

MINIMALIST MONDAY



ZEN LIFE



— Lindsay S. Nixon —

(preview – excerpt)

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My Minimalist (Life) Story

Facebook said I had 718 friends. This number surprised me. Since I only accepted requests from people I knew well in real life (I.e, friends from high school or college, old coworkers, and so forth), I was expecting a much more... *modest* number.

As I scrolled through the list of names, I realized there were hundreds — *hundreds* — of people that I hadn't socialized with or talked to since adding them years (years!) ago. I hadn't even visited their personal Facebook page. This much was clear as I kept finding myself with my mouth agape — shocked to see my “friend” was married, or had children, two things that generally don't happen overnight!

I then had to face another truth: I had “friended” a number of people to scope them out. You know, to see what they were up to, and perhaps, size them up. (Facebook is sort of like a 24/7 high school reunion. *You can gossip and judge in the privacy of your own home!*)

Of course, I wasn't proud of that.

I also felt pains of guilt scrolling through my list because there were a few people I'd fallen out of touch with. Facebook doesn't allow you to *really* fall out of touch (like in the old days pre-Internet), but I hadn't stayed as involved in their life, or talked to them very often. Our closeness wasn't what it once was, or what I wanted it to be.

True, there are some friends (and I find this is very true of family too) that you can just “pick up where you left off” — as though no time had ever passed. You're somehow, still connected at the core, so the space and time that happened between your moments together doesn't matter. Even when you change as people individually, that core connection remains unphased.

While I'm very thankful for that failsafe (without it I'd have lost everyone) I was tired of abusing it.

I can (and did) make excuses: The last few years have been a total mad dash for me as I changed careers and built my business. I've worked and worked and worked some more. My relationships with others took a back seat. They were the "give" in "somethings gotta give."

The cruelest thing a friend said to me (after I'd cancelled our plans because I was facing a brutal deadline with my publisher) was: "Fine. Go sit alone on top of your money."

I retorted, "It isn't about money! It's my CAREER! I've been working really hard! Why can't you support me?" and went into a selfdefense rage.

When I finally came down from the angry mountain, and crossed the river called denial at least twice, I faced my inner truth: What good is success if you have no one to share it with?

Because I hadn't picked material things over my relationships, I never saw a problem with my actions. I wasn't the imagined corporate executive who worked tirelessly at the expense of all relationships to afford a bigger house, a more expensive car, designer clothes, etc.

I'm just setting theses relationships aside temporarily while my life is chaotic.

My lack of *financial* success made it even easier to slip the blinders on.

I had lost a sense of balance, and priority. While my work was important, it wasn't *everything*. I had put my business and career ahead of all my relationships (including the one with myself). I hadn't set out to be so selfish, but that's what happened organically. I came to a place where my focus was almost solely on myself and my goals. Doing that for reasons other than money didn't make it less true. Doing it for "good" reasons didn't make it less true. THAT was the hard truth I had to swallow.

As my work and business took my life over, I went into total "response" mode with my relationships: I reacted. I responded. I never instigated. I never took the first step in my relationships.

I abused the failsafe. I knew my friends would understand, and would be there for me when I came around (a testament to their greatness), so I continued on as I was, with no urgency to change my ways.

I stopped calling. I stopped emailing. I stopped reading Facebook's main feed and only checked my personal page and Happy Herbivore's business page. (No wonder I missed so many life updates like pregnancies and weddings!)

But relationships — all relationships — are a two-way street.

My friend's comment made me finally realize that, and that I had been a bad friend. I could no-longer be blind to my actions or my lack of balance. I couldn't continue to justify and say my situation was different. My actions may not meet some arbitrary vision — I may not look like the imagined evil executive — but I *was* wrong.

To make sure I really understood this, life came in and smacked me across the face.

A friend, who I hadn't spoken to in months, maybe even a year, but someone I should have been more in contact with — someone I wanted to be more in contact with — someone I was once very close to and talked to nearly every day — emailed. A mutual friend of ours had died serving in Afghanistan.

I was saddened by the loss, and even more saddened that it was something so tragic that got us talking again.

Life is short and precious. Relationships are the extent of our riches. Money and things don't outweigh love. Isn't this what minimalism has been teaching me?

I think we can all (very easily) get caught up in our own little world. We lose that balance. Work or careers may not even be the source. It might be our family obligations, or health obligations, or some other factor.

