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Minimalist Style: The 10-Item Capsule Wardrobe

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When I decided to pursue a minimalist lifestyle, one of the first areas I tackled was my closet. I had too many clothes that I didn't wear, and too little space in which to keep them. I wanted a wardrobe that was simple, elegant and functional — and I wanted to be able to retrieve the pieces, and put them away, without any pushing, pulling or wrestling.

Over the course of a few months, I pared down my closet to less than half its original contents. I sold a number of items on eBay, gave some to family and friends and donated the rest.

Although happier with my streamlined attire, I yearned to go even smaller. So when my husband and I moved overseas to pursue a more nomadic lifestyle, I took the opportunity to do some radical downsizing.

I emptied my whole closet and started from scratch (it's easier to decide what to keep than what to toss). My goal was to develop a 10-item capsule wardrobe: in other words, a core set of essentials to get me through my daily activities in every season.

The result is pictured below, and consists of the following pieces: burgundy sleeveless top, plum ¾-sleeve top, slate blue long-sleeve top, black cardigan, black dress, black skirt, black pants, black coat, black handbag and black ballet flats.

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As it turned out, the selection fit my needs as a writer and traveler perfectly; my days consisted of writing, meeting with reporters and TV producers, or exploring European cities (nice life, I know!). To be honest, though, the same pieces would have sufficed in my previous office job — and are now serving me well as a work-at-home mom of a toddler.

Here's a brief overview of the techniques I used to build my capsule wardrobe — and how you, too, can look fabulous with less:

1. Choose a base color. Pick a neutral like black, brown, navy or khaki for your foundation pieces (like pants, skirts and suits). My base color is black — it works with my skin tone, travels well and hides stains brilliantly (important if you spend a lot of time on-the-go).

2. Choose accent colors. Select a handful of shades that flatter you, and complement your base. I chose burgundy, plum and slate blue, but a world of pastels, earth tones, primaries and jewel tones are at your disposal.

3. Limit accessories to one color. My bag and shoes are both black; they go with each other and everything in my closet. (It's liberating to no longer need footwear and handbags in multiple colors!)

4. Dress in layers. I'm accustomed to a four-season climate, hence I've included everything from a sleeveless top to a winter coat. A cardigan is perfect for those temperatures in between. I find that layers offer much more versatility than heavy sweaters or season-specific clothes.

5. Mix and match. Everything in your capsule wardrobe should go with everything else. Ideally, you should be able to get dressed with your eyes closed and still look well put-together.

6. Dress up and dress down. My items are neither overly formal or casual (no sequins or sweatpants here). My tops, for example, can go from the grocery store to a dinner party with the addition of a scarf or jewelry.

7. Choose classic styles. Avoid anything that's too trendy or dated, or that calls attention to the outfit rather than you. I like simple, timeless silhouettes: my pants are straight-leg, my skirt is A-line and my dress is a classic shift.

8. Make sure it fits. When you have a minimalist wardrobe, no item can hang around waiting for you to diet into it — everything should fit now. A little trick: choose forgiving fabrics with a little bit of stretch, to accommodate minor weight fluctuations.

9. Make sure it flatters. Be honest here — you know in your heart whether or not you look good in skinny jeans or cropped tops. Stick to the styles that complement your figure, and you'll always feel confident in your clothes.

10. The feel-good test. When considering an outfit, question whether you'd feel comfortable being photographed in it. Sure, that may sound a little shallow, but pride in your appearance goes a long way towards minimizing your wardrobe (goodbye, mom jeans!).

Of course, a 10-item wardrobe is a bit extreme, and certainly not practical for everyone. But try it as a little experiment: put the 10 pieces you wear most often to one side of your closet, and see how well they serve you for a week.

The results will likely illuminate what you *really* wear, and what's just taking up space in your closet. And although you might decide that 10 items are not enough, you may discover that 20 or 30 (out of the hundred in your closet) will do.

At the very least, it makes a great template for a travel wardrobe — helping you pack light and look great on your next trip!

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