

# Don't Be a Basket Case: Removing Your Life's Clutter

Do your piles of clutter defeat even the best organization system? Maybe it's time to look at the meaning behind the mess.

By Mary Mohler

## Take a Hard Look at Your Bad Habits

I had never thought of myself as a clutterholic. Even with five kids in residence my house was tidy enough to allow for drop-in company with no major embarrassment, as long as guests didn't stray far from the living or dining room. But, oh, the secrets hidden behind closed doors: stacks of mail and receipts on the kitchen table; medicines, batteries, and old Christmas cards crammed into drawers; a laundry room that looked like the drop-off point for a rummage sale; and bedrooms that might be mistaken for the scene of a recent robbery. And that's not even counting the basement, the attic, and the garage, whose contents could have outfitted at least three other families.

Our skeletons were safely hidden -- until the kids left home and my husband and I decided to downsize. After Sandi, our real-estate agent and friend, toured the house, she promptly staged an intervention. Patiently but with unwavering resolve, she made me face the clutter -- and get rid of it. At the end of this painful process I found I had more than just an uncluttered house. Letting go of all that junk gave me a feeling of lightness and coherence, not to mention a sense of being in control of my life. I realized that the stuff clogging the closets and stacking up on every horizontal surface had also been cluttering my brain.



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Sandi's cleanup campaign forced me to confront a hard fact: My struggle with clutter was never really about the particular items in question. Indeed, my attempts to tackle the ever-growing heaps of stuff by buying new shelving systems and pretty containers were like trying to bail out the Titanic with a paper cup. Clutter isn't a problem of space; it's a psychological issue. If you've tried repeatedly to get organized and it hasn't worked, you need a new approach.

## Take a Hard Look at Your Bad Habits

The three handmaidens of clutter, experts say, are passivity, procrastination, and perfectionism. That first P was one of my biggest problems. I used to look at my crammed closets and imagine that soon -- very soon -- something would happen to change the situation. Plus I'd get mired in the feeling that it was just too big a project. Why even try?

The solution? Start small. Tackle the master bedroom first, advises professional organizer Peter Walsh, host of the television show *Clean Sweep*. Walsh believes the bedroom sets the emotional tone and drives the energy for the whole house. "What most people say they want from this room is peace, serenity, intimacy," he says. "That's the vision. But does an unmade bed reflect that?"

I took Walsh at his word. All my life I've considered bed-making an exercise in futility: You're just going to mess it up again. But the effect of making my bed the instant I get up was startling. When the bed is unmade, pretty much anything goes. Once it's tidy, I want the rest of the room to have that sense of order. It's hard to describe the feeling of serenity I get from walking into the bedroom and seeing my cat purring contentedly on a smooth, pretty duvet cover.

Conquering passivity alone won't cut the clutter, however, until you also deal with procrastination. "Eventually the effort to avoid a task becomes greater than the effort needed to do it," points out Sunny Schlenger, a professional organizer and author of *Organizing for the Spirit*. Besides that, she adds, every time you walk by the overflowing laundry basket or the pile of tax papers, you feel bad. Now you are dealing not just with clutter but with clutter guilt as well.

Rita Emmett, author of *The Clutter-Busting Handbook*, has a no-fail strategy for getting past procrastination. She recommends setting aside an hour for a task you don't want to do -- a real hour, which means gathering your tools in advance and no bathroom breaks, coffee refills, or quick e-mail checks allowed. Then set a timer for 60 minutes and go to it. When the hour is up you'll be so into the task you'll find it hard to stop. With luck you may even discover that you're finished with it.

Unless you are a perfectionist, that is, in which case you'll never be finished. If you feel compelled to read the newspaper cover to cover, for example, you may wind up with some very tall, unread stacks. "Paradoxically, perfectionists often hold on to clutter," says Sandra Felton, author of *Organizing for Life*. "They have to find just the right person to give their stuff to or the most environmentally correct way of disposing of it. It has to be done right or not at all." Unfortunately, she adds, it's usually not at all. If this sounds like you, start small, set priorities, and learn to live with "good enough" instead of striving for unreachable perfection.