Point is, we are all busy, and busy for different reasons (or a culmination of reasons) but we have to make time to invest in the relationships we have. We have to make time for those we care about. We can't keep saying I'll call them tomorrow or next week or next whatever. That whatever may not come. (I can't reprint it here, but search the Internet for "Around the Corner" by Charles Hanson Towne. It was one of my favorite poems as a teen and is incredibly apt to my life as an adult).

And here is where my minimalism really came in: When I decided to have more meaningful relationships, I knew it meant making a better effort at keeping in touch, but also minimizing who those people are.

I don't really have 718 friends.

Recognizing that, I made a grand decision to minimize my life and rethink my priorities and relationships. Just as I had tackled the clutter in my closet, I decided to tackle the clutter in my life. "Everything that matters and nothing that doesn't" became my mantra for my work, my relationships, my goals, and my dreams. The principals of minimalism became my guiding light for finding my ideal life, my ideal career, my ideal relationships — my ideal everything.

A minimalist life focuses on living with less stress, less negativity, and less social chaos in order to make room for more positivity, more happiness, and more fulfillment.

It's time to let go of emotional baggage, toxic relationships, stressful social situations, and soul-crushing careers (or commitments). It's time to live for you — for your ideal day. Less stress, more happiness!

Let the light in!

Lindsay

Ending Toxic Relationships

When I decided to have more meaningful relationships, I knew it meant making a better effort at keeping in touch, but also minimizing who those people are. Above all, I knew minimizing my relationships (and my life) meant I needed to put an end to toxic relationships, especially if I wanted to get a handle on my emotional baggage.

The problem with toxic relationships is that they're not always easy to identify.

I find it's relatively easy to pick out toxic people, but not toxic relationships if the person in the relationship with you is not a toxic person per se.

Since becoming a minimalist, I have had to "break up" with two friends because I realized our relationship was not healthy for me. It wasn't that these people were a bad influence on me (i.e., peer pressuring me to drink or do drugs, or something else that's not beneficial). We just weren't good for each other. Put simply, they didn't bring out the best in each other.

For example, Adam* and I would argue nearly every time we talked. Our constant bickering was baffling because we fundamentally agreed on nearly everything and live very similar lifestyles. It's not as if one of us was a Republican and the other a Democrat and our views were polar opposites on every political issue. Actually, I have a friend like that and we almost never argue!

But there Adam and I were, arguing constantly. Our verbal battles soured my mood every time, often for the rest of the day. My husband quickly picked up on this pattern and pointed out I was irritable and grouchy after I talked to Adam. After this happened a few times in a row, my husband kindly suggested I stop talking to Adam altogether.

His suggestion was logical, but despite the arguing, I still really liked Adam as a person and I was willing to accept some capability. After all, it takes two to tango. Surely there was a way to resolve this, I thought.

In defense of my friendship with Adam, I pointed out what a good person Adam

was and all the good things that have happened as a result of our friendship (in spite of our constant arguing). Put simply, it hadn't all been bad.

Since Adam wasn't a "bad apple" it made "breaking up" seem like an extreme measure. *If only he'd been a jerk!*

For a while, I tried to alter my own behavior. I tried to be more agreeable. If I sensed we were migrating towards an argument, I tried to change the topic. I even mentioned to my friend on several occasions that I didn't want to argue anymore. Yet nothing improved. I also had this feeling like I was wearing the wrong shoe on the wrong foot — I wasn't being myself, and what kind of relationship is it if I can't be me?

Eventually, I started to avoid calls and texts from Adam. When he would follow up and lovingly ask why I hadn't called, texted or emailed back, I would fib and say I was busy. (Which wasn't entirely false — I am busy, as we all are, but I wasn't so busy I couldn't return a phone call for three weeks).

Of course this behavior didn't make me feel good about myself, either. It was dishonest. It wasn't me.

Finally, I had to face reality: it just wasn't going to work out. Adam and I simply weren't good for each other.

I still think I am a good person and that Adam is a good person. If I have to blame something, then I'll blame our personalities. They just didn't mesh well.

To be entirely fair, Adam did not find our relationship, or our arguing, as toxic as I did. He was shocked and hurt by the break-up, but I just couldn't go on. I couldn't continue to involve myself in something that caused me so much stress and angst. I can't explain it really, but that friendship, for whatever reason, was just not healthy for me. It brought out the worst in me. It made me not like myself.

