House Smart: Solutions for Managing Clutter

A guide for people who want to reduce clutter around the home
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Clutter - What Is It and Where Can You Find It?

Clutter is an accumulation of items or “stuff” that collects in our homes. It can be all sorts of things that people buy or receive over the years. Sometimes similar items become cluttered, while other times it is a bunch of unrelated items. Most people can relate to feeling like they have more things than they really need. Just the word “clutter” evokes physical and emotional responses from people. They nod, sigh, roll their eyes, explain how they meant to sort through things, but didn’t have time. Some clutter is common to most homes or apartments.

People express disappointment or even guilt that they have allowed clutter to invade their home. Yes – clutter is like an invader! It takes away your free space. Clutter can spread from one room to another and eventually can take over. How much clutter and its location vary from home to home. In some cases rooms or entire homes become so cluttered that it actually prevents you and your family from truly enjoying your living space.

Clutter can show up anywhere. It may be a bunch of items that you have collected and thrown in some drawers or boxes. Or, it may be a room where you put extra stuff – piles of things that have nowhere else to go and you keep the door shut. Closets may be filled up with so much stuff that you may grab something and shut the door hoping something else doesn’t fall on you.

What is the condition of your bedroom? Do you have stacks of clothing piled on dressers or strewn around? Are clean and dirty clothing mixed together? Does all your clothing and shoes fit or are some no longer in style? Do you have clothing you bought or received as a gift, but never wore?

Bedside tables can become littered with drink containers or anything from your pockets such as loose change, receipts, car keys, pens, candy wrappers, papers, thumb drives, small hardware parts or tissues. Some bedrooms have exercise equipment with heaps of clothing piled on, like leaves on the branches of a tree. Other bedrooms become like the home office with computers, peripherals, files and piles of papers.
The laundry area may have piles of clothes – clean or dirty, folded or crumpled in baskets. If you aren’t sure what clothing is clean and what is dirty, your laundry area is probably cluttered.

Some bathrooms, vanities and medicine closets are filled with bottles of cosmetics, medicines or cleaners you forgot you ever had. Hallways may have furniture with piles of things left on tables or the floor.

Does your office have piles of disorganized papers and outdated office supplies that you save because you think you will need them “some day”? Have you taken the time to recycle obsolete electronics?

Toys can also create clutter when they are not put in a designated spot on a daily basis. Teaching kids to care for their toys can prevent some from becoming broken and children can find them easier. Toys can injure people when you step on the toys or trip on them by accident.

Living rooms may have stacks of DVD’s, magazines, books, newspapers, or coats and shoes scattered around.

Your kitchen or dining table may be a dumping ground for all sorts of things – homework, mail, dishes, bottles or cans, knick knacks, pens, notes, even medicine bottles. Is your kitchen filled with countertop appliances you rarely use? Are drawers packed with utensils you haven’t used in years? The shelves and cabinets may be filled to capacity with outdated foods or spices.

In more severe cases, some rooms can become so cluttered that there are only little pathways where you can walk.

Basements, garages and attics often make the rest of the house look pretty good. All sorts of items get left there so you don’t have to deal with them for months or even years.

Some items even migrate into the yard around your home, and become ruined left outside in the wind, rain, sun or snow, just waiting to be discarded.

Can you visualize any places in your home that are cluttered?
Should You Be Concerned?

Clutter in the home impacts you and your family’s health and quality of life. It robs you of your enjoyment of your home. Most people spend 90% of their time indoors. Aside from school, work, volunteering, and most shopping or leisure activities, individuals and families spend a lot of time at home. It is the place where you usually start and end your day, eat, study, read, relax, sleep, and socialize with family or friends. It’s where you keep your personal belongings.

Home is the place we consider “ours” – it gives us a sense of security and protects us from the weather and the rest of the world. For most families, the home is the single greatest investment. Your home reflects the personalities of the people living in it. Do you enjoy your home or does its appearance make you feel stressed?

Research indicates that healthy homes can positively affect your physical and mental health. Clutter makes homes unhealthy. When you remove clutter and maintain a clutter free home, you are promoting good physical and mental health for you and your family. Think about how you can make your home a healthier place!
Clutter Affects Indoor Air Quality

When items become piled up over periods of time and are not cleaned or are left undisturbed, they accumulate dust, dirt, and allergens. This includes pet hair and dander, pollen, dust mites and other pests, and even mold in damp areas. If someone smokes in your household, the by-products of the cigarette smoke settles on surfaces. For example, the walls and furnishings of homes with cigarette smokers often become dingy, yellow, and smell of smoke.

