ideal square-feet-per-person formula. Much of what determines the right size for the inside of your home will be how you utilize the space available to you. If you have a fitness center, laundry, and health food store within a few blocks, then your kitchen can be smaller, you won't need room for fitness equipment, and it's not a problem if you don't have a washer and dryer. Something I've done for many years, even before moving into a small home, is to define an area as my “living space” that can be free of clutter. Things I don't need on a daily or weekly basis get stored in a basement, garage, or storage facility. This allows me to have the immediate benefit of simple and organized living in the space where I spend the most time.

For many people, the size of a home doesn't matter as much as its location or simply how the space “feels” when you first see it. A couple or family might live in a home that feels just right for them, even if it's a bit small. They agree that they'll make it work, and they do make it work. Throughout the rest of the chapter we will be discussing ways to simplify your space so that it can “work” for you.

## **Evaluate Your Space**

Perhaps it's not that your home is too small, but that you aren't using your space creatively. Rooms reflect areas of life such as sleeping (bedroom), eating (kitchen/dining room), personal hygiene (bathroom), exercising (fitness room), and socializing (living room). When these areas of our home overflow into another room, it's an indication that our life may be getting out of balance. The first step is to consider one room at a time. Just as you have defined your personal priorities, consider the purpose of each room in your home (i.e., for entertainment, for privacy, etc.) and then make sure everything in the room serves that purpose. You are not only analyzing used space but also potentially wasted space. This exercise can help you evaluate how balanced your life is.

- ▶ Is everything in the bedroom conducive to sleep?
- ▶ Is the living room an enjoyable place to entertain or is it filled with clutter?
- ▶ Is your bathroom overrun with an excessive number of products?

Until you are able to part with excess clutter, consider storing it somewhere. When taking a look at your home, consider how every little inch can be used efficiently. My bedroom is in the loft area (or attic) of my house, where the peak of the roof is. In most homes, this area is either unfinished or wasted space. As you think about each room in your home, including your garage, I guarantee you will identify wasted space.

- ▶ Is there a spot underneath your stairs that you've been using to store junk that could be turned into a child's playroom or a private nook?
- ▶ What could you do with a room that is currently filled with boxes or bins of unused items?
- ▶ When was the last time you cleaned out your home storage room or storage unit—actually opening up boxes with the purpose of getting rid of stuff?
- ▶ Are there places in your home or storage room where you could install shelves to organize boxes or seasonal items?

Consider what you will need to do to ensure that the purpose of a room matches what you envision it to be. If you're just storing boxes, the room doesn't need to have permanent lighting or finished floors, walls, or ceiling. Storage areas can be built at a much lower cost per square foot than livable areas. If you are using a finished, livable room as a storage room, it may be wasted space. Be bold in examining your home. I promise there is more room there than you think.

## Making Your Home Feel Larger

None of us like the feeling of life closing in on us. When our schedules are busy, our finances are tight, and our homes are filled with clutter, we may feel that the scarcity of time and money is constricting the space around us. Claustrophobia is not always a result of being in a physically small space—you may be living alone in a 3,000 square-foot home and still feel claustrophobic. The contentment you feel with your surroundings is created by what's projected from inside you, not the other way around. The goal is to simplify your space until you find contentment within yourself and your home.

**Floor Plan.** A problem with some larger homes and apartments is that they aren't designed efficiently. This is why some homes that are three or four times the size of mine can still feel cramped. A home that is designed from the ground up can be better designed to utilize a smaller space more efficiently. If you aren't able to build a small home, make the best use of the space you have. For example, customized shelving and storage can be built in to use every inch of space efficiently, rather than adding furniture that sort-of fits. You can also try switching the function of your rooms. Perhaps your spare storage room could be changed to a hobby room.