I felt bad ending things -- I still do, because I genuinely liked Adam as a person. I still have immense respect for him. He's brilliant with kind heart. He's a wonderful father, husband, and friend. Even with me he was a good friend. He encouraged me, he supported me, he always gave me helpful advice when I needed it, but for whatever reason, we just couldn't get along. We didn't go together like peas and carrots. We were more like oil and water.

As much as I hate to say it, ending that relationship provided me a sense of relief I can't quite describe. Initially, I had a lot of emotional baggage and remorse. I had my share of grief, but once that lifted I realized I was better off. I don't feel a twinge of anxiety when my phone beeps. My days are not soured by a phone call.

It's hard to be so honest about this, but I don't think I'm alone. I think everyone will eventually find themselves in a relationship that is not healthy or productive and it's unexplainable.

I went through something similar with an old boyfriend in college. Love wasn't the problem. No one had fallen out of love or cheated or met someone else. We loved each other and got along fine. Our relationship wasn't broken. No one was a jerk. The problem was we just wanted such different things out of life and it was all too clear that our lives were going in separate directions and not together. That break up was 100 times harder than the ones that dissolved after a nasty fight. It was harder to say, "I love you... but..."

Minimalism is about letting go of clutter and that includes emotional baggage.

We shouldn't keep someone in our lives just because they are already in it, especially if having them in our lives does us harm or causes stress.

For me, a minimalist life means choosing to surround myself with people that make me feel good about myself, that make me a better person, that are a good influence on me.

I want love and light and meaningful relationships. I want the experiences I have with others to be as positive as possible. I know my world can't be perfect all the time but if I can remove something that routinely makes me unhappy or gives anxiety, I feel that I should. Even if it's hard or painful and there isn't a better excuse.

Yes, it would have been easier to get in an epic fight. Then I could have found comfort in my anger over what happened instead of facing the hard truth that things just didn't work out. *It's not you, it's me.*

Questions to ask yourself:

1) Does this person make me feel bad about myself?

- 2) Does this person put me down?
- 3) Do I frequently feel like I'm in a competition with this person?
- 4) Do I often argue or fight with this person?
- 5) Have others suggested this person is not healthy for me?
- 6) Do I avoid calls or contact with this person?
- 7) Do I clench up when this person calls or appears?
- 8) Do I spend time venting or complaining about this person?
- 9) Is this person negative all the time?
- 10) Do I gossip with this person? Gossip about this person?

One final note: Toxic relationships can happen slowly, without any warning. That's one of the reasons they are so hard to identify. A relationship that has been healthy for 20 years can become toxic.

When relationships become stressors, you need to remove them or make a change (if possible) to turn the relationship around into something that is healthy and positive.

For example, Molly* had been a great friend of mine for years. We always brought out the best in each other. We were incredibly close, talking nearly every single day. Everything changed when Molly's boss retired. Her new boss was awful, and seemed to find joy in making Molly's life unpleasant. My heart went out to Molly and I tried to be there for her. I tried to support her, encourage her to find ways to improve the situation, deal with it, or find another job. Unfortunately, things only got worse for Molly. Before long, every time we talked, every week day, Molly spent the entire time complaining about her boss. I knew how miserable Molly was. I knew she had to vent, so I listened. It was the same song every day.

A few months later, Molly went on a cruise so we didn't talk for a week. As soon

as she returned though, the complaining started up again. For the first time I could feel the negative pull our conversation was having on me. After a few days, I couldn't take it anymore. I told Molly that I loved her, but I felt her chronic complaining was doing a disservice to us both. Molly agreed. It was a big "a ha" moment for us both and Molly never complained about her boss again. She also left that job for a different one a few months later. I like to think by not dwelling on it verbally, it motivated Molly to make a change. *A real change.*

My experience with Molly (and Adam) made me realize that there are people in my life who are toxic and weighing me down. It's not abusive per se, but these people are not a good influence on me. My relationships with them are overall, not positive.

Other questions to ask yourself:

- 11) Does this person bring out the best in me?
- 12) Am I delighted and happy to hear from this person?
- 13) Can this person help me get to where I want to go?
- 14) Is this person encouraging and supportive?
- 15) Do I feel like this person uses me?
- 16) Is this person filling me up with happiness or taking my happiness away?
- 17) Is this person a good influence? (Are they a bad influence?)
- 18) Does this person make me want to be a better person?
- 19) Are my experiences overall with this person positive? (Negative?)

