

Clutter-Free Living

It's silent. It's sneaky. All of a sudden it's there – clutter! It's found in large homes, small homes, homes in the city, and homes in the country. Clutter is all around us, and it's a growing problem.

Many people are dealing with a clutter problem in their home. They often think that if they could only get rid of all the clutter, the clutter problem could be solved. However, it's not that simple. Clutter doesn't just happen. There are reasons for it. To solve the problem, you have to find the cause of the problem and fix it.

Clutter: What is it? How Does It Happen?

Some people think of clutter as part of an overburdened and disorganized household. To others, clutter is a sign of a culture that offers many choices and easy credit. This “affluenza” has been encouraged throughout recent years as a sign of wealth and material comfort. Now many mid-life people are finding themselves in the dilemma of having too many things. Many want to declutter and downsize as children leave home and retirement years draw near, but are not sure how to attack the problem. Baby Boomers and retirees are frustrated about decluttering, simplifying, and downsizing their living spaces.

Clutter became more noticeable in the 19th century along with mass production of goods. A philosophy of saving that was common before and during the Depression years developed into a desire to buy and acquire. People then began to buy luxury items once reserved for very wealthy. Many more options are now available, too. The old general store once stocked fewer than 1,000 items while today's supercenters cover a quarter-million square feet (nearly six acres) and carry over 130,000 different products. Catalogs and Internet shopping create even more options right in your own home and are available night and day.

Clutter Facts and Figures

Our cultural and industrial systems have been geared toward helping us acquire things, but they have never addressed the topic of letting go. No one has told us to downsize or throw out until now.

Clutter and junk (the things we quit using) have a tight grip on many people. We spend our time, energy, space, and money to shuffle these things around and climb over them. All of these items come with a price tag, too. They take up space and the costs add up for rent, energy (heat and lights), insurance, and emotions each time you deal with them.

Controlling clutter has become big business! Here are some facts to consider:

- The average household size has declined to 2.61 persons while the average home has doubled in size since the 1950s to 2,250 square feet. However, people are still having problems about clutter and what to do with everything they have accumulated.
- According to the National Self-Storage Association, a trade group, one out every 11 people in the U.S. rents storage space during any given year. This includes both off-site units and storage pods stored in the homeowner's yard.
- Television channels offer at least three reality shows on the management of clutter.
- Fifty cities in 17 states have chapters of Clutterers Anonymous, a 12-step recovery program.
- The National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization gives training to professional organizers and has a clutter hoarding scale to assess the depth of the problem from a health and safety viewpoint.

- The National Association of Professional Organizers has twenty-four chapters located throughout the country. They sponsor an annual conference, training sessions for members, and a monthly newsletter. January has been designated as Get Organized Month.

People You May Know

Most of us have family members and good friends who have clutter problems in their homes. Perhaps you do, too. It may come from a feeling of false economy, too many things calling for your attention, or a variety of other reasons.

People have been known to own two or more freezers though they live close to grocery stores. They may save ten cents a pound on meat purchased in bulk but spend \$40 per month to run the freezers. Is this wise?

Some people rent off-site storage units to store their overflow. The cost to store an article may run far higher than the cost of replacing it! It's not uncommon for someone to pay \$300 a year to store \$200 worth of items! Consider the total cost of owning items and compare with the actual worth to you. What would you pay to move them across the country 1,000 or more miles? Do they mean that much to you?

Do you have trouble locating and digging through things to find something you really need? How long does this take? Do a few seconds extend into a 30-minute search? What kind of mood are you in during and after the search? What toll does this take on both you and your family over a period of time? Is it worth it?

Consider the value of time spent storing, cleaning, and transporting your belongings. Think about the costs of insuring and protecting them. Everything has a cost to acquire and to maintain. If you don't keep it, you don't have to clean it, store it or worry about it. If it's worth keeping, it's worth keeping well.

Additional Thoughts to Consider

Creating a clutter free living space is a major trend in interior design, too. Streamlined interiors focus on limiting clutter and selecting well-chosen furnishings and accessories that fit the function and tastes of the people living there. Accessories may be stored and then alternated for display. Some people exchange accessories seasonally and some twice a year. They get to enjoy everything, but just not all at once.