**Color.** The colors we choose for carpet, paint, fixtures, and other elements in our home are a very personal decision. One thing to keep in mind is that lighter colors and smooth reflective surfaces can help disperse lighting, making a room feel more spacious. In some cases, natural lighting is sufficient to brighten a room during the day, but if heavy drapes or blinds cover the windows and there are dark colors in a room, the space may not look or feel bright even with artificial lighting.

**Furniture and Décor.** One of the largest consumers of our space is the furniture we choose and how we decorate a room. Furniture and décor are often purchased because they "fit" in the current space we are in. Then we move them to the next home without regard to the space they are moving into. Consider using furniture that stores easily, such as folding chairs, folding tables, or a futon couch that can fold out into a bed for guests. A properly designed slimmed-down home will have an interior that is proportionately consistent so that to the eye everything is the same relative size to that which is in a larger home. For example, the sink in my home is significantly smaller than an average-size sink, but its dimensions are to scale so it doesn't look small.

**I have a collection of tiny books. This helps reinforce the smaller scale of the home.**

By having common household objects that are smaller scale, the mind interprets the surroundings as being of normal dimensions. The rules for efficient use of space are fairly consistent and apply to small, medium, and large homes.

If there's a room in your home with furniture or décor that doesn't get used or is not proportional to the space, consider redesigning the function of that room or moving the objects to another part of your home where they might be better utilized.

The best option is to make use of what you have, but another option is to purchase new furniture and décor when you move into a new apartment or home. This way you can buy just what you need and not simply be storing unused furniture and miscellaneous items that do not mesh with your new home.

## Other Things to Consider

If you are already feeling cramped in the home you are in, windows, art, mirrors, textures, colors, and plenty of light are essential elements in letting smaller spaces feel larger. Also consider the following:

- ▶ Music can help create a sense of expanded space around you. In fact, the acoustics of music can “trick” your mind into making you feel that you are in a big hall or at a live concert.
- ▶ Watching a movie or television on your computer with a pair of headphones can take you to another space.
- ▶ Taking time out to meditate on what’s inside of you and the vastness of the universe that surrounds you can help expand your view beyond the immediate surroundings.
- ▶ Remind yourself that your home expands beyond four walls to include the local park, shopping areas, and restaurants.

## Eliminate the Unnecessary

You don’t have to throw everything out to simplify your life; you just have to be smart about what you keep and what you give away. The challenging part about downsizing doesn’t have anything to do with getting rid of things. What’s really hard about the process is to first determine what your priorities are regarding your possessions. It can be difficult to decide what to keep and what to throw away if you haven’t clearly defined what the object is for. When you do the evaluation of your space, it should help you realize that everything you have should serve a purpose. Once you know the purpose of your possessions, deciding what to eliminate will be easier.

One suggestion that may help is to look at how people lived a hundred years ago. In the “old days,” people weren’t collectors of unnecessary items—it wasn’t

practical or affordable. The blacksmith would have some clothes and simple belongings for daily living and the tools of his trade. The same was true for the shoemaker, the baker, and the candlestick maker. They would decide what their calling was in life, and then they could own the tools needed just for that line of work. This may be an approach you would like to take. Keep only the “stuff” pertinent to your vocation.

## Make Friends with the Storage Facility

People have asked me, “Was it hard to sort out what was important enough to keep in your home?” The greatest help to me on the journey toward minimalism was the use of a storage facility. I would have had a difficult time parting with my possessions; however, distancing myself from them was something I could do. The benefits were immediate.

I didn’t want to spend a lot of time laboring over what to keep in my home and what to put into storage, so I decided to put everything in storage. I only kept the few things I would need on a daily basis, the kinds of things I might take on a vacation. Putting my possessions into storage wasn’t the same as selling them rashly or giving them away on impulse, because I could always retrieve anything I might want. It made the decision process easier. After years of not using or even thinking about something, I realized that I had never really needed it at all. I simply enjoyed owning stuff, and some objects had purely sentimental value. I realized I could take photos of some mementos and keepsakes instead of keeping them, and it preserved the memory of an item that would have ended up in storage for years anyway. Slowly the unused objects of my life became simpler to part with.

