Identify the essential and eliminate the unnecessary. These are the keys to accomplishing the goals that can change your life.

With these simple ideas, Leo Babauta transformed his life. He wiped out his debt, quit smoking, became a best-selling author and created one of the world’s most popular blogs - ZenHabits.net.

Babauta tells us that “Our problem is living without limits. It’s like going shopping without spending limits - you tend to go overboard and end up with a bunch of stuff you don’t need or really want much. But if you have a budget…you’ll choose only the things that matter and you’ll end up with much less junk.”

Of course, there’s more to it than that...

The Six Principles

The foundation of Babauta's approach is his Six Principles of Simple Productivity: setting limitations, choosing the essentials, simplifying, focusing, creating new habits and starting small.

We’ll look briefly at each principle then we'll look at how to translate the principles into action.

Setting Limits

Who doesn’t believe they’re overworked and overwhelmed with the challenges of 21st century living and working? The sheer act of juggling all the demands we face is itself exhausting. Eventually, we all reach the point where we run out of time and room to maneuver.

These are the points beyond which we cannot pass, but Babauta argues that we shouldn’t let external circumstances, the simple expiry of time, dictate those limits. Instead, we should target everything we feel is in any way overloaded among our
activities and impose restrictions on the amount of time we commit to them. That way, we gain time instead of trying to fit within its constricted confines.

Managing email provides the perfect example of economizing on your activities. Instead of constantly checking the flow into your inbox, restrict yourself to just once or twice a day, at specific times. Even if your job doesn’t permit this, you should still look for ways to reduce the frequency.

Look at every aspect of your life for opportunities to limit the amount of time you commit to each activity.

Choosing the Essentials

Babauta wants us to question everything we do from the perspective of: Do I really need this or want to do this? The aim is to edit the list of our activities until we’re left with only those we need to achieve our goals, fulfill our passions and values, and have the greatest impact on everything else we do.

You can test your activities, projects and tasks against these requirements. So, returning to the email example, the author suggests that if you have, say 20 emails to respond to, use these “essentials” values to select just three to five to address.

An important element of identifying your essentials is to separate out the activities you absolutely have to do from those you simply want to do or think you should do.

The same applies to our home environment and even to our personal possessions. Most wants can be eliminated, he says. By definition, if they’re not needs, they’re not necessary and thus not essential.

Simplifying

In some respects, simplification is just a euphemism for eliminating the non-essential tasks. But it doesn’t mean just abandoning them.

Yes, you can cross things off your list that aren’t really important, but there might also be some you can delegate to co-workers, and others that need to be done but aren’t urgent that you can postpone to a more appropriate time.

A critical tactic is developing the ability to say “no,” telling people who try to add to your list that you simply don’t have time to do additional tasks. More on this later.

Getting Focused

Focus is your most important tool to getting things done. By setting limits, eliminating and simplifying, you give yourself less to do and more opportunity to focus on the remaining
activities.

But it still requires discipline. And the key - a recurring theme in the book - is to target just one thing, one goal, one task at a time. Humans aren't natural multitaskers. Trying to do several things at once slows us down, distracts us, and delays and limits the success of our activities.

Shades of Zen appear in the book at this point – the need to concentrate on the present, with mindful awareness of what you’re doing right now to the exclusion of distractions, past worries or future concerns.

This applies not only to business tasks but also to life activities like eating, exercising and other daily routines, even brushing your teeth. Just think about what you’re doing right now, and you’ll develop the power of focus.

Creating Habits

We’ve encountered this principle before - for example in Charles Duhigg’s The Power of Habit and Stephen Covey’s renowned The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.

The idea is that once you’ve identified behaviors that are essential to your success and wellbeing, you need to repeat them to the point where they can be accomplished with ease as a matter of routine so they become ingrained.

A route to success, which is featured in the author’s ZenHabits blog, is what he calls the Power of Less Challenge. This is a 30-day program in which you target just one activity - regular exercise, for example - and commit to doing it every day.

To underpin your success, choose an easy goal, write down your plan and “go public” with it. The activity should be measurable and you should record and report on your progress daily. In the spirit of the book, you should limit yourself to just one new habit at a time and you should always….

…Start Small

Starting new habits with minimal requirements and building them in small increments is Babauta’s key to success. Indeed the approach is critical to the whole process of simplification, not just habit creation, in the sense of breaking big tasks into smaller, manageable chunks.

Starting small works because it narrows your focus, sustains your energy and enthusiasm over the longer term, and ensures your eventual success.

When we start out on any project, habit or exercise, initial overenthusiasm drives our ambitions, but our motivation falters with the passage of time and we eventually give up. You won’t flag so readily with a shorter, simpler routine.

Think of daily exercise, for example. You may think you can work out for 30 minutes but if you
just target 10 minutes a day, you'll accomplish it easily, continue for those 30 days and by then have established a habit that you can build on and extend later.

The Power of Less in Practice

The six principles of limiting tasks, selecting essentials, simplifying, focusing, habit forming and starting small, can be applied to almost any activity. The second part of the book explains how.

