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Living with less

How many things do we really need to get along?

Story by Stephanie Detillier | Photos by Nicholas Benner

Lincoln Sheets can't skip laundry day, but it's not much of a chore for him anyway. His wardrobe — every shirt, sock, undergarment and pair of pants he owns — totals fewer than 25 pieces and can be washed in a single load.

Sheets, MD '11, a first-year family and community medicine resident at MU, says that is just one of the benefits he has reaped from limiting his possessions to 100 items.

Shortly after Sheets started medical school at Mizzou, his wife showed him a 2008 *Time* magazine article about the "100 Thing Challenge," a minimalist experiment to limit personal possessions. "She plopped it in my lap and said, 'This reminds me of you,'" he recalls. "Then she was so sorry she had done so because she wasn't expecting me to do anything with it."

When Sheets adopted the challenge as his New Year's resolution, he had no



On a daily basis, Lincoln Sheets carries 39 of his 86 possessions in his backpack.

clue how many items he owned (more than 700) and gave himself a more realistic goal (reduce to 500 items). He placed a garbage bag in his closet and started adding clothing that he wanted to give away to friends or to Goodwill. Before he knew it, he was down to about 150 items.

“The first 600 or so things were no-brainers,” he says. “I had a ton of camping equipment that I only used once or twice a year, books I’d never read again and clothes I hadn’t worn in two years.”

Because he had come that far, he figured he’d continue whittling his belongings down to 100. It wasn’t easy; what remained were Sheets’ favorite, highest-quality items. He held on to a pair of \$150 boots for a while before eventually giving them to a hiker friend.

“Every decision I made required pushing past that urge to hold on,” Sheets says. “As I got closer to 100 things, I felt more successful. It was like sticking to an exercise plan or a studying plan.”

Sheets planned to maintain the 100-possession limit for a year, but he says he has continued the challenge because it’s been surprisingly easy. He now owns 86 things, including a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, rain poncho, jumper cables, *Leonard Maltin’s Movie Guide*, bicycle helmet and toiletries. Aside from his car, bicycle, motorbike and a few other items, everything the 48-year-old owns fits into his backpack, which makes traveling easy. When Sheets realizes that he needs something for a temporary use, he tries to borrow, instead of buy.

“I have a friend who I had done a lot of road trips and camping with, and he has a garage full of man stuff. I’m always borrowing something from him, and every time I do he teases me about my 100 things *plus his*,” Sheets says. “But I think of that as a virtue of this project. Not everybody I know who likes to camp needs duplicate camping stoves. We won’t be using them at the same time. It’s kind of nice to be a little bit more dependent on other people than on things. Of course, I’m careful not to go too far. If I’m borrowing something too much, I need to buy it and get rid of something else.”




He admits that deciding what items to count and how to count them can cause some controversy. One woman quoted in the *Time* article, for example, considers her entire shoe collection as one possession. Sheets is living with his mother-in-law in Columbia during his residency and doesn’t count any of her furniture or possessions. The furnishings in his Springfield, Mo., home that belong to his wife don’t figure into his calculations either.

Sheets says his new lifestyle hasn’t rubbed off much on his family: His mother’s favorite pastime is buying antiques at the flea market, and his wife has a garage full of stuff. But for Sheets, the 100-thing limit has had lasting benefits.

“I feel like the more I prove to myself that I’m OK without a bunch of things, the more I really am OK without a bunch of things,” he says.

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