

SUMMARY

STUFFOCATION

JAMES WALLMAN



Summary of “Stuffocation” by James Wallman

Written by Lea Schullery

Discover how you can find more to life by having
less.

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Introduction

At just 28-years-old, Ryan Nicodemus found that he had everything he could have ever asked for. He was working a six-figure job, wearing name brand suits, \$300 pairs of shoes, and owned one-hundred \$100 ties. On the weekends, he went off-roading with his friends on his \$8,000 four-wheeler and drove around in his brand new Toyota Tacoma truck. He seemed to have it all. Instead of feeling happy, however, he felt confused. What was he missing? Why wasn't he happy? It wasn't until his friend, Fields Millburn, came across a group of people whose happiness equation was drastically different from his: the route to happiness wasn't by *getting more*, but by *having less*. Fields and Ryan decided to give this a try. They packed up all their belongings, and when they needed something, they simply grabbed it from its box. After a few months, whatever was still in those boxes and bags would stay in them. Would living with less make them happier? After just ten days, Ryan didn't touch those boxes again, he'd already removed everything he needed.

At the end of the experiment, Ryan had given away or sold most of his belongings, he stopped working so many hours to pay for the things he didn't need. He lived with less but found something more. He found happiness. Instead of striving towards materialistic goals, he worked on building his relationships and focusing on his health. The experiment worked. The question is, will it work for you?

Why We Fill Our Lives With Stuff

Back in the 1970s, people wanted more. They wanted stuff and more of it. At the time, a political scientist named Ronald Inglehart studied people's attitudes towards material items, finding that four out of five people held materialistic views in countries like the UK, France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Today, however, that statistic has drastically changed.

Today, only one in two holds that same materialistic value, which means we are becoming far less materialistic. People are beginning to value their quality of life over their possessions, they are tired of the "excess" and have even thrown out much of their stuff in recent years. In 2014, an advertising agency found that many of us feel weighed down by our own excesses and that many of us would be happier with less. This means that almost 300 million people in the UK and the United States prefer to live their lives with fewer possessions and are "de-stuffocating" their lives.

So how did we get here? Why do many of us keep buying more when we know that we already have enough? To put this into perspective, let's look at the mystery of the Krispy Kremes. On Thursday, February 14, 2013, police officers in Scotland received a call of a traffic jam on one of the busiest motorways in the UK, the M8. Responding to a routine call, officers found the reason behind the massive traffic jam: the new Krispy Kreme doughnut store. At 7 a.m., an hour before sunrise, 300 people were already lined up outside and in the first hour of serving, they served 400 customers. As they continued to pump out doughnuts and coffee, the line of cars kept growing.

First, it jammed the retail park, then it slowed down the traffic on the roundabout, and finally, it clogged the traffic for the M8. People were speechless. Why were people willing to wait two hours for an unhealthy snack containing 217 calories, 22 grams of carbs, and 13 grams of fat? People knew it was bad for them, yet, they waited. Brian Wansink, a food

scientist, believes the answer to the reason why we indulge in such foods is a phenomenon called *evolutionary psychology*. We have an impulse to eat as often and as much as we can, which made sense in the days when food was scarce. Today, however, that automatic impulse is no longer relevant and causes us to over-indulge, so much so that we now have an obesity epidemic.

This evolutionary psychology can be applied to understanding why we keep wanting and buying more, even when we already have far more than enough. Think about clothes, for instance. The cost of making clothes used to be expensive and scarce. Materials were so hard to come by, clothes were handed down from generation to generation. A single shirt before the Industrial Revolution would have cost upwards of £2,000 in today's money. Now, shirts, shoes, cars, books, and a million other things are much cheaper and easier to make. As a result, we are filling our homes and lives with stuff. Now, we are suffering from *stuffocation*, the material equivalent of the obesity epidemic.

Stuffocation is Bad for Our Health

As you look around your house, your closets, your garage, how do you feel? Is there so much stuff accumulating that it makes you feel anxious? Maybe you've planned to clean it out, but the mere thought of trying to organize everything makes you overwhelmed. Well, many people feel the same way. In fact, there is a connection between consumerism and mental illness. Rates of mental illness have doubled in developed countries since 1979. In other words, the more stuff we accumulate, the less happy we become.

Our connection with material goods has become harmful to our health. According to Wallman, "materialism is making millions of us feel joyless, anxious, and even worse, depressed." For instance, British philosopher Jeremy Bentham noticed that when he enjoyed his morning cup of coffee, he felt satisfied and happy. When he enjoyed his second cup, however, he didn't quite feel the same way. In other words, having a small amount of something is good, but having too much of a good thing can be quite detrimental. Similar to how too much coffee can make your heart race and become anxious, too much stuff can have a similar effect. In fact, too much of something can sometimes lead to death.