Goals and Projects

The Power of Less is perfect for achieving goals. Limit yourself to fewer of them and you’ll achieve more. In fact, he advocates a One Goal System, in which you focus on just one medium to long term goal at a time.

To do this, make a list of things you’d like to accomplish over the next few years and choose the one you most want to complete. Then break it down into sub goals.

Say you want to become a lawyer. One sub goal could be to get into law school, another to complete three years of study, and another to pass the bar exam. Then you break each sub goal down to successively smaller and smaller parts until you have daily actions, a regular focus that will move you towards your goal every day.

You can adopt the same selective approach with shorter-term projects. A project is not a goal but a set of tasks that have to be completed within a specific timeframe.

However, a particular project may be related to the achievement of a goal. For instance, in the example above, a project might be to research a number of different law schools.

You should make a list of all your projects and select only three as the main focus of your attention, one of which should be related to your One Goal. The others might be related to your work or some aspect of your personal life.

These three become your simple projects list. The remainder go on to a secondary on-deck list and you don’t promote anything from there to the simple list until you’ve completed all three simple projects.

Again, these projects can be broken down into individual tasks and sub tasks. Each day, you set a Most Important Task (MIT) for each of these three projects.

Today’s MIT for your law school research project could be to identify relevant online sources of information.

Your three MITs will become a focus of your day, so it’s a good idea to identify them first thing in the morning, or even the evening before. If possible, break them down into smaller tasks that can be done in an hour or so.
So, for instance, if you had a project to produce an annual report, your daily sub-tasks might include preparing an outline of the report, brainstorming topics, gathering information, writing the first section, and so on.

The idea seems to be to create almost a hierarchical structure of goals, projects and tasks that ensure you make progress on the things that count, every day.

Managing Time

Like everything else that Babauta recommends, time management should be simple, avoiding rigidity and complicated schedules. It’s about focusing on your priorities and eliminating distractions. Immersing yourself completely in a task is a concept he calls flow.

And if you have an activity that involves multiple repetitions - answering mail or emails, or even making phone calls - he suggests you adopt batch processing, corralling them into a single time period and dealing with them rapidly, one after the other. Avoiding switching between tasks saves time and aids focus.

Beyond this, your time management tools should be simple and basic - a calendar in place of a complex computer program, a paper notebook or text file to note your MITs, batch processing tasks and things that occur during the day that you want to put to one side but remember.

That’s it. You shouldn’t even schedule appointments, says Babauta. When people try to fix a meeting, tell them you don’t use a scheduling system and that they should call you when they want to meet and you’ll see them if you’re free. Perhaps that seems a little far-fetched, but you get the idea.

Dealing with Inboxes

You receive information in multiple ways and you need to take steps to limit, eliminate and simplify the processes.

We’ve already mentioned email. Try to refine your checking and replying to just once or twice a day. And don’t start your day with it. Otherwise you run the risk of getting distracted from your first MIT.

If you have multiple email addresses, see if you can forward them all to one service. Also, use filters to eliminate junk mail, ask people not to send you jokes, and tell people you don’t need them to send you certain types of business email or, if they regularly need certain types of information, tell them where they should go in future to find it.

A key element of batch processing email and other correspondence is what Babauta calls processing to empty. In other words, once you start, go right through the task, dealing with each and every item - binning, replying or archiving. Be liberal with that delete key.
Write shorter replies too - the author limits himself to no more than five sentences.

Simplifying Internet Usage

The internet. It’s a serious cause of time consumption, distraction and low productivity. You need a methodology for efficiency. For instance, use feed-readers to combine the output of blogs you follow, and set aside specific blocks of the day when you totally disconnect from the web.

This may be easier said than done, but you may find motivation if you know just how much time you’re spending online. There are tools that can help you do that - for instance Toggl (toggl.com), yaTimer (nbdtech.com/yaTimer) and Tick (tickspot.com).

If you’re seriously addicted to the web, more severe measures may be necessary. Start by switching off entirely for prolonged periods…if you can. And just when you think you absolutely must go online, try to divert or delay yourself just a little longer. Simple strategies like just getting one more task done first, or even visiting the water cooler, will prolong the period away from the Internet and loosen the obsession. In time you will gain strength and learn to reduce your dependency.

Bottom line: You must set rules for using the internet and stick to them.

A Simple Filing System

Is your filing system out of hand or overly complex? Have you got stacks of documents just waiting to be collated and put … somewhere?

Here’s the solution.

First, try to limit yourself to one drawer, with files and folders arranged in alphabetical order. Put everything waiting to be filed and, ideally if you have time, everything in your existing system, in one pile and then slowly work your way through it.

Process to empty. Don’t put anything to one side. Make a decision for each item. If you don’t see yourself using an item in the next couple of months (unless it’s required for legal reasons) toss it or route it to another more appropriate person. File only the essentials.