**For me, it was very liberating to split my life into two spaces: storage and living.**

Increasingly, my living space became more minimalist and tranquil.

You can take this one step further and apply it to your office space. Trim down your office to what is really practical. Don’t save every professional journal. Scan articles of interest or subscribe to email or online alternatives. Don’t stock up on every extra tool and part. Focus on only what is useful on a regular basis. And if you

**Outsourcing  
is the same  
principle as  
delegating work,  
but it is also  
delegating the  
ownership and  
care of things  
or facilities to  
other people.**

happen to change your career or go back to school in a different field, box up your old materials and keep them in storage until you know for sure that you no longer need them.

By putting your possessions in storage, you will know after a year or two of nonuse which items were really important and which ones were not. This takes much of the thinking and guesswork out of the process. Collecting and hoarding are common but irrational behaviors. You may go back to your storage facility a year or two later and find that you still don't want to get rid of anything. Rationally you know that many of those things are not necessary, yet it can still be hard to part with them. It's okay. You can wait a little longer and see how it goes, but remember that you are paying rent for items that you may not ever need or use. What is the replacement cost of those items? For the hundreds of dollars you are spending on rental fees, could that money be used to eventually purchase the "I might need that someday" items when you actually need them?

## Consider Outsourcing

A smaller or simpler house can be designed to meet the needs of its inhabitant(s) and also have an effective symbiotic relationship with its surroundings. The term "outsourcing" has come to have somewhat negative connotations for many people; yet outsourcing one's life on a micro scale can be very empowering. Outsourcing is the same principle as delegating work, but it is also delegating the ownership and care of things or facilities to other people. For example, when you go out to a restaurant, you are outsourcing the work for creating the meals you purchase—going grocery shopping, cooking the meal, and doing the dishes. Whether one looks at it as giving up ownership of things or giving over responsibility of tasks, the end result is the same.

When I lived in a 2,000-square-foot home, doing yard work, shoveling snow, and performing regular maintenance and upkeep of the home and property became like a part-time job. When I moved into a tiny home, I replaced that part-time job with a paying part-time job—consulting. Spending even just ten hours per month on maintaining my home, which time is now spent consulting, added up to thousands of opportunity dollars lost per year. For some of you, yard work or cooking is a wonderful hobby. Keep what's important to you and what makes you happy, and eliminate other things that aren't so important and take up your time.

Think about items in your house you enjoy that could just as easily be in a shared community clubhouse:

- ▶ piano
- ▶ fireplace
- ▶ patio
- ▶ big yard
- ▶ garden
- ▶ tennis courts
- ▶ swimming pool
- ▶ hot tub
- ▶ putting green
- ▶ exercise room
- ▶ pool table
- ▶ ping-pong table
- ▶ library
- ▶ atrium

Although my life has become smaller and simpler, I'm still living in about 2,000 square feet when I consider all of the spaces I outsource on a regular day. It's just that I'm only responsible for the upkeep of 140 square feet out of the 2,000. Outsourcing can also be a great way to be a part of society and meet new people. When you outsource those items in your home that are currently a source of wasted space, you are simplifying your life and reducing the amount of time, money, and energy you spend on that space.

## Make Your Space Multifunctional

When you evaluate your space, think how you can make your rooms more multifunctional. For example, perhaps you're contemplating or have already started a home-based business to generate some extra income and enjoy some tax benefits. Rather than building on a new office, you can downsize your own needs within your existing home.

Perhaps a corner of your family room can double as your office. In this way, a room that was not previously a profit center can generate cash flow and a tax break.

Evaluating your space and then doing a little research about home-based businesses is all it takes to get started. If you consider that a profit-generating office is simply a room with electricity and a window, it doesn't matter whether it is in a high-rise office building or a small room in your basement.