Take a close look at sentimental items and keepsakes. It's important to keep some as touchstones for you and for passing on to future generations. These items help to provide valuable links in the family. However, clutter can also keep people from living in the present. Keeping things such as old clothing may be a way to hold on happy memories in the past. However, saving too many of these items limits the space for new items coming into your life.

Storage of your possessions will need to take two forms. Long-term storage is needed for items seldom used. Look at vertical spaces and use high storage or create an organized storage area in a closet, office or work space. Short-term storage is needed for things you need to be able to find and use quickly and easily. These items usually need horizontal storage space.

Clutter Buster Ideas

Although technology and trends both influence what we have and cause a clutter build-up in our homes, our busy lives contribute to the growing clutter problem, too. It's important to take time to think through reasons for clutter and then deal with the problem. You must recognize the "why" of the problem before you can fix it or it will quickly return.

Find a place for everything and keep everything in its place. For example, if everyone dumps papers, books, briefcases, and other things on a table or the living room sofa, cleaning these areas today won't prevent the return of clutter tomorrow. Fix the problem by finding a logical home for these things. Fold newspapers and stack in a basket or box. File paperwork. Find a sensible location for back packs, briefcases, and books. Use the same method for other problem areas throughout your home. For instance, entertainment centers become cluttered as a result of technological changes. Decide what to do with your collection of old LPs, 8-tracks, cassette tapes, CDs, and VCR tapes.

Kitchens have become cluttered as a result of new gadgets and new food products that follow the latest trends in eating. Cooking trends create a market for specialized gadgets that need storage space in kitchen drawers. Indian, Asian, Tex-Mex, and other specialty recipes call for different products that need shelf space. Specialized appliances use more counter space. Pizza ovens, bread machines, and electric grills may be handy, but plan how you will store them before purchasing.

Paper Clutter Control

Paper clutter seems to grow overnight. Mail often includes ads, catalogs, bills, and letters of various kinds. Children add papers and projects from school. Newspapers and magazines pile up while waiting to be read. Take control over paper clutter.

- Keep one folder for bills that need to be paid this month. Check it every week to make sure that bills due that week are paid. After they are paid, mark the stub as paid and move it to the proper file folder.
- Keep a folder for receipts and store the stubs from paid bills in this folder. You may need to keep more than one folder in order to make receipts quick and easy to retrieve as needed.
- Keep another folder for family records. Important credit card information, insurance policies, family health records, bank statements, household inventory, and tax records can be filed here. You may wish to have separate folders for each of these categories.
- When you bring in the mail or when your children bring newsletters or notices home from school and club meetings, look at the items quickly if you don't have time to read them carefully at the time. Don't put them in a pile, but place them in a folder or basket to read later that day or the next. Keep them moving along.
- Immediately throw away advertisements and junk mail you don't want. Do not put them in a pile to take care of later.
- Sort through old catalogs and magazines on a regular basis and throw them away, give them away, or recycle them. For every catalog or magazine that you save, decide that an old catalog or magazine must be discarded. Then do it! Keep a box in the garage, basement, or utility room for collecting magazines and catalogs. When the box is full, take it to a recycling center, give to a friend or charity, or throw the contents away. Don't let the box overflow.
- Put newspapers in a recycling bin after reading them. Cut out coupons or articles you want to keep and file them in a folder or envelope. Unread newspapers more than two or three days old should be recycled. Don't let old news pile up. Keep it moving.
- Set limits on children's school projects that are displayed. For every new one displayed on the refrigerator, remove an old one. (Let your child or grandchild help decide what items come down.) Either place the old items in a labeled storage box with other projects or throw it away.

Taking Control of Your Closets

Are your closets overflowing, but you can't find anything to wear? Perhaps winter clothes are mixed with summer clothes or belts and shoes are jumbled together. Solve this by bringing several boxes into the bedroom for a specific time. Empty the contents of a closet, shelves, or chest of drawers. Don't try to do everything at once, but break the work into small jobs that can be finished within a reasonable time frame. Perhaps you can do the hanging clothes at one time, but empty and sort the shelving at another time. Sort the items into six piles:

1. Things to keep and wear now. Put the clothes you are wearing this season back on hangers, shelves, or into the chest of drawers.

