

**8 STEPS TO
DE-CLUTTER
YOUR LIFE**

Overview

The next time you catch yourself frantically searching for last month's outstanding electricity bill, your car keys or that issue of the *New Yorker* you were only reading yesterday, ask yourself if the reason you can never find anything when you need it is because you're drowning in a sea of clutter.

What is clutter? It's all those things in your life that don't really matter or aren't being used, or as the dictionary defines the term, 'a disorderly heap or assemblage, litter, a state or condition of confusion.'

So why do we insist on accumulating so much junk, in our homes and workplaces, even in our heads? Is it because we're too busy and outwardly focused, the upshot being we lose sight of what really matters?

The truth is that despite what consumer capitalism would have us believe, possessing more doesn't bring greater happiness. On the contrary, psychologists ascribe many emotional problems such as embarrassment, stress, depression and frustration to our attachment to clutter.

And at its worst, our accumulation of stuff can turn into compulsive hoarding or pathological collecting, a serious mental illness that requires psychological and/or medical intervention.

The good news is decluttering your life isn't as daunting as you might think, especially now with so much expert advice available on the Internet and elsewhere including our events. For example, organisational expert [Lissane Oliver](#) presented on the topic at our 2012 *Happiness & Its Causes* conference.

What's more, there are many benefits from decluttering. You sleep better, have more time and energy, feel less anxious and enjoy greater peace of mind.

So what are you waiting for? **Here are 8 simple steps to declutter your life.**





Don't get overwhelmed

Decluttering is a big job and it's not going to happen overnight. But don't let this discourage you or worse, make you give up before you even start.

The smart thing is to not try and tackle the whole job, for instance your entire house, at once. Instead, choose one room or even one small area, such as the corner of your bedroom or a kitchen cabinet, and attack this first, before moving on to the next clutter hotspot. Or alternatively pick a clutter category, such as clothes, old magazines, your teapot collection, and work through each one slowly and methodically.

Feeling dubious about whether you have the willpower to actually throw stuff out? Then enlist the help of a friend whose objectivity will be invaluable. She'll tell you honestly whether your pink leather mini dress is really worth keeping. Ideally your pal is also purging, in which case you can be each other's 'goal buddies'. Nothing quite motivates like having to explain to somebody else your inaction.



2

Ask yourself some important questions



It's one thing to decide you're going to declutter; it's quite another knowing which of your chattels should stay or go. The influential writer, craftsman and social reformer of the 1800s, William Morris, said 'have nothing in your house that you do not know to use, or believe to be beautiful.' His words still hold true today, and should be borne in mind as you ask yourself some pertinent questions to help with the sifting process:

1. When was the last time I used this? Or wore it? It's easy to get sentimental and clingy, especially about clothes and shoes, kidding yourself that 'I will wear my pink mini leather dress again ... when I get my 25 year old body back'.

As a general rule - and this applies to most things - if it hasn't been used for more than a year, get rid of it.

2. Could I borrow, rent or improvise with something else the few times I might use this? One example is to consider tool rentals instead of keeping a workshop as a way to pare down your stuff.

3. Have I got more than one? If so, keep the best one and ditch the rest.

4. Is it out of date? This applies mainly to food, medicine and make up.

5. Can this item be fixed? Not a great option if repairs cost more than replacement.

6. Am I keeping this because I'd feel guilty if I didn't? The macramé owl Aunty May gifted you three Christmases ago falls into this category.

7. How easily and cheaply could I get another one if I really needed to? Books we've read are a good case in point. They're tempting to hang onto even if all they're doing is gathering dust. Yet if you get rid of a book and then regret it, you can always borrow it from the library or buy it used and at a cheap price on Amazon or at a secondhand bookstore.

