

# LET GO OF CLUTTER

ORGANIZE TO RECLAIM YOUR  
INNER AND OUTER LIFE



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# Let Go of Clutter: Organize to Reclaim Your Inner and Outer Life

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# INTRODUCTION

Many professionals say that our outer life reflects our inner self. If that is true, hundreds of thousands of us have a psyche that is out of control.

Research from Princeton University found that clutter decreases productivity as the neural circuits in the brain have multiple stimuli competing for attention. The more 'stuff' on your desk (or in your home), the more difficult it is for your brain to focus on the task at hand.

Does clutter affect your life? If so, be honest and gentle with yourself - adding shame to the problem only makes it harder.

**Disorganization and clutter cause many challenges, including:**

1. **Personal health** - stress and sometimes illness or injury
2. **Mental health** - mood, overstimulation and hyperarousal, stress, shame, and self-defeating thoughts or behaviors
3. **Time management issues** - wasted time looking for things and decreased productivity
4. **Relationships** - strained relationships, including spouse or partner, housemates and children, as well as social relationships
5. **Career** - decreased productivity, increased stress, lack of attention to detail, and time management issues
6. **Finances** - buying multiples, buying things you don't need, paying people to help you get and stay organized
7. The list continues...

Also remember that most things exist on a continuum (mild, moderate, severe). **You don't have to be on the extreme end of the spectrum to have a challenge with clutter.** Nor do you have to experience clutter in every area of your life.

Clutter may not be negatively affecting your social life, but it may still be a challenge if it affects your career, adds stress to your life, or causes strife with your family members.

**This report focuses on:**

- ✓ Identifying the many issues related to clutter
- ✓ Strategies to correct and manage clutter
- ✓ How to get housemates and family members on board
- ✓ Letting go of things
- ✓ Staying and correcting the course



# CLUTTER: WHAT AND WHY?

## Defining the Problem

Clutter is subjective. If my house is messy but clean, I may not consider it cluttered - just lived in. If you're a minimalist and have only the necessities, you probably think my house is cluttered.

Should I happen to watch an episode of Hoarders, I will feel really good about my house and myself. It's all relative.

For our purposes, let's assume the definition of clutter to be specific to the challenges previously mentioned.

**You may have a mild challenge with clutter if you experience one or two of these:**

- It causes stress in your life.
- It creates strife with your housemates.

- It takes up more time than most people spend on their things.
- It results in limiting your social interactions.
- It costs more money than most people spend on similar things.
- It affects your work or productivity on tasks.

If clutter affects three of these areas, your problem is likely moderate. More than four and the clutter problem is severe.

So - think about your life. How serious is your problem with clutter?

## Why is Clutter a Challenge for You?

You may not think it matters *why* you have a challenge with clutter - just fix it already! But in many ways, **it's important because it helps you understand how to address it.**

*For example, if you live in a small, cramped space you may not have enough storage for even the most basic things. The solution to that challenge is very different from other causes of clutter.*

*Perhaps you've inherited a lot of things when a relative died or have been the recipient of things passed down through the family.*

*Heaven forbid that you're on every mailing list possible and buried under catalogs and newspapers.*

*Maybe you kept all your college textbooks, research papers, and supporting articles from undergrad and graduate school - just in case you need*

*an obscure reference that didn't make it onto the internet somehow.*

*Another scenario - you're a bargain shopper and have stocked up on everything imaginable. Or, you plan to recycle things that you've held onto for years.*

**It's possible that you learned to hang onto things when you were growing up.** Many people who grew up during the depression or had parents who grew up then stockpile things that are on sale.

**True hoarders have a compulsion** to keep things for sentimental reasons or to fill a void left by deprivation, either material or emotional. This is extreme and beyond the scope of our discussion here.

**The more significant the problem, the more likely you will need outside help** to get organized. That could mean family or friends to help haul things away or a therapist to address deeper issues.

Sorting through the piles and choosing what to keep, what to donate, and what to toss can be a long, painful, exhausting, and overwhelming process.

**So - think about why you have more stuff than you need. This will help you develop a plan of attack.**

Remember - everything is on a continuum. Your situation may be relatively mild compared to others, but still considered a significant problem for you.



