

Declutter your life

By JENNIFER HARTLEY

Be honest. It's okay. If you're like me, you have five pairs of scissors, three corkscrews, four heads of lettuce in your fridge and six jars of peanut butter kicking around. That's in the kitchen alone. Take a look at the home office and what greets you are piles of paper reaching the ceiling comprised of children's artwork, photos, junk mail, old bills, newspapers, unused cookbooks and even a few discarded mobile phones from circa 1995. Let's not even mention closets or the basement which is enough to send even the most patient of home organizers running for the door - if she could actually find it!



Thankfully, I am not alone in my world of embarrassing clutter and disorganization. Think tank The Australia Institute recently conducted a study on this very topic and discovered that 88 per cent of respondents claimed they had at least one room in their house that was cluttered. Spare rooms topped the list, followed by bedrooms and the garage.

Four in ten Australians say they feel anxious, guilty, or depressed about the clutter in their homes, with women being more concerned about the issue than men. In fact, almost half of the women surveyed said they were anxious, depressed or worried about the clutter in their home, while a third said they were embarrassed by it and wouldn't dream of letting anyone in to see it. And if you have kids? You might as well forget about ever having any order in your house.

Just how did we end up in this mess? That depends in part on how old you are. For many who grew up with parents

from the 1950s, the notion of throwing things out was sacrilegious. Jean, who is in her late 60s, explains that "the Depression was the creation of pack rats. Material possessions became very important as a result of that era and so we grew up being told to keep everything for a rainy day or to keep things 'just in case'." Jean jokingly says that after her recent move, she gave items to Habitat for Humanity: "I never thought you could collect bathroom sinks, but there you have it."

Clutter in the homes of today's younger generations, especially those with children, is generally caused by the busyness of life and lack of time to deal with, well, stuff. Let's face it, life is hard enough for those who have to get the kids to school, run off to work, and deal with kids' activities. There's hardly time in such chaotic schedules to worry about clutter. Some would argue our consumerist society encourages clutter through the importance placed on having the latest, trendy products. That is a whole other story. In my world, I don't even have time to think about

why I have the clutter: I just have it.

But while we step over the piles of clothes and magazines to get to the bathroom or bed, there's also a movement afoot: women want to conquer clutter and are looking to tidy up, rid themselves of baggage, both in their physical and emotional lives. There are TV shows dedicated to the noble task of doing this and even Oprah has gotten in on the declutter craze. But let's face it, not all of us are like *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw with closets the size of Manhattan. Furthermore, if you're like me, you buy boxes and containers for your things, adding more instead of taking away. So what's a girl do to?

There's no shortage of places to go for help. Head to your local library or bookstore and there are lots of great books on the topic of how to organize your life. The Internet provides endless opportunities with countless websites to consult for ideas, and some are better than others.

Here are some practical ideas that seem to make a lot of sense.

- **Go easy on yourself.** It didn't take a day to make your mess and it won't take a day to clean it up. Don't set goals that are too ambitious. Start off with small tasks and celebrate the small victories, that way you won't get discouraged and you'll stay motivated. Whether you get through one pile of clothes, a whole room, or your house, you'll feel better and you will take control of your life, one pile at a time. A number of declutter specialists recommend having a schedule. If you are trying to do one room, then give yourself concrete deadlines (works for everything else in life, why not decluttering?).

- **Assess the room you're preparing to tackle:** what do you want it used for and remove what is unnecessary.

- **Donate.** You'll feel better about getting rid of things if you think someone else can use it. (Of course, follow through on delivery. I still have bags in my basement waiting for delivery to a charity).

- **When in doubt, throw it out.** If you can't remember the last time you used it, bin it. You won't miss it. As Angela Irvine argues, founder and owner of Love Your Space, a home organizing company in Ottawa, you need to ask yourself if the item is something you would be embarrassed

to present to a houseguest. If so, she says, "chuck it!"

- **Stay focused.** Try not to linger on items. Don't get caught up in a visit down memory lane. In fact, to assist in preventing in taking this dangerous path, get a close friend you trust to help out. Help her declutter her place and she can help you. She can guide you through the emotional minefield associated with ditching certain items ... like those tickets to the 1984 Air Supply concert, or the genius business ideas you came up with at 2 a.m. in a pub twenty years ago.

- **Try organizing a declutter session the day before garbage day.** It's a good motivator to know you will get rid of the junk the next day.

And of course an ounce of prevention never hurts. When shopping, ask yourself if you really need what you are about to buy. Even if you don't need it but buy it anyway, when you get home, purge two items that you don't use anymore.



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So let's say you are too busy to even contemplate attacking the clutter, you can always hire some help. Check out www.organizers-incanada.com. Professional organizers can come into your home and offer a consultation on how to organize your home or they will come in and do it for you. But it's

not cheap. The consultation route can cost you in the range of \$150 while a clean-up of one room alone can set you back \$300. Based on that fee structure, to organize my home would likely run \$1500. Right now, given I'm buried in paper, Dora the Explorer paraphernalia and too many toy cars and planes to even mention, that seems like a small price to pay.

Those who have undertaken the declutter process talk of the inner peace they feel in their home. The ability to find what you're looking for in mere seconds instead of a long frustrating process of sifting through piles, boxes or drawers, is rewarding. Life is less chaotic because of it. Irvine says that "getting organized gives you a strong sense of well-being. A clutter-free space will clear your mind, re-energize and inspire you. It increases efficiency and productivity by lowering stress and helps you find more time and energy for what matters most to you. It makes a home or office appear more spacious and inviting."

Sounds good. Let the decluttering begin, one pile at a time.