If you do not clean and put things away on a regular basis, your home will become cluttered. The medical community has documented that the number of people with asthma and sensitivities to their environment is rapidly increasing. Children, the elderly and those who have chronic illnesses like asthma are most at risk. You can positively impact you and your family by maintaining a clean, clutter free environment.
Questions to Ask

Do you have clutter in your household?

☐ Do you have to step aside, over, or on things to get around the house?
☐ Do any rooms have pathways since there is a lot of stuff on the floor?
☐ Do you have waste baskets located throughout the house and does everyone use them and empty them daily?
☐ Are countertops and tables filled with so many items that you have almost no free spaces?
☐ Do you have multiples of the same item that you don’t use?
☐ Are dirty dishes, empty food containers, used soda cans or water bottles left out for more than 24 hours?
☐ Are drawers, closets, shelves and other storage areas filled to capacity?
☐ Do you have papers in piles or hobby materials you intend to sort through but rarely do?
☐ Are the bedrooms or closets filled with clothing, shoes and accessories that you no longer wear or fit?
☐ Do you have to search for misplaced items at least a few times a week?
☐ Do you get into disagreements with family members over lost items?
☐ Have you ever had to buy a replacement item since you lost the original one?
☐ Does the appearance of your home make you feel uncomfortable about inviting friends and family over to visit?
☐ Could you improve the cleanliness of pet areas (i.e., food storage, food and water stations, bedding, kitty litter and cages)?
☐ Do you keep items that you haven’t used or don’t really like because you feel guilty letting them go?
☐ Do you have areas in your home that you have no idea of what is stored there?
☐ Do you have bags or boxes of items you plan to give away, but never do so?
☐ Do you keep your belongings at a storage facility on an ongoing basis?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you have clutter! Follow the Action Steps!
Action Steps

Develop Sorting, Organizing and Cleaning Routines

Routines are essential to reduce clutter around your home. Perform daily routines to reduce clutter. Start by checking common areas every day. Then move on to rooms that are used by individuals. Even 10 minutes a day can make a big difference. Involve household members. If every household member spent 10 minutes daily sorting through things left down and putting them back where they belong, you can reduce clutter over time. This routine is very practical and not too time consuming. Most people can schedule ten minutes a day to remove clutter. The benefits are visible immediately!

Pick up anything left where it doesn’t belong. Sort into piles by the location where it belongs and return it to its place. Pick up dishes, silverware and glassware, empty bottles and cans, and wash and put away daily. Collect and empty trash daily. Recycle bottles and cans and redeem weekly. When you wash and dry clothing, fold it and put it away. Putting away clothing, dining utensils and trash should be part of the daily routine.

Eliminate items you no longer use unless they have strong personal value. Organize rooms differently. Look for new ideas for storage solutions in stores, magazines or on the internet. Perhaps, find a new use for something you already own. Store items vertically on shelves or in hanging baskets. Securely attach wall units for extra storage. As you organize items, think about creating a sustainable space that complements and simplifies your lifestyle.

Clean surfaces daily such as countertops, stoves (if you prepare food), and tables where you eat. Clean pet areas daily. Set aside time to clean frequently used rooms at least twice a week by sweeping and/or vacuuming, washing or dusting. Less frequently used rooms can be cleaned once a week in general. Monthly check your garage and go outside and check your yard or the area around your house to remove clutter.

Developing a routine that works for your schedule is important!
Think About Yourself

Why do you hold onto items that you no longer use? People use about 20% of the items in a home. That means about 80% is rarely if ever used. Think about parting with these items.

Assemble a clutter removal kit!

Large garbage bags
A dustpan and brush
Vacuum cleaner/bags
Storage bins or boxes
Broom
Magic marker/labels/label maker
Multipurpose, disinfecting and glass cleaners
Bucket
Mop
Clean towels or paper towels
Laundry detergent

When removing clutter, wear clothing to protect your body

Wear long sleeved shirts, full length pants and shoes/sneakers that cover your feet. Wear plastic gloves and eye goggles if handling cleaning chemicals. Always read directions on cleaners and follow the directions for use.