# START THE DECLUTTERING PROCESS

*Taking stock of the job that lies ahead seems to be the starting point for most people. Let's get started ...*

## **Where is the Clutter?**

- Is the clutter confined to one or two rooms? The garage? Basement? Extra bedroom? Attic?
- Is the clutter on every surface in the house? All rooms and in stacks on the floor?
- Every room ceiling to floor? Maybe a storage shed or two?

## What is the Clutter?

For some, the problem may be a surface-level mess and for others a literal pile of stuff hiding more stuff. For hoarders, it's even more complicated and may require professional assistance.

### **Identify your challenge - it may be one or all of these:**

- Things on surfaces need to be trashed, filed, shredded, passed on, or handled (mail)
- Stacks need to be trashed, filed, shredded, passed on, or handled
- Stockpiles of 'stuff I may need' or extra reserves need to be put away, given away, or trashed

- Family treasures need to be sorted, passed on, donated, thrown away or put away
- Piles of things that may be useful/ recycled need to be sorted, trashed, donated, or passed along
- Things you haven't needed or used in years need to be trashed, passed on, or donated

## Who Causes the Clutter?

Is this your problem? Someone else in your home? All of you?

**It's important to recognize what you can and can't control.** If you live with someone who keeps everything 'just in case' or 'to be recycled someday' or 'in case of the apocalypse' or 'it was on sale and we need it,' it can be difficult to convince them to change their ways.

They'll need to be willing to make the changes and work through these questions to identify why and how to change the behavior. As you likely know, it can be complicated.

Many couples and families spend a significant amount of time trying to clean up the clutter of others who aren't ready, willing, or able to let it go and/or stop it. It can cause much family strife.

If the clutterer is you, you'll have to be committed to not only getting control of the current situation, but also ways to prevent it from happening again. **This requires changes in thinking and behavior.**



# DEVELOP A STRATEGY

## Get Prepared

It helps to get everything you need before you actually begin the active process of decluttering. Otherwise, you may have to stop to get supplies and it can be hard to start again.

- Trash bags and/or boxes
- Markers and labels
- Clear, stackable storage bins
- Various sizes of zip bags
- Shredder
- Small trash can for every room
- Organizers for magazines and files
- File cabinet (if needed)
- Shelving units for garage, basement, attic
- Bookshelves or bookcases

- Cannisters
- Over-the-door hooks for towels, coats, or whatever
- Mail organizer
- Drawer and shelf organizers
- Caddies for shower and cleaning products
- If you'll be cleaning as you go (recommended), buy all cleaning products and supplies
- Label or set up bags or boxes for: Donate - Trash - Recycle - Pass On - Handle

**Get anything else you need to organize what you keep - but not to keep things that you don't need!**

## Get Everyone on Board

If your spouse, partner, or other housemate is part of the problem, you'll need to get them to support your efforts. In fact, this likely won't work long-term without their buy-in.

**Many people who disagree on what is and is not 'junk' learn the art of negotiation.** They compromise on things that are important to them and let go of the small stuff.

Some people allow their kids to have a playroom for their toys to keep them out of the other areas. Periodically, it's a good idea to go through the toys and either trash or donate any that are broken or not being used.

Another good rule for kids and toys or adults and tools/books/knick-knacks is to give away one thing before buying another. That helps us think more about what is important to us and prevents adding to the clutter.

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## **Johnny and Hazel**

Johnny and Hazel were at odds about some of the things that Johnny wanted to keep in their home.

Instead of having deer heads in the living room and tools all over the place, they carved out a 'man cave' for his things and agreed he will only have tools and such in the garage or mud room.

To reinforce this arrangement, they agreed that any tools left inside the house overnight went into the 'donate' box to be dropped off at Goodwill each week.

Hazel had the same arrangement with the kids and their toys. If it's not in the toybox before bed, it goes in the Goodwill box.

To retrieve something from the donate box, the offending party has to do something good for someone within 72 hours.

Most recently, Johnny used the wrench he retrieved from the donate box to fix the leaky faucet in the kid's bathroom.

Carmen got her skateboard out of the box and used it to go to her Grandma's to help pull weeds.

