

Downshifting: 3 steps to get you started

Contributed by Sally Lever

Not sure where to start? Some valuable suggestions from Sally Lever.

There is a certain, stereotypical 'The Good Life' image of downshifting which goes something like this: First quit your job, then move to a cute cottage in the countryside, then start digging up your garden to grow vegetables, then sell all unwanted consumer items to generate the cash to buy chickens, goats, maybe a pig or two, a set of knitting needles and sewing machine (because of course you're going to be making your own clothes and furnishings from now on.) Oh, of course, you'll also need to sell the car and buy a bike, or at least a family rail card. Viewed in this way, of course, downshifting can seem like a huge, impossible leap to make in one go. Also, leading 'The Good Life' might not be your idea of fun anyway. Downshifting can take many forms. Those who live in the city might want to stay there and not rear animals or make their own clothes, for example. For them, living a more financially frugal and sustainable existence is still perfectly possible. The form that the change of lifestyle takes will depend on personal preference and will be different for each person making that shift. So, if downshifting is a different experience for each and every one of us, what is it that downshifter have in common? And how does someone who is still in the rat race get started? Being clear on values. In my experience, those who make a success of downshifting and enjoy it are very clear in the beginning on what their values are. They know what it is about being in the rat race that they find intolerable and what they want less of in their lives. They also know how to be honest with themselves about what's most important to them and what they would like more of in their lives. The kind of values that downshifter tend to have in common are: love, family, health, contribution, learning. That doesn't mean that there will not be other values that they hold, but these are the ones that tend to stand out, in some form or another. So, to get started with downshifting – get clear on your values. Making certain values a priority. Having got clear on what their values are, successful downshifter then prioritise those that favour downshifting. So, for example, they might prioritise their health above their material wealth. A participant in one of my teleclasses explained to me recently that, following the teleclass, his first step towards downshifting was deciding to turn down an offer of promotion at work. He'd realised that promotion would involve him working longer hours, spending less time with his family and increasing his stress levels. The classes, he said, had helped him be honest with himself about what mattered most to him in his life. He felt he could now make more intelligent decisions based on that knowledge. So, to get started with downshifting – make your values that support downshifting your highest priority and make this the basis for your next major decision. Having a clear vision. Another major success factor with downshifting is the ability to develop a very clear vision or idea of how your life will be, what it will look like and how it will feel once you have made the shift. One of my clients, at the start of her coaching with me, had a hazy idea of the kind of life she would like to create for herself. At that stage it was largely based on what she wanted to avoid from her current existence! But she had not allowed herself to clarify her vision because she didn't really believe, deep down that it would be possible. We treated it light heartedly to begin with and she made a collage, using pictures cut from magazines, of all the elements she wanted to attract into her new life. They weren't so much material items as situations – health and vitality, companionship, a deep sense of fulfilment from a job working as part of a team. Once she had clarified her vision, then she had something very clear to aim for. This reminded her to focus her efforts in every aspect of her life towards reaching that vision. Her first step was amazingly simple – deciding to make the time and effort to cook her own dinner each day from fresh ingredients. So, to get started with downshifting – develop a clear vision of the lifestyle you would like to create. There are as many different ways to downshift as there are downshifter and it's perfectly ok to do it in stages and in your own way. The keys to your success will lie in your intentions, awareness and focus. Using the 3 steps I've described above, you can make the decisions you need to make immediately to get you started. © Sally Lever 2006 www.sallylever.co.uk Sally Lever is a Sustainable Living Coach who specializes in supporting and inspiring those who are downshifting or otherwise moving towards a more sustainable way of life. She offers one-to-one coaching, teleclasses in 'How to step off the Treadmill' and a free email newsletter.