My home "office" is a 7 x 10-foot room that consists of a small desk area where I put my notebook computer and some storage cabinets. It's a wonderful space to work, framed in by bookshelves on both sides and a window in front of me. When I'm working, I only use about 3 x 4 feet. When I'm not working, the whole room becomes my kitchen and dining area. Since I live in a one-room house, that one room needs to serve multiple functions. For homes with multiple rooms, the "office" often has a bed in it, allowing the room to serve as a guest room. The principle is the same. Even a family room can take up less space now that flat screen televisions and smaller home video components are available. Comfortable folding

chairs or easily stored furniture can allow a room to grow and shrink based on the current need.

Living small doesn't mean people can't come and visit you.

## Don't let space keep you from inviting people over.

There's more of it than you might imagine. In fact, regardless of the size of your home, if it is less cluttered and easier to keep clean, you'll be more likely to invite friends over. Socializing in larger venues, like sports arenas, large reception centers, or dance halls, can make it hard to have a quiet and meaningful conversation. Socializing in a smaller setting can be more personal. Having furniture that easily folds and stores is a nice way to make room for guests.

## Keeping Your Spaces Slimmed Down: How to Avoid Recluttering

Once you have gained control of your space, here are some tips to avoid clutter and to not run into the same problems all over again:

- ▶ Shop and drop. The shop-and-drop principle is that for everything you buy—every pair of shoes, every appliance, every book—you get rid of one or more items that are less necessary. In this way, your material possessions either stay at the same level or decrease over time.
- ▶ Buy small. As you buy replacement items, purchase the smaller version of appliances, electronics, furniture, and other such things.
- ▶ Set boundaries. Having a place for everything and everything in its place can be a great way of setting boundaries. If you don't have room for more cookware or dishes, don't buy them. Only buy what you have space for.

NO MATTER HOW YOU CHOOSE TO SLIM DOWN your livable space, you can make it work for you. Evaluating your home for useable areas and downsizing your possessions can be difficult at first, but if you start small, I guarantee that

you can make a difference in your home and begin the process of simplifying your life. Creating a simpler and smaller living space is a freeing experience.

## Action Points

The following action points are some ways to streamline your space and keep it slimmed down. Select one or two to start with and slowly implement more as you simplify your life.

1. Take everything out of the bathroom except the bare essentials. What would you take on a very short relaxing and casual weekend trip? Can you live with that at home? Try it out to see for yourself.
2. Select one main living area and evaluate how much of the space is used and how much is wasted. Develop a plan to slim down your space and then implement your plan. Write down how well it went and what you learned.
3. Make your space multifunctional. What areas of your home could serve dual purposes?
4. Find three practical things you could outsource in your home and choose one to implement for a week. Evaluate how it goes and if you could outsource even more to create space in your home. If it works for you, consider how much money and time you could save by moving into a simpler and smaller space.
5. Set boundaries and have a place for everything you own. Start with your bedroom closet. Make two piles: (1) belongings you've used in the last six months and (2) belongings you haven't touched in the last six months. Put all items you can't part with from pile number two in a box labeled "Closet Excess" or decide where they should go so that you start using them. Write the date on the box and keep it in your storage unit for a year. When a year has passed and you don't remember what's in the box, donate it to a local charity.

## Discussion Questions

Here are some discussion questions for you, your roommate(s), spouse, family, friends, or book club to consider.

1. Look around your home for wasted space. Do you have items in your home that can go into an unfinished storage room rather than taking up space in a finished area? Is it worth the money to you to rent a storage unit to free up space in your home? Brainstorm with your friends and loved ones to come up with ideas for their homes as well as your own.
2. Simplify. Reducing your possessions and commitments of time and money can help make you much more focused, effective, and peaceful. What are your priorities for each room? Discuss this with friends or family, and once you've decided, follow through to make that space fit what you envisioned.