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## Kids

Involve your kids in the process before the big day or weekend. Start by talking to them about why you're decluttering. **Help them understand the difference between needs and wants.**

There's a lot of pressure for kids to have the most and the best. The sooner you help them learn to resist and change that way of thinking (even if they learned it from you), the better. Be prepared for pushback but stay on track.

Speaking of toys, you may want to ask your kids to choose 3 (or whatever number) toys to keep and give away or trash those that are unused or broken. Help them understand how giving to others who have less benefits both you and them.

Kids who are used to having anything and everything all the time will resist this and try to sabotage your efforts. This is a time to be the grown up and make decisions based on what is best for everyone.

Is it really necessary to have toys and clothes that haven't been used in months or years?

Explain your reasoning to let go of some things you've held onto and model positive behavior and decision-making.

## Should I Sell It?

Many people decide to have a yard sale and keep things for the sale.

However, **keep in mind that yard sales are a lot of work for little return!** Most items in a yard sale are priced at only a few dollars. It's generally not a good return on investment of the time and energy it takes to do the sale. And, you end up with a lot of things that still need to be donated anyway.

If you have a few bigger items that may bring a decent sum, consider selling them online or to a local used or antique goods store. It is much easier and more cost effective than a yard sale.

## Choose a Day and Recruit Help

Ask for help if you have widespread clutter involving several rooms or a garage, basement, or attic with tons of stuff. Plan to work all day or all weekend if needed.

Arrange off-site child care if possible. Kids can make the process more difficult in many ways - especially if decluttering involves their toys.

Offer pizza and beer (or whatever is appropriate) for your friends who agree to help.

Be organized so that they feel good about making progress. If you're tackling different rooms, put someone in charge of each room.

## Prioritize

Prioritize. **Start where you need it most.**

For some people, that may be an office (at home or work). Others may want to start with the room in the house where you need the space most - living room, dining room, or kitchen. Or, the room where you stash everything out of sight.

If you have multiple rooms, make a list with the priorities. You may want to have a separate sheet of paper for each room - for more lists! If you need to make a path to the room, do that by filling trash bags or boxes labeled: trash, recycle, donate, and pass on. Things that need to be kept and organized should go in one place. Setup a stack to be filed, handled, or put away.

**Avoid putting all those things in a box and leaving them for another day.**



# HOW TO EAT AN ELEPHANT

On the big day, set up the main rooms with your supplies and discuss how to begin with your helpers.

**Give them specific instructions about what goes where, what stays, and what goes.** If it's mail, it may be easy enough to identify junk mail to recycle, loan or credit card offers to shred, and bills to be handled. If they don't know what to do, they can put it in a pile to ask you about.

Books and magazines are hard for a lot of people to let go of. Some of us have hundreds of books that have been boxed and unboxed and moved and stored for ages.

You may need to go through the books and magazines yourself. Just remember that most non-fiction information is available online now and most fiction can be obtained from the library or purchased as an ebook.

Even most magazines and newspapers are published online - so why must we keep hard copies of everything? Something to consider.

Friends of the Library and many used bookstores accept books for credit. Also, there are lots of family and women's shelters that appreciate donations of newer books and magazines.

## Where to Begin

Some people start at the top and work their way down. Others start at the bottom and work up. Let the people who are doing the work in each room decide unless there is a reason to do it a specific way.

Starting at the bottom, meaning the floor, is a good plan for those with stacks and boxes on the floor. Once the floor space is cleared, it may be easier to sort through things.

After the obvious clutter is removed, you may have to go through knick knacks and personal items to choose what stays and what goes. Try not to think about it too much.

## Deciding What to Keep

### Ask yourself the following:

- How long has it been since I used this? More than 6-12 months (except clothes and shoes, appliances, or other items used infrequently, such as a working lawn mower that you use seasonally)?
- How likely am I to use it in the next 6-12 months?
- Is there a way to borrow or use one should I need it?
- Depending on what it is - can I replace it if needed for less than \$xx?
- Is it something someone else may need more than I?
- Is there a reason to keep this (pass on to my daughter when she starts a family)?

## Family Treasures

These can be complicated. In some cases, people are very specific about what goes to whom and when. If that's the case, you may need to honor their wishes and find a way to store things, so it doesn't take over your life and home.

In some cases, it might be useful to pass along things now. Particularly if they're useful and your loved one can benefit from it. Jewelry, china, and such may be welcome at any time.