To find a place of less stress and more happiness we need to end or take a break from relationships that are toxic and negative.

To be clear, this doesn't mean I'm only friends with people who are exploding rainbows — because someone can be happy or sad in their own life while still

being toxic to your life. I respect that everyone has ups and downs, and the great gift of friendship and love is that we can share those joys, and comfort each other during our sorrows. I'm talking about the cumulative effect overall. Is this person GOOD for you?

Using two other examples from my life: I ended my relationship with Carolyn* because she always deflated my self-esteem and often made me feel bad about myself. We had a lot of good times, true, and she had been there for me through some tough times also, but minimalism made me realize I needed to stop clinging to those few good instances. Overall my dealings with Carolyn were not good or positive. She frequently put me down, embarrassed me to our friends, bullied me or picked on me. I hate comparing a person to a pair of shoes, but the analogy fits: Just because I wore the shoes three times a year, doesn't mean I should keep them, especially when they give me sores and blisters.

The other example is my friend Danah*. Danah is an alcoholic. I've tried to get her help but she doesn't want it. She digs a deeper hole with every swig of the bottle. It's her life, not mine, and I'm not judging her, but I can't keep playing on the emotional teeter totter with her either. Danah's life is chaotic, extreme, and toxic. Her cyclone winds are strong and I'm dizzy. I cried feeling like I abandoned her when I told her not to call me drunk again. For a long time I thought I was a bad person for walking away, but I continue to hope that doing so was the best thing for both of us. I couldn't... *cant* be a friend to her while she drinks. Should she ever decide to get sober, I'll be there for her. I'll help her in any way that I can. I still love her. I miss her, but I accept can't be part of her drinking anymore.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

Digital Friends & Frenemies

As I mentioned earlier in the book, at one point I had 718 Facebook friends. This number surprised me since I didn't "friend" anyone I didn't know in real life. All 718 people were classmates, co-workers, family members, or members of a group I'd been involved with at some point or another.

Scrolling through the list of names made me face a few personal truths. First, I hadn't talked to the vast majority of those people in years. Even though we were "friends" on Facebook I was completely removed from their life. I found myself shocked to see they were married, had children or had graduated with a degree—things that generally take more than a few days to accomplish! Clearly I had been absent... *really absent!*

Second, I accepted that I had added a number of people (especially ex-boyfriends or people I'd once been in "competition" with) just so I could scope them out. I

wanted to see what they were up to, who they were dating (or had married), how they looked, what school they went to, or where they worked — basically, size them up and judge high school reunion style. (Obviously I'm not proud of this).

Knowing that behavior is not healthy or positive, I unfriended all of them immediately. I then went on to delete anyone I hadn't talked to recently, or at least, couldn't remember the last time we spoke. For example, my old neighbor from sophomore year in college that I hadn't talked to since my sophomore year in college almost a decade ago? Delete.

Minimalism helped me see that I don't need to be "friends" with someone online that I never talk to. People that I'll probably never talk to.

What's the worse thing that could happen? I might want to talk to them in the future? Well if so, I can find them on Facebook and contact them, or contact a mutual friend who is still in touch or might have their info. (Editorial note: I completed this project more than two years ago and have yet to have this experience).

Words can't describe how amazing it felt to minimize my "friends." It felt freeing... *cleansing*.

Most importantly, doing so made room in my life for the people who really mattered to me. My news feed was filled with updates I wanted to read, from people whose lives I wanted to be more involved in. I stopped missing important moments. I'm not scrolling past thinking "I don't care" anymore (even if it's hard to admit I did that).

To date, I have 219 friends, which is still a lot, but I interact with most of them regularly, liking and commenting on their updates or pictures. Admittedly there are a few, such as spouses of close friends, that would be too socially awkward to "unfriend" without warning or reason, but most of those who remain are people I'm genuinely interested in keeping in touch with. That desire is evident by our regular virtual interaction. It may not be every day or every week, but I enjoy and look forward to reading about their life in my feed. Most importantly, my interest in them is for positive reasons!

To be clear, I didn't get to 219 overnight. I worked my way there, and I could probably do with a little bit less. You may find a different number more satisfying, but the point is to minimize your relationships. Embrace that 5 meaningful, life-altering relationships are worth more than 55 superficial ones. If nothing else,

accept that, you don't have the time or emotional resources for 555 friends online.

