

The Shopping Strategy I Used to Pay Off \$22,000 Debt and Save \$36,000 Might Sound Extreme — But It Worked. Here's How.

*This as-told-to essay is based on a conversation with Ashlee Piper, a political strategist turned eco-lifestyle journalist and TV personality who is the author of Give a Sh*t: Do Good. Live Better. Save the Planet. and the forthcoming No New Things: A Radically Simple 30-Day Guide to Saving Money, the Planet, and Your Sanity.*

Image Credit: Courtesy of Ashlee Piper

I started doing “No New Things” in 2013 as a personal challenge. I wanted to stretch myself and see if I could expand some of my sustainable behaviors. In the past, I’d participated in some of the secondhand purchase challenges that are popular now, i.e., not buying new clothes. But my goal was to see if I could buy nothing new for one month. Of course, there were a few caveats: I could pay my bills and buy groceries and hygiene products.

One month into the no new things challenge, I was enjoying the benefits so much that I stuck with it for almost two years. I saved \$36,000 in that time. I also paid off all of my debt – \$22,000. However, the rewards went so far beyond the

financial. In addition to buying fewer things overall, I offloaded items I didn't use anymore. My home was less cluttered; it became a more serene place. My closet also became a friendlier place because I wasn't saving clothes for an aspirational life. The psychological benefits are understated.

I'd mentioned the challenge to my modest Instagram following at the time and was surprised to learn that a lot of people were interested in doing it themselves. People started sharing the challenge and participating in 30-day versions of it, and I got a lot of positive feedback about how it was changing lives. That's what inspired me to write *No New Things* – I wanted to provide more formal guidance for folks who wanted to try the buy nothing challenge themselves.

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I wrote the book to speak to some of the most common obstacles people who undertake the 30-day challenge face. I ordered the book and sequence of daily action items in a way that felt intuitive based on what I'd heard people experience. Although the no new things challenge doesn't require any supplies or startup costs, it does necessitate some forethought and planning. For example, people should consider if they have to buy gifts that month or make other special purchases.

Of course, sometimes people do the challenge, and unforeseen gifting occasions arise – a lot of people get nervous because so much of Western culture around gifting is focused on registries, wishlists, buying people something new and spending a lot of money. It gives people anxiety, especially when it comes to high-stakes gifting occasions like weddings and baby showers. However, once people try gifting another way, with secondhand items, they realize it's much easier than they thought. They can still give meaningful gifts that the

recipient loves.

People can also have difficulty embracing a circular, community-based mentality. In the book, I explain the SUPER System, an acronym that helps people understand the approach. “S” is for “secondhand” purchasing. “U” is for “upcycling,” so repurposing items. “P” is for “paying nothing,” or acquiring things for free. “E” is for “experiences,” so prioritizing less tangible ways of gifting or entertaining. “R” is for “renting” – essentially borrowing or sharing.

The borrowing piece has been such a huge cornerstone of how we’ve sustained ourselves in community for a very long time. It’s a bit of a lost art, and it’s something that some people even consider socially taboo. I speak with a lot of women who are afraid of seeming like a neighborhood pariah if they borrow from neighbors too frequently. A lot of people think the American Dream involves having one of everything in their garage – it’s all theirs, and they don’t need anybody else’s generosity.

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The U.S. Department of Labor conducts an American Time Use Study, which is a sort of census of how various Americans spend their days. It’s broken down by gender, and it found that women spend anywhere from two to six hours a day on shopping and shopping-related activities. That can mean cleaning the things, browsing for the things, making lists to buy the things, repairing them, etc. It’s a significant amount of time each day. Of course, some people are heads of households, and that time includes shopping for groceries and other essentials, but not all of it.

If most of us are honest with ourselves, we waste a lot of time scrolling on social media, where we see products on Instagram that we don’t necessarily need but purchase anyway. When I broke that cycle, I had a lot more time for all of the

things I said I didn't have time for before, like volunteering, prioritizing physical fitness, prepping meals, talking with friends, reading books, etc. I'd expected the no new things challenge to come with a financial payoff, but I didn't expect just how much time I'd gain back. It helped me focus on what matters and add value to my life.

One of the most unexpected benefits of the challenge was that I also became more creative. You have to come up with alternative ways to meet your needs, and that introduces the constraints that your brain requires to be creative. We think, especially in the U.S., that having an abundance of choice is what makes you creative and leads to ingenuity and a great life – but sometimes those choices need to be curtailed for maximum creativity. Instead of going to Amazon for an item, I see what I have on hand that could serve the same purpose. It's a lot like exercising a muscle.

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We went from being a society that would wash and reuse tinfoil and purchase an item with a lot of intention and repair it for the rest of our lives to bona fide consumers. The book delves into how we went from citizens to consumers. What was happening in the historical zeitgeist at that time? What happened with industry, what happened with marketing? How did all of those come together to create the people who are essentially constantly in an over-consumption swirl?

For a lot of people, it's natural to feel nervous when considering a challenge that will turn off the tap on some of our shopping impulses. Advertising is such a large part of our culture and conditioning. It's such a given that we have to pay to remove advertisements from much of our entertainment.

But, from some of the thousands of people who've participated in the no new things challenge, I've heard that it basically

becomes a lifestyle. I have received unsolicited testimonials from people who say just participating in it for the week was elucidating – one woman messaged me to say she'd done it for one week and was going to do it for one more so that she could save up enough money to see a therapist about her shopping addiction. Other people have done it for three months and were able to get their finances in order, organize their home and actualize a goal they'd been putting off.

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No matter how much time folks can try the challenge for, they're going to see benefits. What's more, if someone has any concern or stress around trying the no new things challenge, that in and of itself should be a sign that it's time to go for it.

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