You Can Be Happy with Very Little

New research praises the psychology of the minimalism movement.

KEY POINTS

- The link between minimalism and psychological well-being may be that minimalists are better able to control their desires to consume.
- Minimalism may encourage people to focus on needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness that promote psychological growth.
- The relationship between minimalism and well-being may be stronger for low-income and older individuals.

A new article published in the Journal of Positive Psychology suggests that there are definite psychological advantages to adhering to a philosophy of minimalism and voluntary simplicity.

“Research has accumulated over the years to support the adage that money can’t buy happiness,” state the authors of the research led by Joshua Hook of the University of North Texas. “As an alternative to the high-consumption lifestyle often found in Western cultures, voluntary simplicity (also referred to as minimalism) involves a lifestyle that is focused on reducing consumption and excess in one’s life so that individuals can focus on prioritizing their values.”
To better understand the connection between minimalism and happiness, Hook and his team scoured the research literature for all studies published on the topic. They found 23 such studies. Next, they tested to see how many of these studies supported the hypothesis that minimalism/voluntary simplicity is associated with enhanced psychological well-being.

They found that, among the studies that included a quantitative (i.e., numerical) component, more than 80 percent reported a connection between voluntary simplicity and well-being. For example, a 2005 study led by Kirk Brown of the University of Rochester compared 200 self-identified voluntary simplifiers and 200 matched control participants and found that voluntary simplifiers exhibited more positive emotion and well-being than did control participants.

And, among the studies that included a qualitative (i.e., interview) component, more than 85 percent found a link between voluntary simplicity and well-being.

“Overall, the vast majority of studies found a positive relationship between voluntary simplicity and well-being,” state the researchers. “This finding was mostly consistent irrespective of how voluntary simplicity and well-being were measured and it was also consistent across both quantitative and qualitative research designs.”

The authors speculate that the link between minimalism and psychological well-being has to do with the fact that minimalists are better able to control their desires to consume. Minimalism may also encourage people to focus on psychological needs — such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness — that have been shown to promote psychological growth.

They also note that minimalism may be more impactful for some individuals than others. For instance, they found evidence that the relationship between minimalism and well-being is stronger for low-income participants and older participants. A 2012 study found that voluntary simplicity was associated with enhanced life satisfaction for low-income participants but not for high-income participants.

The authors hope their research inspires more people to consider a “less is more” approach to life as a viable pathway to happiness and flourishing.
“I think this research counteracts the general tendency in our society to go after more,” says Hook. “It's one of the biggest lies we can buy into that we just need more money, more material possessions, and more [fill in the blank] to be happy. These efforts don't usually work. Instead, I think we need to think about other avenues to improve happiness, and living more simply might be something to try out.”

References