In recent studies, it has been proven that between two and six percent of people in developed countries suffer from a behavior called hoarding. These people who hoard struggle to throw their stuff away, even when those things are something as simple as trash. This lack of throwing away results in people storing their stuff in basements, attics, spare rooms, and even hallways and common areas. Sometimes the stuff becomes so much that maneuvering around the house becomes impossible and even dangerous.

Perhaps one of the most life-threatening aspects of hoarding is the higher possibility of fires. For instance, flashovers occur when there is so much stuff within a confined space that when heat builds up, everything within the space spontaneously combusts! A study in Melbourne revealed that flashovers today occur between three and four minutes after a fire has

started. This is a huge difference from thirty years ago when a flashover occurred between 28 and 29 minutes after a fire. This drastic change in time is directly correlated to the amount of stuff we accumulate and collect in our homes. Perhaps it's time to rid ourselves of all the junk we've bought in the past decades, and live a simpler life.

The Origins of Consumerism and the Global Impact

So when did countries like America begin this obsession with overconsumption? Wallman states that “In the sixty years since the Civil War’s end, the population had increased by a factor of three, from 35 to 114 million. Over the same period, output had risen between twelve and fourteen times.” America had to determine how they were going to deal with this large disparity in goods and population. Do they cut production leaving many unemployed, causing an economic collapse? Of course not, the answer was simply to consume more.

One of the pioneers of consumerism was Earnest Elmo Calkins who suggested a few ways to close the gap. One of those suggestions was to build obsolescence into manufactured goods. For instance, Henry Ford once claimed that he wanted to build a car that man could drive all his life; however, Ford began to adopt the ideas of Calkins, and within a few years, he changed his business strategy. Ford began to change the design of his cars every year, that way people knew who was driving the latest versions. In other words, people could clearly tell whether or not you were “keeping up with the Joneses.”

Additionally, while economists like John Maynard Keynes and industrialists like W.K. Kellogg suggested cutting hours to provide people with more free time, President Hoover and General Motors CEO Alfred Sloan found the answer in convincing society to *consume more*. Now, people began finding higher-paying jobs just to spend more. Other countries began to follow suit after major events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain. The idea that people needed to consume more became a worldwide phenomenon as countries tried to boost their economies.

Nowadays, our over-production and “clutter-crisis” is becoming even more lethal than flashover. For instance, the threat of climate change has become more pressing now than ever before. In the 21st century, our goods are

cheaply made and many are oil-based which directly contributes to climate change and global warming as we burn these wastes and release harmful gases into the air. Luckily, we've become more aware of our landfills and our carbon footprints, and many do what they can to reduce their waste. For instance, many people use apps like Uber to get around rather than owning their own car, or they buy their books online instead of filling an entire room with a physical library.

Minimalism and the Medium Chill

At this point, you may be wondering what else you can do to overcome stuffocation. According to Wallman, there are many alternatives that we can turn to, including minimalism and “medium chill.” When it comes to minimalism, the idea is to go through your belongings and eliminate the majority of your belongings. You can follow minimalists like Ryan Nicodemus by separating your stuff into boxes: clothing, kitchen items, bathroom items, etc. for a period of 21 days.

As you go about your daily routine, take out only what is necessary. At the end of the 21 days, you’ll find that many of the boxes will probably remain unopened. Then, you could easily get rid of the things you don’t use often. Wallman also suggests that since you are consuming less with your minimalistic lifestyle, then you won’t need to work as much! Another approach suggested by Wallman is to adopt a simpler life. For example, a simpler life might include moving away from the city, living off the land, and refusing to buy modern consumer goods like an iPad or a new car.

The simpler life differs from the minimalist life in that a minimalist will still accept modern technology into their daily lives. However, those who choose a simplistic life will have to dedicate their lives to survival, learning how to grow food and live off the land. For this reason, environmentalists like David Roberts suggest a more popular, less drastic approach to curing stuffocation. Roberts believes in something he calls, “medium chill.”

The medium chill requires us to step back from the pressures of everyday life, take a lower-paying job, and spend more time with the kids. With this idea, the medium chill suggests stepping back from a promotion when offered and settling with happiness in what you already have. Wallman points out, however, that this idea isn’t quite aspirational and doesn’t inspire us to continue seeking out happiness and new experiences. For these reasons, Wallman suggests a more attractive approach, experientialism.