3

Create a system

If you're planning to get rid of a lot of stuff, rather than pile it all in one gigantic heap, which is just going to create even more mess, you need to be strategic. Use some large boxes or garbage bags and label them as follows:

1. Keep - for things you definitely want to keep, and that meet these three criteria:

1. You use it regularly
2. You like it (a lot)
3. It has a place in your space

This box/bag can also include anything you're still not sure about e.g. your solar powered attic fan, perhaps because you think it might come in handy if you're ever stuck in your attic during a power failure. Put the item in a box, close it, label it and store it out of sight. Then wait six months or a year. If you haven't once opened the box, toss its contents or give them away.

A note about paperwork, tempting as it might be to throw much of it away, bear in mind tax documents need to be kept for five years after they are filed, utility bills for one year, and you should throw out credit card statements only after you've checked the transactions and paid the bills. Better still, elect for paperless billing where it's offered.

2. Put Back/Return - for stuff that doesn't belong where you found it e.g. office paperwork in the bedroom, children's toys in the lounge room, overdue library books, and any clothes you've borrowed from friends.

3. Give Away - for anything you don't need or want anymore but that's in too good a condition to be chucked. Sell items on [eBay](https://www.ebay.com), [Craigslist](https://www.craigslist.com) or at a garage sale, or find them a new home, via your local charity or at [freecycle.org](https://www.freecycle.org).

4. Fix - for possessions you believe are worth fixing although if the object in question has been broken or torn for longer than a few years, and you haven't missed it, don't bother investing in repairs.

5. Trash - for anything that's truly outlived its usefulness and can't be recycled.

As you go through your things, deciding what to keep or discard, don't mull. The more you mull, the more likely it is you'll hang onto the item in question. In fact, if you hesitate at all, it probably means it should go. This is a good exercise in learning to detach feelings and emotions from what are just things we choose to invest with meaning. Unless something is truly irreplaceable, it's okay to part with it and preserve its memory in your heart.

4

Deal with the boxes/bags

Once you've gone through everything and relegated at least one third of it to a box/bag, you're ready to do one of three things:

1. Get it out of the house - now

Put those items you decide to trash or recycle straight into their respective bins. Likewise, stash anything that's going to charity in your car, ready to be dropped off the next time you take a trip, along with those belongings that aren't yours and need to be returned. The most important thing while you're on a declutter roll is to clear the space as quickly as possible.

2. Group similar things together

You need to sort and store stuff in such a way that makes finding it and putting it back where it belongs easy, so you don't create mayhem all over again. One method is to store like with like e.g. put all reading material together. You may need more shelving to do this, or for other items, extra containers, or cupboard space. Look for ways to group things in one place and make their final resting place obvious. A useful question to ask is 'where do I mainly use this?'

3. Celebrate when you're done

Even if you just clean out one drawer or bookcase, that's still an accomplishment, and worthy of a celebratory treat ... a piece of cake, a new outfit (but only if you're sure you'll get lots of wear out of it). We all need incentives!





Avoid clutter in the first place

Celebrate by all means but don't get complacent. Unless you take precautions, it's easy to revert to your old clutter bug ways. Here are some things you can do to stop this from happening:

1. Get rid of something

Every time you bring home something new (e.g. your new celebratory outfit), get rid of something. This keeps the balance of clutter in check.

2. Set a clean up time

Commit the family to a set period of clean up time every night, once a week, or even once a month, during which you resolve to sort and toss a specific number of items. Be realistic though. Set the bar too high and you'll just give up when you don't meet your target.

3. Get the kids to help

Involve your kids by having them help designate storage zones. Ask them to select and sort into piles items they use in their various activities, such as art or reading. These can then go into their respective 'zones'. Your kids can make signs for these to help them quickly identify where their stuff belongs.

4. Healthy minds make better purchasing decisions

But even then, it's easy to get swept up in the thrill of ownership and spend money on things we don't need or even want that much. Think long and hard before you buy. The truth is, having less frees you up time and moneywise to follow other, more worthy pursuits.

And by using the library for books, and online music providers instead of buying CDs, to name a few examples, you shift even more of the 'care burden' off your shoulders. Plus the environment benefits too.

