

Come clean about clutter!

By Lisa Taylor Huff

Is clutter taking over your life? When you have clutter in your living and working space, it often means there are other areas of your life that are also cluttered up with unhealthy things. Clutter drains your energy, creates stress, and diverts your attention from the things you REALLY want to be doing. It provides you with “excuses” about not doing other things that matter to you. And it contributes to other types of mental or emotional “clutter” such as credit card debt, being in unhealthy relationships, or taking good care of yourself.

The more clutter you have, the more chaotic your life becomes - which in turn usually creates MORE clutter. It becomes the proverbial “vicious cycle”. To break the cycle, you have to start by eliminating the clutter. But before you start randomly shoving things in boxes under the bed or a dark corner of the basement (which is really just hiding the evidence, not “getting organized”), it will be helpful to understand some of your individual reasons for your clutter. In Julie Morgenstern’s book, *Organizing from the Inside Out*, the author points out the importance of doing a little self-analysis before you start trying to get things organized - the idea being that understanding the internal reasons for your clutter will help you make the *external* changes to create a more organized and peaceful life.

When I work with my own clients on this process, I have them start by asking some tough questions:

- What is it about this clutter that bothers me the most?
- What is it about having clutter that either gives me a reason/excuse to do something, or a reason to *avoid* doing something?
- Am I using the mess to keep others at an emotionally comfortable distance? Who am I hiding from?
- What goals do I have for my life that I am NOT accomplishing as a result of having this clutter in my life? How has the clutter become an obstacle to achieving my goals?

Chances are, you’ll uncover some very interesting things about your clutter, and yourself, that you might not have realized before. Having that knowledge will help keep you motivated to get and stay more organized.

Next, it’s time to take some action. Start small. Pick ONE space that is cluttered: the top of your desk, a single closet, the inside of your car. It’s advisable to deal with one space at a time so you don’t get distracted by other cluttered areas. I recommend following Morgenstern’s acronym for organizing: S-P-A-C-E

S = Sort. Before you toss or put away, sort everything into appropriate categories first so you know what’s there.

P = Purge. Once you know what you’ve got, get rid of whatever isn’t being used, or isn’t in good condition. Create “Toss” and “Donate” or “Sell” piles for the things you are going to eliminate.

A = Assign a Home. After the S and P steps, you now have to decide where the remaining items will go. This is where you will need to create systems and solutions that work with your personal lifestyle or work needs. Check Morgenstern’s book for pages of useful tips and ideas for every imaginable organizing challenge from filing systems to bedroom closets and more.

C = Containerize. Once you’ve decided where things need to go, you will need to figure out what kind of containers you’ll need to put things in for storage. It’s important NOT to do this step until you’ve done the other three - most people make the mistake of buying the containers before they know what their needs will be, and end up with solutions that don’t fit the needs.



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E = Equalize. This is the ongoing work of STAYING organized. It means creating a process where you regularly put things back where they belong, once they have a home and the right containers.

Sometimes when we're faced with a HUGE cleaning/organizing project, we make excuses by saying "I don't have time to do all that now." But instead of having to block out an entire day or half-day, what about doing the job in small chunks? Are you willing to spend just 15 minutes (or 20 or 30) a day to clean up or organize that space until all the clutter is handled? You'll be amazed at how much you can accomplish in regular, short intervals! I tried this strategy myself several years ago while setting up my first home office because I felt so overwhelmed by the existing mess in that spare room, which was part guest room, part work space, and part storage locker for all the junk I couldn't find a home for elsewhere. I committed myself to a half-hour each day and estimated it would take me about a week. Imagine my happy surprise when I ended up finishing the entire job over the course of only three days - because I ended up WANTING to spend more than the minimum 30 minutes, once I got started!

If you need it, get extra support - buddy up with a friend, hire a professional organizer, enlist a life coach for some extra support. Having a neutral person on board can help you when you feel emotionally attached to your clutter - the other person can help you prioritize and remind you of why you are doing all this clutter-busting in the first place. Don't go it alone if you don't have to!

Sometimes, just the act of take ONE initial step can help you cut through that feeling of being stuck and overwhelmed, and you'll end up making BIG progress! In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase. Just take the first step."