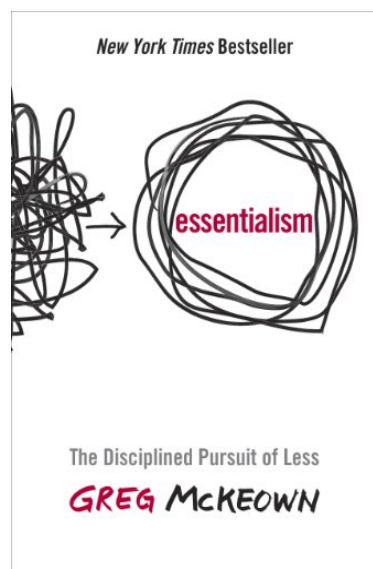


Essentialism Book Summary, by Greg McKeown (archive)

by Allen Cheng

<https://www.allencheng.com/essentialism-book-summary-greg-mckeown/>



We feel constantly pressed for time. We try to do too much, yet when someone makes a request, we say yes without thinking. We feel we have to do it all. But because we're going in so many directions, we make little progress in any of them. Yet most of these activities are trivial. As Greg McKeown, author of *Essentialism* puts it, we're majoring in minor activities.

The way out of this trap is to practice essentialism: "do less but better." McKeown explains how you can distinguish the vital few from the trivial, then eliminate the nonessentials and make your optimum contribution in your life and work.

1-Page Summary of Essentialism

We're constantly trying to do too much and to be all things to all people. Yet when someone makes a request, we say yes without thinking in order to avoid conflict or hurt feelings. We feel we have to do it all.

Because we're stretched thin and going in too many directions, we make little progress. **We feel overworked but underutilized because most of what we're spending our time on isn't really important.** As Greg McKeown, author of *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, puts it, many of us are majoring in minor activities. **The way out of this trap is to practice essentialism: "do less but better."**

**Essentialism is defined as the consistent and focused pursuit of less but better. **It's not about being more efficient or doing more with less (or less with less), as many companies demand of employees. It requires stopping regularly to ask yourself whether you're spending your time and resources on the right things.

We have numerous opportunities to choose from, and obviously we can't invest our time and energy in all of them. Some may be good or excellent, but most are unimportant; few are crucial or essential. **Essentialism means differentiating among the options and selecting just a few essential ones while eliminating the rest.** It's doing the right things as opposed to doing more things.

Taking an essentialist approach is similar to how you or a professional organizer would streamline your closet. If you neglect your closet, it gets disorganized and crammed with items you don't wear. You purge it periodically when it gets totally out of control. But if you don't have an ongoing system that you stick to, you'll keep ending up back at square one, with a messy closet.

The same thing happens to your life. With good intentions, you say yes to too many things without a sense of overall purpose and your schedule soon overflows. Many activities are ongoing and unless you have a system for purging them, they expand to fill your time automatically.

Define Your Purpose

Essentialism is investing your time and energy only in what's essential in order to make your optimum contribution to the things that matter most to you.

Before you start eliminating things, you must decide your intent or purpose, the highest contribution you're trying to achieve that's distinct from the many nonessential options and opportunities you *could* pursue. It should be specific and measurable. Ask yourself: What inspires me? What am I really good at? What would make the world better?

Deciding your purpose makes many further decisions unnecessary or makes them easier. For instance, deciding on a specific profession like law or medicine eliminates myriad options and sets a future course. Once a critical decision is made, subsequent choices fall into alignment while other options become moot.

Three Phases of Essentialism

An essentialist approach to your closet — or your life — consists of three phases, in which you consider tough questions:

1) Explore options: When sorting items in a closet, you'd typically ask yourself whether you might wear

an item someday. But an essentialist asks a tougher question: Is this item a favorite that I wear often? If the answer's no, toss it. In your life, the key question is, is this activity essential to making my optimum contribution?

2) Eliminate nonessentials: You have trouble getting rid of things because of sunk-cost bias. This means you place a greater value than they're worth on things you own because you've invested in them, so you're reluctant to get rid of them. To circumvent this bias, ask yourself **what you'd be willing to pay for the item if you didn't already own it**. This may be the reality check you need to realize the item's true worth. Regarding an activity, the question could be, "if it hadn't just popped up, would I go out of my way to seek out this activity?" If the answer is no, it's probably not an "essential" activity. Not only must you sort out the nonessentials, whether possessions or activities, you also must actively eliminate them.

3) Execute routinely: For your closet to stay organized, you need a maintenance system that's automatic. In your life, once you've decided what things to pursue (those that enable you to make your highest level contribution), you need a system to make doing the important things simple and routine.

Learn to Say No

One of the most crucial skills for practicing essentialism is saying no. If you can't say no to the nonessential, you won't have the time and energy to pursue the truly important things.

