

# Time to Declutter

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › You may have a tendency to accumulate “things” as you travel through life, stuffing your home, office and computer with items and information you may not use for years, if at all
- › Clutter is associated with a reduction in creativity and performance, and an increase in anxiety, stress and allergic reactions; decluttering your physical and digital life may reduce these symptoms
- › By clearing out what you don’t need or use, and purchasing less of the same, you may also enjoy greater financial freedom and a sense of accomplishment
- › Choosing quality items, pitching goods that have expired or are broken, giving away what you haven’t used in months and storing what you need in an organized fashion increases the likelihood you’ll experience the benefits of decluttering your life

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Moving through life, most have a tendency to accumulate "stuff." You may have drawers full of pictures and mementos, a closet full of clothes you no longer wear or a kitchen full of utensils you can't remember how to use. It is a common human condition to acquire "things" from places you've been or events you want to remember.

You may often crave more room or space to live in, which may mean you're looking for a larger home every 10 years. But, what if you could create more in your life for yourself and your family by living with less?

This is the basic premise in a popular movement toward minimalism. The minimalist movement began in the 1960s in the art world, when sculptures and paintings began to focus on the art medium and not an overt expression of emotion or symbolism.<sup>1</sup> Today, minimalism has become a tool to help you live with greater freedom in your life.<sup>2</sup> It is not a set of rules or restrictions, but rather an approach to help reduce a consumer culture that breeds a need for goods.

According to *The Minimalists*, Joshua Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, minimalism is quite simply "a tool to rid yourself of life's excess in favor of focusing on what's important — so you can find happiness, fulfillment and freedom."<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, you define how much you want to live without and enjoy greater freedom. There are several psychological reasons to declutter your life and bring greater organization to the "stuff" you continue to own, and simple strategies to make the process go smoothly.

## **How Clutter Affects Your Brain**

You may think the decision to buy an item is based on logic, but far more often it is grounded in an emotional response that marketing professionals understand how to trigger. For instance, the mere act of touching an item may increase your emotional attachment to the item and your desire to purchase it.<sup>4</sup>

In one study researchers found the longer you hold an item, the more you're likely to pay for it. Apple stores are built on the premise that if you can hold, handle and use their product, you're more likely to purchase it.

As you introduce new items into your life, you assign a value to the item, making it more difficult to give it up. Assigned to an item are memories, hopes and dreams, which means that if you get rid of them you may have failed.<sup>5</sup> Getting rid of the skinny jeans you haven't worn in years may mean you've given up hope of ever fitting into them again. However, the excess you keep around has an impact on your ability to focus and process information.

A team from Princeton University found those working in a physically cluttered environment experienced greater stress and had a reduction in performance.<sup>6</sup> Another study from Los Angeles found mothers whose homes were filled with toys and clutter experienced cortisol level spikes at home that dropped after they left.<sup>7</sup>

These studies, and more, demonstrate clutter has a similar effect on your brain as multitasking, overloading your senses, increasing stress and reducing productivity.

However, clutter isn't necessarily reserved for the physical world. Your computer desktop, phone's home screen or the incessant notifications from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat can also clutter your mind space and trigger similar responses.

There is an emotional cost to living in a cluttered space, or working on a messy desk. TreeHugger founder Graham Hill moved from a million-dollar mansion to a 420 square-foot apartment.<sup>8</sup> In an interview with The New York Times he talked about his decision, saying:<sup>9</sup>

*"I like material things as much as anyone. I studied product design in school. I'm into gadgets, clothing and all kinds of things. But my experiences show that after a certain point, material objects have a tendency to crowd out the emotional needs they are meant to support."*

Clutter assaults your mind with stimuli, distracts your attention, inhibits creativity and productivity and prevents you from locating what you need quickly.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, this signals your brain that your work is not done, making it difficult to relax. Psychologist Audrey Sherman, Ph.D., writes frequently about the links between physical chaos and mental depression and anxiety.