2. Things to keep and wear next season. Clothing for next season should be cleaned and put away in a dry place. Use a chest, boxes or bags in an out-of-the-way space, but don't leave them in your closet.
3. Things to throw away (put in box or bag). These are items that are not worth recycling, repairing and moving on to another person.
4. Things to give away (put in box or bag). Give these items to a charity so that someone else can get some good out of them.
5. Things to sell (put in a labeled box). Take useful items in good condition to a consignment shop or have a yard sale. Combine with a neighbor for a larger sale.
6. Things to recycle (put in a box or bag). If you haven't worn an item during the last year, it may be time to throw it away, give it away or sell it. Put things in this box if you're not sure what to do with them. Decide at another time and keep moving along with your project.

Finish your decluttering and reorganization by placing hard-to-sort items like belts and scarves on special hangers or see-through storage boxes. Over-the-door shoe storage units are ideal for storing many items other than shoes.

Easy Steps for Having a Clutter-Free Home

After you have eliminated the clutter and organized things you want to keep, you need a plan to prevent clutter from building up again. Here are some helpful ideas to keep in mind.

- Take time every day to wash the dishes, make the bed, and quickly straighten the bathroom. Dirty dishes on a kitchen counter and unmade beds add to a cluttered, rumpled look to your home.
- Take care of things right away. Throw them away or put them away. Keep a container or basket handy for things that will go to another room. Don't just put them in a pile to take care of at a later time.
- Invest a few minutes every day for a quick pick-up. Take a basket or bag and go through the house quickly. Pick up and drop things off where they belong. Don't get sidetracked or try to clean during this time.
- Set limits on things you keep. Rotate magazines and catalogs on a regular basis. When a new one comes in, give away or recycle the oldest one. If you save paper bags, set a limit of five or ten to have on hand. Recycle or throw out the additional ones.
- Keep a box or shopping bag in every closet for items that you need to recycle, discard, sell, or give away. When you come across such an item, put it in the box. When the box gets full, move the items out.
- Don't allow items to pile up at the top or bottom of the stairs. This doesn't look good and is dangerous, too. Instead, put things in a basket and then take items with you when you go up or down the stairs.
- When you leave a room, take a look to see if there are items that need to go with you. Return empty glasses to the kitchen and take toys to a bedroom.
- Encourage family members to get in the habit of picking up after themselves. Make it easy for them by having convenient places to put things.

Maintaining a Clutter-Free Life

Establish good habits. Sort what to keep and find a logical place for these things. Then practice good habits by returning everything to its new home. For instance, begin a "returning home" habit or routine. As you shut the back door, hang the car keys on a hook just above the light switch. Remove jackets and coats two steps inside the house, and hang them on the coat rack. Place purse or briefcase next to the coats. Sort the day's mail near a waste basket and handle junk mail once. To stay clutter-free, practice this routine until it becomes habit.

Adopt a one-in, one-out habit. When you buy a new cooking utensil, magazine or shirt, make it a practice to discard, recycle or give away an older cooking utensil, magazine or shirt. This limits the number of items that accumulate.

Before you buy a new item, consider where it will be stored and what it will replace. Buying something takes on new importance when an older item must be discarded as a result.

Rely more on outside resources to cut down on the number of things you have in your home. The public library has books, magazines, and CDs available for loan at no cost. Rent rather than buy tools for home repair projects. Rent videos and DVDs from the video rental store and exchange the use of equipment with friends and neighbors. The fewer items you actually keep in the house, the less chance that clutter will grow, the fewer items you will need to store, and the less time spent in caring for your possessions.

Accept reality. There's no such thing as completely clutter-free living. Pick a few areas where clutter is accepted. In a bedroom, one chair could be a clutter-catcher. A kitchen junk drawer could hold vitamin bottles, rubber bands, clipped recipes, expired coupons, and other items. A large magazine bucket in the living room is fair game for catalogs and magazines as long as they can fit inside the bucket. Toys in a child's room could be placed into a plastic laundry basket.

To stay clutter-free, work on new clutter-busting habits. Remember—the fewer things you bring into your home, the less clutter will grow in your newly organized home! Buy something only after deciding where to store it. Throw out one or two old possessions for every new one. Habits once established help protect your home from growing clutter.

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