Saying no makes us uncomfortable because it's socially awkward. There seem to be only two options: say no and endure the immediate awkwardness, or say yes and regret it much longer. However, **you can learn to say no gracefully and even get people to respect you for it in the process.**

Some key principles are:

- **It's the decision, not the person.** Rejecting someone's request isn't the same as rejecting them. Separate the two in your mind. Then communicate your decision clearly but also kindly. You may want to reject the request without using the word no. For instance, you might say, "I would love to do it, but I'm overcommitted right now."
- ****Remember the trade-off. **Remembering what you'd give up to say yes makes it easier to say no.**
- **Accept that you might be temporarily unpopular.** When you say no, the other person may be disappointed or angry. However, the anger is usually short term. In the long term, the other person may respect you more for demonstrating that your time is valuable, which is more important than popularity.
- **Don't leave them hanging.** Most people would rather have a definitive no than a noncommittal response, such as, "I'll try to be there," when you know you won't. Being frank is more respectful. Besides, delaying a no makes it more difficult for both of you.

Since essentialists say no a lot, it helps to have a repertoire of ways to do it. Here are a few to start with:

1) Employ the pregnant pause: When someone makes a request, pause and wait for them to fill the silence, or just wait a few beats before saying no.

2) Make the rejection gentle: Say “No, but...” For instance, “I’d love to but I have other plans; let’s try it next month.”

3) Buy some time: Saying something like, “I’ll check my calendar and get back to you,” gives you time to think and ultimately reply that you’re unavailable. Just remember not to use this as a noncommittal response — use it only if you genuinely have to think about it.

4) Use email auto-responses: Many people are accustomed to receiving email auto-responses when others are on vacation or holidays. You can use them more broadly. Indicate that you’re tied up with a project and temporarily unavailable.

5) Suggest someone else: If you know of someone else who might want to help, convey your regrets while suggesting another name.

At the end of life, many people express the wish that they’d had the courage to live on their own terms rather than trying so hard to meet the expectations of others. However, **you can be true to yourself, focusing on what’s important to you, by saying no to nonessentials**, not randomly, but intentionally as part of an overall strategy. It takes determination and practice, but you can resist business and social pressures to be all things to all people by learning to focus on what’s essential by eliminating everything else.

Full Summary of Essentialism

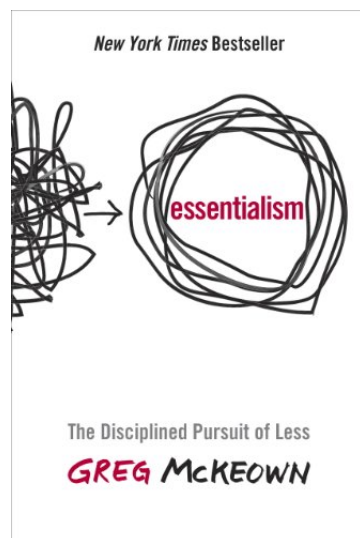
Introduction

We feel constantly pressed for time. We’re trying to do too much, yet when someone makes a request we say yes without thinking, in order to please them or avoid resentment. We feel that we must do it all.

As a result, we’re stretched too thin, we’re going in too many directions, and we’re making only minuscule forward progress on our many tasks and projects. We’re busy but not necessarily productive. We feel overworked but underutilized, because we’re spending much of our time on things that matter little.

As Greg McKeown, author of *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, puts it, m...

---End of Preview---



Read the rest of the "Essentialism" summary at my new book summary product, [Shortform](#).

Here's what you'll find in the **full Essentialism summary**:

- Introduction
- Part 1: The Essentialist Mindset
- Exercise: Deciding What's Essential
- Part 2: Explore Options
- Exercise: Hell Yes or No
- Part 3: Eliminate the Nonessential
- Exercise: Learn to Say Thanks, But No Thanks
- Part 4: Execute Effortlessly
- Exercise: Change Your Habit
- Exercise: Give Yourself a Buffer
- Exercise: Remove Obstacles
- Appendix: Being an Essentialist Leader

I've been building Shortform for the past year. It's the book summary product I always wanted for myself. I was never satisfied with the summaries from what was on the market, and so I built Shortform for myself and readers like you. **If you like my book summaries, you'll love Shortform.**

Shortform has the world's best summaries of nonfiction books and articles. Even better, **it helps you remember what you read, so you can make your life better.** What's special about Shortform:

- The [world's highest quality book summaries](#)—comprehensive, concise, and everything you need

to know

- Broad library: 1000+ books and articles across 21 genres
- Interactive exercises that teach you to apply what you've learned
- Audio narrations so you can learn on the go
- [Discussion communities](#)—get the best advice from other readers

Sound like what you've been looking for? [Sign up for a 5-day free trial here.](#)

Like this book summary? Visit www.allencheng.com for more.