One final note: There are a few people in my life who I wish to maintain relationships with, but I generally don't want to see their updates. They either post things I disagree with sharply, or use language that makes me uncomfortable, etc. I respect that everyone is entitled to their opinion, and their page is *their page* — they can do and say on it what they wish, but that doesn't mean I have to see it or read it. If their updates upset me, the best thing I can do for myself, and our relationship, is remove myself. I enjoy a diversity amongst my friends, and I don't expect everyone to be exactly like me, but agreeing to disagree includes not following all their posts online, or engaging in debate. One pal, we'll call her Amanda, is a very close friend of mine. We talk and text often, and frequently comment on each other's photos (I especially love seeing pictures of her cats on Facebook). Her updates, however, are very political, and often upset or enrage me. I'm not going to try to change Amanda, as I wouldn't want her to try to change me. I also accept that those are Amanda's opinions, just as she accepts and respects mine. We aren't trying to sway or influence the other, but I also don't feel I have to see her updates. Similarly, another pal, a guy pal, who I happen to like a lot, posts a lot of messages with language that makes me uncomfortable. Strangely, he never talks like that in person, but his online voice is a little too R-rated for me, so I don't follow his updates. We still post on each other's wall fairly often, and we talk a few times a year, too. I'm genuinely interested in how he is doing and keeping up with him, but I don't feel my friendship requires me to be subject to language that bothers me. I'm sure some of my friends have unfollowed me, finding my non-stop talk about veggies boring!

Questions to ask yourself:

- 1) When was the last time I spoke to this person?
- 2) When was the last time I liked or commented on their page?
- 3) Did I wish this person a happy birthday? (Do I know when their birthday is?)
- 4) Am I surprised to find they are married, have children, etc?
- 5) Am I only friends with this person to scope them out? (Am I snooping?)

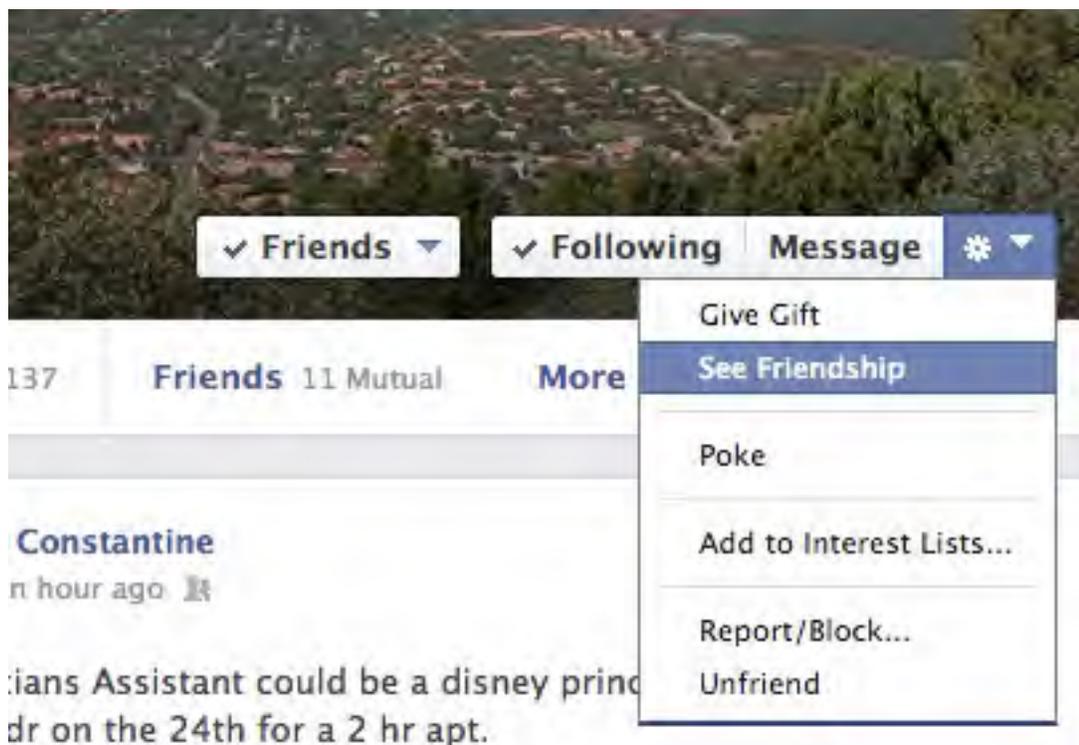
6) Do I know who this person is? Do I recognize their name?