## See How Shedding Sets You Free

"Your home reflects your life," Walsh says, "and you can't make progress in any other area of your life if your house is a mess." That goes double for those of us who work at home. Wendy Brooks, a publicist from Phoenix, Arizona, found herself freezing up when she sat in her chaotic home office trying to write press releases. So she got rid of

knickknacks, photos, and anything else that helped keep her from focusing on her work. "All that stuff distracted me and short-circuited creativity," she says.

Walsh says his clients have told him repeatedly that when they purge their stuff it feels as if a weight has been lifted from them. Some of their mental clutter -- in the form of tension, anxiety, and lack of motivation -- simply dissipates, and they end up feeling better about themselves. "Just the act of deciding to throw something out is energizing," says Gail Blanke, author of *Throw Out Fifty Things*.

Kathy Partak, of Auburn, California, has been decluttering since March and loves the sense of pride it gives her. "If you were to show up at my door today I'd be able to invite you in and show you to my beautiful guest room -- even hang up your clothes in the closet," she says. "No more, 'Just a minute while I move the piles from the bed and try to make room in the closet.'"

After Sherry Gavanditti, of Bedford, Ohio, vowed to get rid of two bags of clutter a week, she, too, discovered that organization has unexpected benefits. "I like myself more, I feel more in control of my life and I have more self-respect," she says. Gina Miller, of Lombard, Illinois, found she had more time and energy after decluttering her home. "I even have a higher sex drive," she says. Now that's motivation.



## No More Excuses!

Most of us have elaborate justifications for the clutter that clogs our household and our brain. We invited some experts to poke holes in our usual alibis.

**What you tell yourself:** "But it's still perfectly good."

**Reality check:** Take a cold, hard look at that green suit with shoulder pads, circa 1992. "Just because something is good doesn't mean it's good for you anymore," says Felton. Learn to distinguish between functional and useful.

**What you tell yourself:** "It was on sale."

**Reality check:** A tag saying "50 percent off" trumps all for many women: So what if you don't have anything that goes with it or any place to wear it? Then you feel guilty every time you see the item in your closet with tags intact. Learning to set boundaries can help you stop clutter before it starts. Ask yourself whether that sale item will increase your serenity -- and then walk out of the store.

**What you tell yourself:** "I'll wear it when I lose weight."

**Reality check:** This is a catchall justification for a closet so stuffed even the moths can't breathe. If you've been saying this for years, chances are you're harboring unreal expectations about your body -- a category of clutter as real as the clothing itself. Follow Schlenger's rule: If it's been a year since you wore the item, dump it.

**What you tell yourself:** "It was a gift."

**Reality check:** Feeling chained to that hideous vase your great-aunt gave you? You might want to consider what this drive to please others is doing to you. Returning or passing along a gift does not mean you don't love the giver or appreciate her thoughtfulness.

**What you tell yourself:** "I can't dump a collection."

**Reality check:** Sometimes what starts out as a collection ends up as a bad habit. "I started collecting rabbits 30 years ago and it just got out of control," says Joan Sharpes, of Hoodspert, Washington. "They took over the house." Donating most of the collection (except for a few favorites) gave her a sense of relief, not to mention a break from dusting.

**What you tell yourself:** "I might need it one day."

**Reality check:** Life can take scary turns, and it never hurts to save one or two things that have a reasonable chance for a future life. Unfortunately, says Walsh, many people have stowed away enough to furnish an alternate universe.

**What you tell yourself:** "I'm going to get it fixed."

**Reality check:** The cost of repairing an item is, sadly, often greater than the cost of a new one. If you've stowed that broken TV for a year or more, you clearly don't need it. And maybe it's time to give up the Ms. Fixit fantasy altogether and concentrate on more important priorities.

**What you tell yourself:** "It holds so many memories."

**Reality check:** Baby clothes, old love letters...it's hard to accept that an era of your life has ended. When Bev Simpson's husband died two years ago, she was devastated. "At first I attached great meaning to all his stuff," says Simpson, of Canby, Oregon. "But clinging to these objects kept me stuck in my grief, unable to move on." She held on to a few key things and gave the rest to charity.

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