Cut down the incoming flow of documents by storing reference material online, asking people to email documents to you rather than sending hard copies.

At home, where possible, opt for electronic billing and statements, stopping the paper versions. Create a single home inbox where all mail resides until you batch process - and then do it in one go, paying bills immediately and entering key dates in your calendar. Toss what you don’t want and file the rest straightaway.
Reducing Commitments

“If there’s one change that you could make today,” the author writes, “that would have the biggest impact on your life in terms of productivity, effectiveness, and being able to do the things you want to do, it would be to reduce the commitments in your life.”

These are all your obligations at work, with your family, with civic and religious organizations, and even in pursuit of hobbies.

By taking an inventory of your commitments, you can start to identify and eliminate the non-essential ones. In keeping with the “start small” principle, begin reducing them one at a time.

Send your regrets that you can no longer attend a meeting or function. You can be open and honest, telling people you are trying to reduce your commitments.

Above all you must learn to say “no.” Yes, that’s difficult, but learn to recognize requests for what they are - demands on your time. If the request doesn’t line up with your priorities, be firm and say “I just can’t right now.”

“Often,” says Babauta, “I will honestly tell the person, ‘I really wish I could. It sounds great. But I just don’t have the time’.”

Look for opportunities to simplify your personal life, leaving space between appointments, slowing down and “being present” in the task you’re doing, enjoying it.

Some more tips to simplify your personal life:

• Single-task. Don’t try to do two or more different things at once.
• Create time for solitude. Being alone, making time for yourself, are important to your wellbeing.
• Do nothing. “Sometimes,” he says, “it’s good to forget about doing things, and do nothing. Don’t be afraid to be lazy sometimes.”
• Free up time, for example by watching less TV, getting up earlier or eating lunch at your desk.

Simple Routines

In pursuit of forming habits that can simplify your life, it’s a good idea to establish daily routines at key times of the day, especially mornings and evenings.

Set aside a specific time for preparing your daily goals or doing something enjoyable like reading or exercising.

You can also adopt new simplification behaviors.

A classic example would be decluttering your desk and your workspace. A clean desk will
help you focus on the task at hand and provide a Zen-like sense of calm.

Once again, it’s time to create a pile. Clear everything off your desk into a heap, except your PC, phone and other essential work tools, and then go through the items one by one, invoking the mantra: Trash it, delegate it, file it or put it on a list to do later.

Get rid of knick-knacks, posters and pictures, though a couple of family photos are all right. Empty your drawers and do the same, asking whether you really need each item. Be ruthless. Work at it for as long as you can.

The same process can be adopted for decluttering your home. Start small, in a single room or location, and don’t try to do it all in one go.

Now, you’ve got to keep things that way, by having a place for each item and returning it there after use. Schedule regular decluttering sessions and invoke a simple process of questioning your need for any new items.

Going Slow

It seems to fly in the face of intuition, but slowing down your hectic pace can actually help you to be more productive.

For a start, you’ll be calmer, happier and more focused. You’ll be less likely to make mistakes or miss opportunities. And you’ll give yourself thinking time.

You can do this by focusing your attention much more closely on whatever you happen to be doing. Don’t be in a hurry to get on to the next thing.

You can apply the approach to many aspects of daily life. Slow eating will help you lose weight, enjoy your food more, experience better digestion and reduce stress, while slow driving can save gas, save lives (by cutting the risk of accidents) and probably save your sanity by replacing highway dueling with a relaxed period of thinking time.

Getting Fit

A simple fitness plan echoes the slow approach. Real health and fitness come over a period of months and years and are best achieved through a simple diet of fresh foods, eaten slowly, and an exercise habit built from starting small.

The key, says the author, himself something of a fitness fanatic, is choosing a time of the day for exercise that works best for you and for which you can virtually guarantee your availability - the start of the day for instance.

It’s important because, when forming a habit using the 30-day challenge approach, you should not allow yourself to miss a single day. It’s also vital that the form of exercise you choose is something you enjoy and it helps if you have someone to share the challenge with.

If you find yourself flagging, try to reinvigorate your motivation by remembering how good you feel after
a workout, by recording the cumulative calories you’ve burned, by seeking inspiration from role models, blogs or even a coach or trainer, and by trying to use your exercise time for peaceful contemplation.

Conclusion

Motivation is fundamental to maintaining the new behaviors that are the key to exploiting the Power of Less because: “If you can stick with a goal long enough, you’ll get there.”

Adhering to his principles offers a route to sustained effort. Starting small, narrowing your focus to a single goal or task at any one time, eliminating non-essentials and patiently building new habits, will open up the space you need to feel more fulfilled and to be more productive.

If your enthusiasm wanes, refocus on the benefits of your new, simplified approach to life, celebrate your milestones and reward yourself often.

If you’re really stuck, just prompt yourself to at least make a start, nothing more. Take your lead from Babauta: When he doesn’t feel like running, he has a simple rule – he won’t think about it until he’s put on his running shoes and has shut the door behind him.

In other words…just do it.