She says,<sup>11</sup> "Although it appears to be a mundane sort of thing, I find disorganization and chaos to be one of the biggest problems reported by depressed and anxious individuals." Fortunately, unlike other commonly recognized sources of stress, this may be one of the easier stressors to fix, and you may experience the benefits far quicker.

## **Living With Less May Bring You More**

This is not an esoteric, philosophical argument for pitching your worldly goods, but rather a realistic and functional result of learning how to live with less. For instance, a decluttered and clean kitchen is likely to make it easier to eat healthier foods at home and enjoy cooking.<sup>12</sup>

Removing clutter also reduces the amount of places dust particles can cling, improving your overall indoor air quality, and may improve your allergy symptoms. Dr. Robert London, a New York-based psychiatrist, believes it may also help you feel better about yourself and help you to tackle deeper problems, saying:

*"The clutter leads to anxiety, embarrassment, family stresses – some kind of despair. When you relieve the problem and learn to throw things away, you feel better. You'll find theories of why people do this. They might have unconscious guilt, so they assuage that guilt by carrying out these rituals."*

Another benefit to decluttering your home and life is that you have more time to spend on the things that truly matter to you. When you don't spend time maintaining the things you own, you have more time to spend with the people you love or on achieving your goals. The gift of your time is the most valued and important thing you can give to the people you love, as it strengthens your relationships and builds memories that last a lifetime.

By reducing stress and improving your focus you may also find your productivity and creativity improve,<sup>13</sup> leading to greater improvements in your financial situation.

Decluttering your environment at home and at work improves your mood and gives you a sense of accomplishment.

## **Room by Room**

If you begin by looking at your entire home, it can be overwhelming to figure out what you want to keep, give away or fix. It's important to take the task one step at a time, in the same way you would address any big project. You can't finish in one hour, but you

can easily and painlessly finish by taking 30 minutes out of each week to go through areas of each room.

Schedule these 30 minutes on your calendar the way you would a meeting, and keep that meeting with yourself. Here are some tips that may help you sort through your home:

**Choose quality and emotional attachment** – As you move through each room and evaluate your furniture, equipment, clothing and home goods, remember to choose quality of items over quantity. You likely can reduce the number of blankets if you have a high-quality lightweight and heavier blanket to use throughout all seasons.

Decorate with items that bring you joy. No matter how basic the item – a candle, book or throw – keep what brings you pleasure as you use the room.

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**Pare your wardrobe** – Plan your clothing as you would a campaign. Your closet has finite space and it's your job to use the space optimally. This means that most of your clothing should coordinate together. Choose a color palette you enjoy and you look good in. Choose pieces that coordinate and can be mixed and matched. The rest can be given away. Then, before bringing anything new into your closet, make a rule you must get rid of something else.

You might consider choosing the items you keep or give away using this strategy. Turn all your hangers so the hook is backward, or facing you. Once you wear a piece of clothing, turn the hanger around so it's facing the wall again. If you have clothing that remains on hangers facing backward as you pass through a season, you know you haven't worn them and can safely give them away.

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**Digital sweep** – Consider going paperless with your bills and correspondence. Most of your paper clutter is from mail you don't read and likely don't want. Keep a shredder in your office and daily send through the machine mail that you don't need to keep or file. Use the option to be digitally billed by your credit cards, utilities and other

companies to whom you may owe money, such as for medical care or loans. This also reduces your paper trail.

Unsubscribe from mailing lists or catalogs you don't read. The same is true for online newsletters. If you don't routinely read them, it helps to declutter your inbox more so by unsubscribing than by hitting the delete button each week.

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**Bed and bath** — In your bathroom, start with your cabinet space. Take everything out of the cabinets and drawers, discard any cosmetics or supplies that may have expired. Move any medications to the kitchen, away from humidity that may damage drugs.