The Buddha said, 'with our thoughts we make the world'. It's worth noting that if there's a lot of clutter, it can be a sign of some deeper underlying issue such as grief or loss. Therefore it's important to try and understand, maybe with the help of a professional, the role in your life played by superfluous possessions.



6

Organise your workspace

Many of us work at desks and in offices crowded with papers, books, boxes, stationary, dirty dishes and other miscellany without realising the detrimental effect this is having on our stress levels, efficiency and productivity. Yet research shows very clearly that we're happier and work faster and better in a well ordered office.

There are lots of things you can do. Begin by binning post-it notes and loose papers. Chuck out pens that have run out of ink. Create files for essential material worth keeping, record appointment dates in a planner or online calendar, and find a home for everything on your desk.

Some suggestions:

1. Organise your digital files in clearly labelled digital file folders (again, like should go with like - all your resumes in one folder, all photos in another)
2. Store all files in one central location e.g. 'My Documents'
3. Consider cloud storage for all your backups.
4. Trash everything that's no longer of any use to you including banal email correspondence.

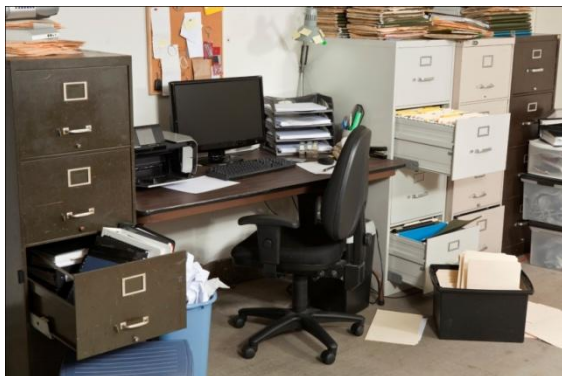
Your aim is to create a digital world that matches in serenity your decluttered physical one.

The physical workspace

Hence it's a great idea to regularly spring clean your work area. If this is in an out-of-home office, why not ask your colleagues to join in so that everyone benefits from an improved working environment.

The digital workspace

Our jobs today are vastly different to those our parents and grandparents did. We now use computers instead of filing cabinets and often our most important files are spread all over the desktop, on a USB or in cloud storage. The anxiety and confusion this causes is no different to walking into an office where everything is in disarray.



7

Clean out your car

If your car is so full of crap passengers have to clear a space to sit down, it's time for some helpful reminders:

What shouldn't be the car: old food wrappers and empty drink bottles, toys, anything destined for the op shop, drycleaner or recycling depot that you've been meaning to drop off for weeks but haven't yet; tools unless they're for the car, and unopened mail delivered to your post office box.

What should be in the car: registration, insurance certificate, owner's manual, maps (unless your car is fitted with GPS) and headset for your mobile phone (although it's illegal to talk on your mobile when you're driving).

What should be in the boot: tool kit, torch and working spare tyre.





Spring clean your mind

Clutter isn't just confined to our external world. Our mind can also be chock-full of worries, regrets and repetitive stories that keep us stuck in neurotic patterns.

The goal of reducing clutter is to get rid of non-essentials and keep only what's necessary. When it comes to the contents of your mind, this means deciding what you pay attention to, that is, what's worth keeping and what's not.

How do you do this? Every time a negative thought, emotion or internal experience arises, ask yourself the following:

1. Do I need this? Is it really necessary?
2. Does it serve me? Is it helpful or useful?
3. Am I attached to it? Can I let it go?

Experiment with this and get into the habit - one way is through the practice of meditation - of refocusing your attention away from those mindsets that don't serve you. You may even find that simply asking such questions causes neuroses to loosen their grip, including those that compel us to choke our lives - both inner and outer - with surplus stuff.

If you're interested in meditation check out:

<http://www.vajrayana.com.au/>
<http://meditation.org.au/>
<http://www.mindfulness.org.au/>



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