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Clearing away the clutter



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While clutter might seem like just “stuff,” there is a psychology to why we accumulate clutter and find pleasure in clearing it away.

Cue the latest craze of decluttering fueled by Japanese organizing consultant and author Marie Kondo of Netflix’s *Tidying Up With Marie Kondo*. Not only has the show spurred a social media frenzy to declutter, it has created a windfall for thrift stores enjoying the fruits of decluttering efforts.

But why is decluttering so equally satisfying and difficult? Our experts offer answers and advice.

The allure of decluttering

Alice Boyes, PhD, author of *The Anxiety Toolkit* and *The Heathy Mind Toolkit*, says we are drawn to decluttering because because it can make us feel more in control.

“It can help people realize they can methodically tackle a large problem that felt insurmountable to start with, and that they've previously avoided. TV shows and books about decluttering often offer it has a way that people who are unhappy in their lives can turn that around and improve their relationships,” Boyes says. “It can help people feel like they're getting a fresh start. It can help people realize that their nature and habits aren't static and they have a capacity to change and grow that they may have doubted.”

June Saruwatari, author of *Behind The Clutter: Truth Love Meaning Purpose*, has been helping people declutter their lives and spaces for more than 20 years, and agrees that there is a new widespread realization that clutter can prevent us from living the life we really want.

“The ‘physical stuff’ can literally weigh us down—mentally and emotionally. Most importantly, I believe that the exercise of clearing the clutter can be a tool to uncover and deal with many psychological and physical issues that we may not necessarily be confronting,” Saruwatari says. “We need to first stop and address the root cause of why we accumulated the clutter in the first place—otherwise, the ‘stuff’ will keep on coming back into one’s life with a vengeance.”

Why we hit roadblocks

If decluttering is so satisfying, why do we struggle so much? Boyes says many of us don’t have the mental energy for the numerous small decisions that decluttering requires, especially if your

work or personal life already involves constant decision-making.

“If your willpower is stretched thin, it's hard to have the mental energy to declutter,” Boyes says.

“The psychology behind the clutter is what I'm most interested in and why I focus on helping people get to the root cause behind their clutter,” Saruwatari adds. “It is not just about the physical stuff that takes up room in our lives, but the mental clutter that keeps us from feeling productive and happy, the emotional clutter that prevents us from being open to a new relationship, and so on.”

Decluttering isn't a simple act of cleaning, Saruwatari says, but a deeper clearing away.

“Decluttering is not just about getting your desk or closet in order,” she says. “It's about relieving yourself of all the stuff you're hanging on to from past careers, relationships, iterations and stages of your life, even including unfinished business.”

Anxiety can also be a barrier, as well as issues with planning and sequencing.

“People who are anxious often fear regret about throwing something away they later wanted. Anxious people dislike making decisions when there is uncertainty and there is a lot of uncertainty involved in deciding what to throw away and what to keep,” she says. “People who aren't great at planning and sequencing can have a difficult time thinking through the process of decluttering.”

Finding the root of our problems with decluttering can be the biggest part of the challenge, Saruwatari says.

“Many people will have an ‘a-ha moment’ when they understand the root cause of why they are having a hard time letting go. This goes deep. It could be anything from broken dreams and fears of failing again at a career or business venture. Clothes that no longer fit but stay in our closet can be connected to lack of self-confidence, self-love and not fully appreciating the body you have been blessed with. Relics from past relationships might be connected to anger at another or our self for mistakes of the past. The list goes on,” Saruwatari says. “What is most

important is to relish the journey of letting go and really examine with an open heart and mind what clutter you have accumulated and why—and then to fully let go with love and gratitude. This is a powerful way to break the cycle once and for all.”

Where to start?

There are many ways to start clearing your space and taking control, says Boyes. One is to start with small goals. Throw out five things for 30 days, or spend 15 minutes decluttering each day. Choose a small area to begin working and continue until that small area is complete.

“Start with the easiest places for you, and work up to areas that are more emotionally difficult,” she says.

Saruwatari agrees.

“Just one. Just one step at a time. Just one space at a time. Just one item at a time. Start small. Start with just one area. Perhaps just the junk drawer that you keep throwing things in to or better yet, your purse or briefcase that you carry with you every day,” Saruwatari says. “Get into the groove of letting go and feeling liberated from the ‘stuff’ you thought you needed, but truthfully you have not used or needed for some time.”

Labeling boxes for final destinations can help, Boyes says. A discard box, and a “holding” box may help.

“I like having boxes labeled with one and three months,” Boyes suggests. “When you're not sure if you want to discard something, you can put it into one of these boxes and if you haven't used it in that time, you'll discard it.”

This can help individuals realize how seldom they might need something they think is so important, but also can help cope with getting rid of things they worry about throwing away and then regretting.

“People fear regret but humans have a better capacity to bounce back from emotions than we give ourselves credit for,” Boyes says. “You don't want to hang onto nine things you don't need, to avoid regret over throwing away one thing you later needed or wanted.”

Saruwatari adds another technique, the core of her philosophy that is centered around simple criteria that can be applied to not only our physical spaces but, thoughts/belief systems, and relationships as well. She suggests tackling the following questions to declutter both physically and mentally.

1. Truth: What is the truth of this situation? Do I truthfully need or use this item or thing? Does this person truthfully deserve to be in my life?
2. Love: Do I absolutely love it?
3. Meaning: Does it truly have meaning for me? Is the meaning for me still relevant for where I am in my life today?
4. Purpose: Many things can serve a purpose, but is its purpose in alignment with who I am today? Does it serve a purpose for me today or did it only serve a purpose for someone else in the past?

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