Separate everything from your cabinets into three piles — keeping, fixing, pitching/giving away. Everything that is kept may be placed back, while what is pitched should be put into a garbage bag, what is being given away into another bag and what needs to be fixed onto a table. Label the bags "Pitch" and "Giveaway" and move on.

Once in your bedroom, make the bed and clean out the nightstand in much the same way you cleared the bathroom cabinets. Any books you've read and want to donate should be given away while books you want to keep can be stored on bookshelves.

Throw out or recycle anything you no longer want or use. Next, move to your drawers. Take everything out and sort through all items. Anything you no longer use or wear should be pitched or marked to be given away.

As you're putting items back, be sure they are folded neatly or hung in the closet to reduce wrinkling, keeping them ready to wear when needed. Set up a laundry basket if you don't already use one. Decide if you want it kept in your bedroom, bathroom or with your washer/dryer.

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**Kitchen** — Your kitchen may be challenging as it's often a place where multiple types of items are used and stored, especially if you have a built-in office desk where you pay bills. It may make the most sense to attack this room by zones.

Completely empty a specific space, cabinet, drawer, shelf or pantry. Clean the shelf with warm water and vinegar to remove any greasy or sticky substances. Assess each item and determine if you want to keep it, pitch it or give it away.

Anything that you keep may be returned to the space and organized so what is used most often is close to the front of the space. Anything you haven't used in a year should be given an honest appraisal and given away or pitched if you think you won't use it in the near future.

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**Living area** – This is likely the most difficult room to keep picked up during the day, especially if you have children. You use the family room throughout the day and it often doesn't have a lot of storage space. The key in this room is to find a storage area for items you commonly use, such as books, magazines, remote controls and throws.

One at a time, empty any piece of furniture that has storage, such as an end table, television cabinet or bookcase. Choose items carefully that you want to keep or pitch. If you have read a book and don't need it to clutter your library shelves, then consider donating it.

If you have children, consider using a toy bin where your children store their toys each evening before bed. Go through your children's toys to pitch any that don't work and giveaway any they may have outgrown. Get them involved in the process to help them give items to other children and help them understand the importance of picking up each evening.

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## **Edit the Noise**

Once you've decluttered your home, office and computer, it's important to develop habits that keep them clean and clear. Without new habits you'll likely fall into the same the same patterns that resulted in your mess in the first place. Here are several simple strategies.

- **Reduce your spending** — By purchasing only what you actually require to live, you also gain financial freedom. At the same time you are reducing the clutter in your physical and mental space, you are reducing your financial expenditures and thus increasing the amount of money you keep for yourself. Financial hardship and work stress are significant contributors to depression and anxiety. One important strategy is to buy less.
- **Use the "tape date" trick** — Sometimes you keep items "just in case." You think you may need them "later," but it may be years, or even a decade, later before you realize you haven't touched the item and may not remember why you kept it. In the meantime, it's taking up space at home or creating a new bill at a storage facility.

If you're not sure if you want to keep something or really "need" it, place a piece of tape on the item with the current date. Then, put a reminder in your calendar to check the item in two months. If you haven't removed the tape or used the item, you likely can give it away.

- **Do a monthly review** — Once you've pared down everything at home or at the office to what you actually want to keep, do a quick monthly review. This will reduce the potential your collection of "things" will once again get overwhelming. Remember to remove what you don't use and don't purchase until a need arises and you are ready to use the new item immediately.
- **One in, one out** — Use the same mindset for your home that you use in your closet. In other words, once your home is pared down to the essentials of what you require and enjoy, don't purchase anything else until you're ready to get rid of something you already own.
- **Daily declutter your desktop** — If you work on a computer, facing a cluttered desktop can give you a daily uneasy feeling as you literally are facing items that need to be done or haven't been completed. At the end of each day, find a place to file your documents, complete your tasks or add them to one folder at the bottom of the desktop you can easily access the next morning.



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