Make personal decisions

Limit what you keep.
Buy only necessities until your home is clutter free. This is a major decision, but it will help you a lot and save you money.
Set aside ten minutes or more daily to sort through clutter.
Sort items into piles – KEEP, DISCARD, OR DONATE.
If possible, sort through clutter with a friend or any family member who is willing to help.
Remove anything from a room that you or another household member no longer uses.
Set realistic goals like discarding three bags of clutter a week.

Keep a bag or box for charitable donations in your car (if you have one) so you can deliver these weekly when you are in the area.
Once you have reduced the clutter in a room or area, rearrange your belongings or furniture to make things more spacious and easier to reach or access.
Contact your town for guidelines on recycling and follow these carefully during the sorting and disposal process.
These personal decisions are critical to reducing clutter in your home.

GOALS!
Think About Your Family

Children feel secure with routines.

- By developing a cleaning routine, your home will become more pleasant and less cluttered. This can have a positive effect upon your children.
- Become a role model for your kids so they will learn how to care for their things and respect other people’s property.
- Monthly, help kids to sort through their belongings to eliminate those broken or no longer used.
- Teach kids how to develop personal responsibility and how to keep track of their possessions.
- Teach kids to keep selected treasured items in a safe place and give unused items away to help other kids.
- Kids value their peer groups at school and in their neighborhood. When children wear clean clothing to school, they will have an easier time being accepted by their peers.
- When kids keep their school possessions organized, this supports their success at school.
- Some children respond better to a clutter free and predictable home environment – one that is not messy and chaotic.
- Children may feel embarrassed to invite friends over their home if it is excessively cluttered. Support their social development by keeping the house clean and uncluttered so they can have friends over to visit.

Treat adult children like adults.

- Don’t keep belongings for adult children or relatives unless there are special circumstances.
- Reclaim and reorganize space (such as bedrooms) formerly occupied by family members who have moved away.
- Don’t assume adult children want your furniture and belongings eventually. Ask them!
- Set a date with adult children to pick up their belongings or mail or deliver them. It’s okay to discard things that they fail to pick up after several attempted contacts.
Think About Others

Don’t agree to store or hold onto items for family/friends for an extended time.

As people age, it’s safer and easier to maintain a simple, clean, uncluttered environment.

Help elderly people to downsize by reducing items no longer used in their home.

Donating to local charities or events can help individuals and families in great need.

Create a sustainable household by limiting what you buy—buy only what you need, less will end up in landfills.

Dispose of broken items. If you are convinced you will fix and use something again, put it in a box labeled “FIX.” If after two months you haven’t fixed it, discard it.

In any case, don’t wait too long to make decisions. Try to handle something once.
Solutions For Managing Clutter

Remember, clutter is unhealthy. In addition to contributing to a polluted indoor environment filled with allergens and possible safety hazards, clutter drains people of energy. Clutter becomes a burden. The burden may not be obvious at first, but it is a burden that drags people down. Clutter can prevent you from enjoying your life.

Some people believe they must keep every item they ever had. They are afraid to part with anything. However, if you find the clutter in your home is out of control, this is a serious personal problem and poses a safety issue. You could actually be hurting yourself and your family. If you feel you are having difficulty letting go of clutter, speak with a health care professional to provide the guidance you need.

If you have moved from one place to another, you know how easy it is to acquire things. Moving is a great motivator for clearing away the clutter. Families are more mobile than in previous decades, so it is likely you will be moving several times throughout your life. It is more economical to keep what you actually use and really like. Let go of the rest. You'll save money.

If you received a gift that you don't want or don't use, it is best to give it to someone who wants it, donate the gift to charity or sell it. Let go of items you no longer use. Be selective. Keep special items that have sentimental value such as photos, treasured gifts that mean a lot to you, or family heirlooms. Display and rotate them and keep them in a special place so you know where they are. Taking pictures or a video of sentimental/treasured items that take up a lot of space is a good way to preserve the memory, without having to keep and store the items. If you think items are ugly, don't keep them!

By getting rid of clutter, you will create space for new and fresh things to enter your life. You may find you have time for a new hobby or to make time to do something you used to do and loved. Redecorating a room becomes easier when you remove unwanted items. You can support a better global environment by limiting your purchases to those that are essential and important to you. When you get rid of clutter, you support a healthy lifestyle physically, mentally and socially.
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