7) Where do I know this person from?

8) Do their updates bother me? (Do I “dislike” and debate with them?)

9) Am I really, truly a friend to this person?

Facebook also has a nifty feature that allows you to “see friendship” it’ll show you how often you interact, if at all.



Make room for the people who matter, let go of those who don't. It's not personal.

Minimizing your relationships is about giving all the time you have to the people you actually spend time with.

Twitter and Beyond

(Pages omitted from sample excerpt)

Judgement and the Mirror

"Judging a person does not define who they are. It defines who you are."

Most of us look at judgment or judging as a bad thing, and it certainly can be, but judgment and judging also have some utility. After all, it's our quick judgment that often keeps us out of dangerous situations.

Point is, to judge is human. It's how we judge and what we judge (and why we are judging) that determines if it's a good behavior or one we should minimize.

That classic, grade school wisdom rings true: When you point one finger at someone, three more point back at you.

Here's an example from my life: I said to a friend, "How dare you judge her!" referring to a comment she passed about a mutual friend's decision. The "judging" friend replied to me, "You realize you just judged me for judging her.. the very thing you're so mad about."

It makes my head spin, but it's true.

The reactions we have a truly mirrors of ourselves.

Minimalism has been a great mirror for me in many ways. I have often had to look back at myself, or my practices, and face certain, hard truths. For example, in my first minimalist book, *Minimalist Monday: Declutter Your Way to a Zen Home*, I admitted a painful truth about my large keepsakes collection. As boxes of mementos piled around me, I had no choice but to face the truth: I was holding on to things in a bizarre effort to hold on to my past.

Minimalism has also made me realize that my negativity (towards anything) has always (always!) unmasked me. Even when my points were factual or valid, there was always that tiny, lingering stench of jealousy. I'm very fond of this saying, "The worst thing someone can say about you, reveals a little truth about them."

Being a pseudo public figure has forced me to learn how to hold my tongue, and at times, bite it.

My parents always told me to “think before I speak” which I never really did, but certainly do now! They also told me “if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.”

That practice was to teach me to be polite, but I’ve also realized if I don’t open my mouth, no one knows what I’m thinking and I can’t unmask myself. Truth is, we can’t see in ourselves what we can see so clearly in others. By pointing something (usually unpleasant) out about someone else, we’re really putting a big neon sign over our own heads.

Complaining is not a Conversation

Earlier in this book I talked about my friend Molly used complaining as a form of conversation. Complaining is not a conversation... it’s *complaining*. (You’ll read more about Molly in a later chapter).

Here’s a project for you to try: Go 24 hours without complaining. Not once! You’ll be amazed at how your life changes! (It really is an amazing, eye-opening challenge).

When you feel the urge to be negative or judge, try to twist it into a positive. Find the compliment that’s hidden in there.

Building Your Ideal Future: Your Ideal Day, Ideal Relationship, Ideal Career – and Beyond!

Before I was a minimalist (and especially before I had my now career), I was very unhappy. I spent hours crying and sobbing about how miserable I was with my life. There was plenty of good in my life. Plenty to be thankful for — but there was so much that was making me so unhappy that I couldn't see past it. The storm clouds were hiding the sunshine.

Every time I have tried to be honest about how I was feeling, both at the time, and since in retrospect, people have been cruel. They would say things like "quit being a spoiled brat!" or "suck it up and grow up" or "you have bulls#!t problems"

and that hurt.

All I can think is those people must never have experienced depression or burnout, and how suffocating and blinding both can be. Depression is real and it hurts. Often we don't even know we are depressed. I didn't. I knew I was unhappy.

I knew I was angry and irritable. I knew I was stressed out, but I didn't know these were signs of depression or that I was depressed. I thought you had to be socially withdrawn or suicidal to be depressed — and I since wasn't suicidal or withdrawn, I didn't bother seeking help or treatment professionally. It wasn't until years later that I would learn depression has many forms, signs and symptoms and that I had been depressed.

Thankfully, I also had people in my life who offered sympathy and a helping hand, so I eventually found my way out of my depression.

I did it by following a minimalist practice (even though back then I wasn't calling myself a minimalist nor did I even have minimalism on my radar).

Since then, I continue to live by this practice and find it not only keeps me from falling back down the dark hole, it also helps keep me going in the right direction. I'm sidetracked less. Having a focus allows you to navigate the best course towards happiness.

What you need to do:

(end of sample)

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