

# The joy of de-cluttering

## How clearing up leads to cheering up

After fifty or more years of spending, acquiring, and collecting in the consumerist society in which we live, many **in my primers** are now simply drowning in 'stuff'.

Of course, 'things' can be great to have – clothes, furniture, collections. And arguably, many items are 'essential' - equipment, tools, documents and papers. However, nearly all of us are guilty of continuously acquiring more and more without discarding a commensurate amount, with the result that we're living in surroundings (at home and work) which are over-cluttered and in danger of becoming completely overwhelming.

We're not advocating that minimalism is for everyone, but there's a big difference between *cosy* and undeniably *cluttered* - and what is often overlooked is the extent to which accumulated possessions can contribute significantly to feelings of depression, hopelessness, stress and inability to cope. Those who feel it most have been heard to comment *"I feel like I'm drowning in stuff. The walls are closing in on me and I just don't know where to start clearing it all out."*

Hopefully your situation isn't quite so dramatic, but if you recognise even a grain of what you've felt at times in that statement, it might be worthwhile taking action before things get too bad.

As an **in my primer**, by now you may well have acquired not only your own possessions but those of children who have moved out and possibly those of deceased, parents or other family members. In these situations 'things' then carry the added weight of emotional attachment, memories and even a sense of duty to continue to look after items that were once treasured by others. But face facts, your house isn't a museum – unless you choose to move to a larger and larger dwelling, something has to give. You need to get rid of some things.

Of course, if you're living with your spouse or partner you need to discuss the issue with them and agree whether it is something you jointly ought to, and want to, tackle. Often one partner is more convinced of this need than the other, so

this is probably going to be something requiring full and frank discussion at the outset. (See our fact sheet on *Negotiating* if you feel it's going to be a problem).

If you're the one wanting to start clearing and your partner doesn't agree, it might be worth calling on others (family members, neighbours) to give their objective opinion on whether or not they think it needs doing. Generally, if you've reached this stage, their response is almost certainly going to be 'yes' – and what's more they may even be prepared to help you!

Experience shows that particular categories and types of 'stuff' need different approaches to sorting out, and you need to be clear about the best approach in order to avoid being bogged down in the process. We don't believe in being prescriptive, but hopefully the following guidelines may be helpful:

**Clothes and accessories** – if you haven't worn it in the past year – do you really need it? Does it fit, is it in good condition, is it still 'fashionable', is it comfortable, does it suit you? If the answer is 'no' or 'maybe not' to any of these, you probably need to get rid of it. Research has shown that in fact most people only wear a small percentage of their clothes (both women and men) – so start by taking everything out of your wardrobes and drawers and only putting back what you consider are 'essentials'. After that, identify what can definitely be discarded. If you can't bear to part with the remainder, bag it or box it up, and store it – marked with today's date. Any item in the bag/box that you don't use within the next six months has then got to go at the end of that time!

**CDs, books, 'collections'**. Only you can decide what you really want and need to keep, but undoubtedly it's not all of what you're currently harbouring. You don't have to be a nerd to categorise, label and sort your stuff for easy access – it just means you're organised. After all, what's the point of having things if you don't know what you have and you can't lay your hands on particular items when you want to? And be realistic – are you just keeping books and other

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things as 'nice to haves'. Do you ever use them? Are you ever really going to refer to them again?

**Pictures, plants, and ornaments.** Deal with these as part of your whole-house makeover (see below). As a starting point to being decisive, remove everything from where it traditionally resides and then make a deliberate decision about whether or not you want to keep it, and if so, where it should go. Often we just stop seeing our own stuff we've had it so long, so take an objective view. Are your things still fashionable, interesting and stylish or old, tired and frankly, unlovely? You don't have to have the latest of everything, but you may find there are many things that really no longer do much even for you, and certainly many houseplants and pictures may be looking very old and tired.

**Furniture and appliances.** Many in my primers simply have too much. We buy new appliances without discarding the old, we store things we have been given as gifts (especially kitchen and personal health appliances) and never use them. We hold on to old furniture that once fitted a purpose long after our needs have changed. And remember, furniture items do wear out. These days, it's possible to buy new, serviceable, attractive furniture for a fraction of what it once cost, so there's no excuse for harbouring things that are tatty, tired and totally past it.

**Papers – documents, bills, policies.** Decide what is really important and what you absolutely have to keep (and for how long) and have a policy about the rest. For example, keep household bills only until the next one arrives, discard the previous year's policy when you renew. Best of all, look at what you can store and access on computer, and online. Banks, utility companies and many more organisations allow you to access your payment records and bills automatically, cutting back dramatically on your need for storing supporting paperwork. The most effective strategy of all for keeping excess papers at bay is not to keep them in the first place – scan, and discard (paper recycling bin) on the day of arrival, or deal with all your paperwork once a week at a set time. Don't let paper mountains build up – ever.

**Memorabilia – souvenirs, baby clothes, toys, brochures, photographs.** Keeping it all won't change your memories so just choose one or two items to treasure. Catalogue your souvenirs, brochures, letters and postcards – that way you can find them when you want to look at them and you won't have to search through whole boxes of ephemera every time. Digital photographs can now be stored online, too – look at sites such as [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com) [www.kodakgallery.co.uk](http://www.kodakgallery.co.uk) and [www.snapfish.co.uk](http://www.snapfish.co.uk)

**Tools, equipment – sport, hobbies, DIY.** Here most of us are guilty of living in a mess or with a mess – generally because that mess resides in a cupboard or shed. These days there are some great and inexpensive storage systems available to help you organise these items, keep them in good condition and make them easy to find. But it does mean that you will have to be disciplined about putting things back in the right place once you have sorted them out or you'll just end up in another mess!

