

SLOW DOWN AND GREEN UP

National Downshifting Week, Nationwide



Tracey Smith, speaking with ITV's Mark Austin (Source: Tracey Smith)

Tracey Smith and her husband Ray were having a tough time enjoying life. Ray was working in the City, Tracey was at home raising their 3 children, and despite having a comfortable lifestyle, they hardly spent time together and were unhappily living their lives on parallel lines. That is, until they decided to 'downshift'. Tracey tells us what it is, and how it's become a national phenomenon:

What is downshifting, and why should people do it?

There is an increasing amount of pressure put on people in the UK to conform to a materialistic, super-consumer society. People are spending money they haven't got and subsequently have to increase their earnings to keep up. They make lots of impulse purchases to cheer themselves up because they have been working so hard, but it only provides them with a temporary fix. As financial pressures continue to mount, people find themselves running around in circles trying to find a way out.

Some people are looking at 'downshifting' to provide the answer – cutting their spending, clearing their debts and living simpler. Green issues are also being highlighted in the media too, and in my view, they hold hands with many downshifting principles, so people are getting the message in a variety of ways.

What is National Downshifting Week?

Following my own downshift in 2002, I decided to write about sustainable living, as there were just so many exciting aspects to talk about. One of the most exciting parts about exploring and finding

my own comfort level of the downshift was that, as a journalist, I got to explore every layer and level of it. My articles on simple living were published and people wrote to me, asking for tips on how they could start to make a difference. I realised there was a clear need for a stronger focal point, so I pulled together the threads of the key principles and created National Downshifting Week.

I truly believe National Downshifting Week is making a difference. This year, just under 11,000 people visited the website from 91 countries and 24 American states. The next one will be held in the UK 19-25 April 2008.

Another interesting facet was when I realised I could also encourage and inspire businesses to develop a little corporate social responsibility by adopting the principles contained within National Downshifting Week. The same went for educational establishments and that would help get our children in the green groove before they stepped out into the world, so there have always been 3 clear prongs with the same message, just dressed differently.

How did you become involved in downshifting?

Before we downshifted, there were just not enough hours in the day, and weekends were a constant guilt trip for Ray, as to how he should spend his time: helping around the house, seeing the children, being with me, or even doing something for himself. We were all exhausted and unhappy living our lives on parallel lines.

We downshifted big-time, moving house to a cheaper, dilapidated old place in need of much loving care, and considerably lowering our outgoings and living with less. There were limited comforts, no central heating, no town sewerage, just a septic tank and all of our heat came from the wood we had to cut and dry out ourselves. We positively embraced the simple life and the benefits are a slower, more relaxed pace of life, better food, and much more quality time together to raise our children.

Did it change your life?

Yes, absolutely. The downshift was a radical one, but we were never driven by having the latest gadgets anyway, and I always bought clothes and household items from local charity shops wherever possible, so it was not difficult to come down on major spending. What was different was growing and rearing our own food, and working with Ray on all the projects.

However, I discourage people from taking the same route. The best way to achieve long term success, is by 'dipping your toes' into a bit of simple, green living, and if you like it, you take things forward another step and another and so on, until you find your comfort level.

I do not believe you have to make such a radical move as to actually move house in order to downshift. You can make a huge difference in your own four walls. We were already a fair way towards being thrifty, so the physical move suited our circumstances.

“I hope my story inspires people to let their imagination run wild and helps them to be creative in any way by encouraging them to slow down, green up and make a difference!”

Tracey Smith, National Downshifting Week

Some critics say people have difficulty changing their lives and living with less money. What's your opinion about that?

Many of the downshifting principles I write about are not rocket science and can be adopted straight away. I believe it can offer an immediate utopia for those who are comfortable with the change, but living with limited funds does not suit everybody.

Downshifting, especially in a radical form, can involve enormous life change. It affects everything you do, everything you eat, buy or covet. You have to be content with your restricted purchasing

power and if you are in a relationship with somebody, they also have to be at the same level, or you may end up falling out.

People need to talk about their thoughts and feelings, explore and understand their budgets and spending habits and analyse why they spend what they spend. If they get to the root of the problem and can see the clear benefits of slowing down and spending less money, they are more likely to succeed than somebody who has plunged themselves into downshifting blindly, or against their will.

It is also important to point out there are many different layers and levels to downshifting. What suits one person may not suit another. It is about dipping your toes into the lifestyle, seeing how you get on and if you like it, taking it another step forward. That is the real key to making it work.

What is the main reason why people downshift?

Very often, people are ditching the 'mad rush' lifestyle, but it can also be fuelled by other driving forces: unhappiness with our material culture, or a need to make a difference to our environment and ultimately the planet – green and simple go hand in hand.

Some people even move abroad to chase their dream. However, I encourage people to dip their toes into a bit of downshifting first and analyse how they feel about the changes, long before they start looking at new house details. A physical move does not necessarily hold the key to happiness and many find contentment once they have made life a bit simpler.

Any last words of encouragement?

Good luck to everyone who understands that every one of their actions really can count!

Facts and Information

- Downshifting has many of the same principles as living frugally, being thrifty or self-sufficient. Search in your local library or online for these terms to find out what you can do.
- Slowing down can be applied to anything from supermarket shopping, to time spent doing housework, to changing jobs, selling up and adopting a self-sufficient lifestyle.
- Tracey Smith has been featured on many television and radio shows, from the BBC and ITV to her own radio show, "Slow Down and Green Up", on Apple AM.

Further Resources

- For more information about National Downshifting Week, visit www.downshiftingweek.com.
- Tracey Smith maintains the Green Family Blog at the Sustained Magazine website: www.sustainedmagazine.com
- Enhance your downshift by buying better as well as buying less. To find out more about shopping ethically, get some tips online from Every Action Counts at www.everyactioncounts.org.uk/en/fe/page.asp?n1=230&n2=2&n3=20

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