The Experience Revolution

What impresses you more? Someone who has a fancy watch or handbag, or someone who's climbed Kilimanjaro, completed a Tough Mudder course, or been to a Secret Cinema event? Wallman began thinking about these questions when he came across a study completed by two UCLA psychologists, Rena Repetti and Darby Saxe, which showed that too much stuff causes stress and becomes bad for your health. At the same time, he came across another study by psychologists Leaf van Boven and Tom Gilovich which proved that experiences are more likely than material goods to lead to happiness.

Thus began Wallman's shift towards the "experience revolution" and the cure for stuffocation: experientialism. Experiences hold a much higher value than material possessions, even those that didn't go as planned or became negative experiences. For instance, perhaps you went on a weekend camping trip where you had horrible weather where it constantly rained. Instead, you can look at the experience in a positive light, perhaps that same trip resulted in a bonding experience that would have otherwise never happened. You see, even experiences like these are important. Not only do they allow us to learn about ourselves, but they also help us grow and develop as a person.

In this post-materialistic world, experientialism doesn't have to be compared to hippie culture. While hippies were known to reject materialistic values, experientialists can still exist in mainstream society as they enjoy what they need but don't chase happiness through material items. However, experientialism isn't perfect. In the age of social media and Facebook, this revolution can lead to status anxiety. For example, philosopher Alain de Botton revealed that four out of ten people aged between 18 and 34 in the US and the UK now experience a fear of missing out on an experience. This fear is so common, there is even a name for it, "FOMO."

As social media begins to escalate and influence people's behavior, we have seen immense popularity in experiences, including live music festivals and an increase in spending on holidays and vacations. This trend can even be seen in the growing popularity of e-books, which shows that people care more about the experience of reading rather than the ability to display books on their shelves. However, the trend doesn't stop there. For instance, a country's policy decisions are no longer measured by GDP alone. Instead, the Human Development Index of Economic Well-Being shows that progress is also measured in terms of quality of life and the well-being of its citizens.

Now, we are seeing countries, such as China, Vietnam, and Brazil experiencing a rise in the middle-class. With that, a rise in mass consumption begins as people are now able to afford the luxuries they always dreamed of. However, while they experience the benefits of materialism, they're also experiencing the negative impact of environmental damage and status anxiety. Wallman states that China, in particular, in its "bling stage," they're excited they can have all these new things, but stuffocation will soon catch up to them.

The Experiential Economy

As you know, the economy is nothing without its citizen's earning and spending money. This is why adopting a minimalistic life or a simplistic life isn't quite the answer we are looking for in the answer to stuffocation. Stuffocation simply means that we have too much stuff, not that we should drop off the face of the earth in favor of living off the grid. Of course, that's an option too. But a more economical answer is experientialism.

In fact, spending makes up 65 percent of the British economy and up to 70 percent of the US economy. If we consume less, we are simply putting jobs at risk, maybe even our own! Therefore, experientialism isn't about not spending at all, but about spending *differently*. Companies can no longer rely on simply selling a product, instead, companies must learn how to sell their consumers an experience. The economy must transform into an "experience economy."

An example of an experience that consumers are willing to buy into is the Secret Cinema in London. In this experience, a movie is shown in a special location but the audience also dresses up and takes on roles that match the movie. This immersive experience takes going to the movies to another level, and moviegoers are happily spending £50 to partake in it. Additionally, companies like Apple are also providing their own take on the experiential trend.

For instance, Apple consumers understand that they aren't simply buying a product, but an experience. Apple stores reflect the importance of user experience which is why when you walk in, you can test out the products themselves. The company even plans out the experience of opening a new iPhone or MacBook by packaging the product in a way that is satisfying to open. Companies also understand the problem of clutter, especially when it comes to shopping bags. For this reason, Puma produced a shoe bag that disintegrated after spending three minutes in water. Not only did Puma

produce a bag that wouldn't contribute to the clutter of a home, but the company also created a satisfying experience for the consumer.

Final Summary

In today's world, we have simply accumulated too much stuff. This accumulation is both dangerous and unhealthy, leading to flashovers in fires and mental illnesses like anxiety and depression. However, economies need consumers to spend in order to thrive. Luckily, Wallman has created a solution that solves stuffocation while also allowing our economy to grow. By turning to an experiential economy, we are still spending, but we become happier individuals. When we spend money on experiences over products, we stop contributing to the clutter in our homes while also creating memories that will last a lifetime. This solution, while not perfect, can cure us of the materialism that has been ingrained in us since the 1970s while simultaneously boosting our economy. It's time to get out there and experience life and find happiness in our relationships instead of seeking fulfillment in money and status.



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