**Maintenance items – personal and household.** Here we're talking about health and beauty products, cosmetics, cleaning materials. Separate them into regular use and occasional use and store them separately in accessible boxes. Throw away anything that is more than one year old and/or that you haven't used in the past six months. Discard duplicates and anything that only has a tiny amount left. Be ruthless!

### Your whole-house makeover

So you think it sounds like a good idea so far, but where should you start? After all, cache of clutter the size of yours isn't going to be sorted out in a day.

1. **Create a vision** of what you want you would like your house (or office, or room) to look and feel like – if you don't know what you're aiming for; it isn't going to happen. Get a folder or scrapbook and fill it with pictures from magazines of the sort of airy, uncluttered space you would like to achieve. Write down what it would feel like to be living in that way.
2. **Decide on a reasonable time frame.** It's taken you years to accumulate all this stuff, so sorting it out is going to take time too. But if you don't aim for an end date, it won't get done. Above all, be realistic but don't allow yourself too much time or you'll end up being overwhelmed by the idea even before you start.
3. **Devise a sensible plan.** Work out where to start and in what order to tackle various spaces. List specific projects e.g. sorting out particular collections, cupboards or cabinets and estimate how long it will take you to deal with them. If, as mentioned earlier, you're harbouring items that aren't really yours, take action at the outset. Get your kids to take their stuff if they want to hold onto it and ask other family members if they want to take anything that might be considered 'family heirlooms'. If they don't want them, then why should you feel obliged to look after them? If they really can't take them temporarily but do want them kept, then perhaps you need to think about temporary storage elsewhere.

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4. **Create a system.** This means deciding **how** you're going to start and possibly is the most important step of all. If you aren't clear at the outset about how you're going to decide what to keep and what to discard, what you're going to do with the stuff you want to get rid of, and how you're going to store what you've got left you'll just get into an even worse mess and you'll give up almost before you've started. Believe it or not, it's difficult to make these types of decisions when you're right in the midst of it all, so it's vital to think it through before you launch into it.
  5. **Prepare for action.** Obviously the first step is to decide **when** to start – ideally allow yourself at least a free weekend (ideally longer) to get stuck in and make some real progress. At the end of the day if you've tackled things properly you should be able to see some real progress, which should boost your motivation for doing more. But before you get going, make sure you have everything you need – rubbish or storage bags, boxes, labels, and cleaning materials are all essential. And if anyone's offered to help, it could be a good idea to take up their offer. This really is a time when many hands make light work and someone else's enthusiasm for the job will help keep you going (no doubt about it, although you may start off with energy and enthusiasm this is tiring and draining work).
  6. **Start with one room.** The best approach is to remove everything (except large items of furniture which are going to remain) from the first room you're going to tackle. This will mean having identified somewhere to move everything to (see points 4 and 5 above). Clean – and if necessary rearrange – the room - then only put back those things that are essential.
  7. **Identify the 'must-haves'.** Deciding what to keep and what you could and should get rid of isn't easy. The best way is to think through what would happen if there were a fire or flood. How much of what you have would you be desperate to save or replace? How much of what you have do you actually **need**? How long has it been since you used or even looked at a particular item? What would be the downside of getting rid of it and finding out later that you needed it (we all keep a lot of things 'just in case' we might need them, when we could fairly easily and cheaply go and buy a replacement if such an eventuality occurred.)
  8. **Be ruthless.** This is the hardest part of what you have to do – but if you aren't ruthless in discarding items you'll just end up putting back the majority of what you started with. Here is where objective help can come in

useful – actually having to answer the question “What *is* this and exactly why are you keeping it?” can lead to some useful insights and realisations.

9. **Note future projects.** Undoubtedly you'll come across some areas that will take a considerable amount of time to tackle (e.g. sorting through a cabinet full of papers). It's important not to undermine your efforts to make real progress by becoming sidelined into sorting them out immediately, so schedule in a few hours to tackle each project separately. But – don't allow yourself to move the unsorted mess back into your newly cleared room – it has to be done before you move onto the next room.
10. **Persevere.** It's almost certain that clearing the first room will have taken you longer than you predicted and it may have been both physically and emotionally draining. But doesn't the result look great? If possible, take a break at this stage and just enjoy using and living in your first newly cleared space before you start on the rest – room by room in a methodical fashion. If not, and you've allowed yourself a chunk of time to get lots done, then press on in the same fashion – just make sure that none of your rubbish creeps back into those newly cleared and reorganised spaces.

Probably you will need to organise a skip to take all your discarded rubbish, though of course, charity shops, recycling depots, auction houses and ebay are all good alternatives for anything that anyone else might want. But if you don't get a buyer or can't find a new home for a particular item, don't take it back – grit your teeth and follow your original plan to discard it.

Finally – while you're cleaning up and clearing out, resolve not to be distracted. Don't answer the phone, turn on the TV, have a 'quick look' at the newspaper or stop for any longer than the minimum time for coffee and lunch breaks. Experience shows that after a while you'll be desperate to finish and to find any reason to stop, but you mustn't. This is one situation where sticking with it really will have huge benefits for you, both immediately and in the longer term. Your sense of achievement will be amazing.

For more information and motivation, you may find these books helpful (there are plenty more):

*The life Laundry*, Dawna Walter  
*Organising from the inside out*, Julie Morgenstern  
*Teach yourself decluttering*, Bernice Walmsley

For great storage solutions see [www.theholdingcompany.co.uk](http://www.theholdingcompany.co.uk) [www.aplaceforeverything.co.uk](http://www.aplaceforeverything.co.uk) and of course, [www.ikea.co.uk](http://www.ikea.co.uk). See [www.yell.com](http://www.yell.com) for storage companies in your area.