**You may also want to have a candid talk with your adult children about your belongings.** Talk to them about what they want to keep and if there are things you can donate or liquidate now.

In some cases, things we believe to be important to pass along are things our loved ones have no need (or space) for. You may find that they would prefer (or need) the money if it is something valuable.

As people are living longer, many are downsizing as they age. They often find they no longer have the space to keep things once held dear. Furniture styles and home sizes have changed so much that grand old antiques may not fit in the space or preferences of your loved ones.

## Now What?

By the end of the day or weekend, you should have bags or boxes sorted into piles. It is important to take them to the identified location immediately, lest they sit there indefinitely. Take a load or two to the trash and recycling place. Get someone to drop off the donations.

As for the things to handle, file, organize, or store - your work continues. **If you do it within the next few days, it's more likely to get done.**

Carve out some time each day to work on it. Use labels and file folders and clear bags and boxes to identify things. Put them where you can find them!

**Work on one thing until you finish it.** Start with the things to be handled - and handle them. Pay bills, make phone calls - do all of them at one time. When you finish handling

all those things, move to the next stack and work on it until you complete it.

Do the same for each room of the house. Work in one room to finish up what your helpers started, if needed. If you need to go through each knick-knack or books/ magazines, finish it before moving to the next room.

Find a way to celebrate as you finish each room, but avoid going out and buying something! Get a pedicure or go play golf. Have a latte at the coffee shop.

When you finish the whole house, go out with the family and celebrate! Do something fun, such as going to a movie, zoo, aquarium, museum, or other entertainment venue.



# STAYING THE COURSE

**Unless you develop new habits, your house will look the same within a few months.** It takes a concerted effort to prevent this.

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## **Bev and Hillary**

Bev and Hillary were determined to keep their house tidy and clutter free after downsizing and letting go of a lot of stuff they didn't use or need. They did the research and came up with some easy ways to break the cycle.

**Most involved being proactive and having the necessary supplies.**

They have a donate box in the garage that they use for anything they no longer need or want. When it is nearly full, they take it to Goodwill.

They have a 3-level inbox by the front door where they put mail to be handled,

keys/sunglasses/gloves when they come in and things they don't want to forget when they leave.

The shredder is next to the door to eliminate things that don't go directly in the recycle or trash bin in the kitchen.

They spend five minutes before bed making a sweep of the house to pick up and put away anything out of place.

They wash and put away dishes as they use them while cooking and after eating.

They wash out the kitchen sink and wipe down the counters after dinner and before work.

They wipe down the bathroom counter and sink in the morning before leaving.

They do laundry on Sunday while preparing for the work week.

One vacuums while the other sweeps the kitchen and bathrooms every Sunday.

They each clean a toilet and tub in the bathrooms and dust one room weekly.

Every month all the rooms have been dusted and they do it again.

They celebrate on Sunday evenings by eating-in while they watch a movie or ballgame!

### **Course Correction**

It's easy to backslide and let things get cluttered again. **The trick is to catch it before it gets overwhelming.**

People who are most successful changing behavior long-term have a limit - a line they will not cross. With weight loss, that may be a certain size or weight. For clutter control, you can decide what that looks like.

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Bev and Hillary have an agreement - one week is their line. If they miss cleaning one weekend, the next weekend nothing else happens until they catch up on their chores. No tv, no going out, no internet - nothing.

The sooner they're back on track, the sooner their lives get back to normal.

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What's your line in the sand? How do you get back to where you need to be? What leverage do you have with housemates to be part of the solution?



# THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Productivity is negatively affected at work and at home by clutter.
- Clutter affects mental and physical health in many negative ways.
- Family and social relationships may be negatively affected by clutter.
- Clutter can take a toll on your finances.
- You can lose up to an hour a day looking for things due to clutter.
- Problems with clutter are on a continuum - mild, moderate, severe.
- Even mild challenges with clutter can have a negative effect on your life and career.

- Organizing and staying organized requires everyone be willing to do their part.
- Sometimes compromise is necessary to manage what/who you have little control over.
- Ask for help! Friends, family, and professional organizers may be very helpful.
- If the problem is extreme, mental health assistance may be required.

**Good luck to you!**