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Can you go without a purse? Or does your world rest on a shoulder strap?

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The handsome, wine-red Prada knockoff tote sits nuzzled next to Arneitra Robertson, keeping her company at lunchtime on a recent Wednesday on the plaza outside Oakland City Hall.

The two are nearly inseparable, and a look of anxiety emerges at the mere hint of even the slightest, theoretical, temporary, possible concept of a breakup, considered in the query, "Could you get along without a purse?"

"Well ... how long are we talking about?" the 22-year-old Oakland woman asks, shifting closer to her cavernous carryall as if to protect it. "I mean, I could do it to go to the grocery store. Maybe. But not much longer than that. No. No, I couldn't do it."



Home organizer Gayle Grace has ditched her handbag and is blogging about the freedom of going without a purse. (courtesy of gayle grace)

Indeed, it's her world on her shoulder -- the home of her digital devices, wallet, snacks, mirror, makeup, lotion, hand sanitizer and more. "I have braces, so I always carry a toothbrush and toothpaste," she says. "For a while I had a first-aid kit in there."

For most women, this magical bottomless receptacle is a lifeline, a portable work station, beauty salon, impromptu trash receptacle, medicine cabinet and fashion statement. It's equal to any emergency, especially for moms, and a constant mystery to the male species, who dare not invade.

But it's also a huge pain. Quite literally for your shoulders and back, known to cause nerve, muscle and skeletal damage if too heavy. And also a nuisance to find stuff. It's a black hole, sucking pens, coins, keys through to another dimension.

So it seems like it would be nice to do without a purse, at least on occasion, right? Is this possible?

One woman thinks so. Gayle Grace, a Bay Area professional organizer with All Things Home Organizing, is on a personal "no purse"

For the past few months -- after a friend had a shoulder dislocated during a purse snatching -- Grace has been conducting an experiment, whittling down her necessary walk-around belongings so they will fit in her pockets, and blogging about the experience at <http://allthingshome.com/blog>.

"I haven't used a purse for months now, and I don't think I will," she says. "I'm perfectly happy to have nothing in my hands and nothing over my shoulder as I walk down the street, nothing to watch over, worry about or look for a safe place to put. It takes a 5-pound weight off your arm, and removes the potential for being a target for crime."

MINIMAL MUST-HAVES

Grace now only carries a cellphone, keys and a small wallet. But even for someone whose business is organization, this project has taken some work.

"You really have to think it through, come up with fixes for things," she says. "I took a look at how men do it. Sure, some carry backpacks or satchels, but generally they get along with pockets."

Pockets are key, for sure, which means going purse-free may be more doable in winter with coats and jackets. And they have to be trustworthy pockets, ideally with closures, Grace says. "You don't want things falling out, obviously. You have to get used to feeling the items in your pocket to make sure they're there."

And you do need auxiliary areas, such as the glove compartment of your car, for makeup and extras. "Most of us don't need to carry a full array of cosmetics 24/7, but you need to have it available," she says.

Grace is not without stuff. When visiting a client, she carries a case with paperwork, client information and a tape measure. "But I used to carry that AND a purse," she says. "I've left the purse out of the equation."

And though digital devices have eliminated some items in a handbag, they've added others. Some women carry a personal phone and a work phone, and often a tablet or even a laptop.

Atoosa Savarnejad, 42, of San Jose, thinks going without a purse is "doable," but she still doesn't plan to do so. "A lot of things, like financial transactions, can be done via smartphones," she says. "A lot of places are taking Apple Pay and Square. You can read a book on your phone. You might just need your ID when you go out. But makeup? Tissues? Meds? I need all of the above, and my keys and Kindle and feminine products. I think I'd be weighed down if I tried to carry all that in my pockets."

THE BIGGER THEY ARE ...

Truth be told, whether it's a \$4,400 Bottega Veneta tote or a \$20 Apt. 9 mini satchel at Kohl's, you're going to fill it up. Kelley Styring, a consumer strategist and author of "In Your Purse: Archaeology of the American Handbag," researched why women carry purses and what's in them. She spent 100 hours interviewing 100 women and cataloging their purses and contents, finding an astounding 45,000 cubic inches filled with 6,670 objects weighing 340 pounds.

In addition to the expected wallets, lipsticks and cellphones, she found some unexpected things such as weapons, letters from prison and what she describes as a "souvenir from a bachelorette party."

"The purse is a bag of contradiction on a string," Styring says. "It's the nerve center of a woman's life, bearer of her most important things, a home away from home. But it's also a disorganized bag full of

junk. Once you watch somebody turn a big purse upside down and shake it to find their keys, you realize there's a problem."

Styring says a woman uses the purse to solve problems, "almost like a Swiss army knife."

"Women tend to be care-taking and problem-solving, in concentric circles," she says. "The innermost circle is themselves, what they need, makeup, tissues for their own noses. Next, it's family and friends, to blow a kid's nose or take care of a scraped knee. Then it reaches out to the complete stranger, you see people on the plane without a tissue. You have some in your purse. You can help."

Age is a factor in size of purses, Styring says. Young women generally have very little responsibility, so in their purses you might find a wallet, lip balm, maybe some keys, cosmetics. Once they transition to parenthood, they go through the diaper bag stage -- often opting for a diaper bag alone -- then, with older children, moving onto a bigger purse. "Women who are retired often have a very small bag, similar to very young people, because they have fewer people to take care of, fewer necessities," she says. "It's often a very freeing kind of attitude."

Even those in the marketing realm have realized women don't always want to tug titanic totes around, so some have come up with clever devices. The Purse N' Boots collection from Elizabeth Anne Shoes offers cute boots with a hidden interior pocket to hold credit cards and a phone. For runners, Objex Sports gives you a cellphone pocket in your bra. There's the Hip-Appeal from NoPurseNeeded.com -- a slim, stylish update on the fanny pack.

But, never fear, lovers of Louis Vuitton. The huge handbag industry is not going away.

"I don't think you're gonna get rid of purses unless people think about how incredibly germey and dirty they get, inside and out," Styring says. "They fall down on the floor of a public bathroom, then you put them on your kitchen counter. Ick."

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Handbag history

The purse may be generally a woman's domain these days, but guys really started it all. Looking back through history, men usually carried a small pouch for coins. The concept evolved in more modern times as men opted for trousers with pockets and women's skirts became slimmer -- no room for pockets, so a purse would dangle from a delicate wrist. Check out some of the 4,000 bags, pouches, purses, suitcases and other accessories dating from the 16th century to the present at the Tassenmuseum Hendrikje Museum of Bags and Purses in Amsterdam, www.tassenmuseum.nl/en