

CAN A CLEAR HOME BRING A CALM MIND?

More and more of us are paring down our belongings for a serene space—and finding a feeling of peace with who we are right now

By Jancee Dunn

IT'S JUST STUFF—THE BROKEN APPLIANCES YOU never got around to repairing, the overflowing junk drawer, the pants lurking in your closet that are older than Justin Bieber. So why does it make you feel so stressed?

It's not your imagination. A 2013 Huffington Post survey found that clutter was a major source of anxiety for Americans—ranking as high as unanticipated expenses and not having enough time for loved ones. “Clutter zaps your energy and knocks down your self-esteem,” says professional organizer Melissa Levy of Declutter + Design, “because it’s a constant reminder of what you haven’t done.”

And it's distracting. A 2015 Princeton study found that the more “objects in the visual field” there are (e.g., clutter), the harder the brain has to work to ignore it. “I see this over and over,” says New York professional organizer Barbara Reich, founder of

Resourceful Consultants. “Ignoring clutter causes mental fatigue.”

It may seem easier to look the other way than to deal with a full-to-bursting closet—but all of that stuff eats into your time. (The average American reportedly spends two and a half days each year looking for lost items among all their belongings.) It keeps you awake at night: a 2015 St. Lawrence University study found that a cluttered bedroom distracts you and messes with your sleep. It even costs you money—a 2017 report from the Self Storage Association found that nearly 1 in 10 families stash their excess in a storage unit.

How, then, to break free? The first step, say experts, is to realize that it's not about the stuff—it's about the feelings you have around the stuff. “Clut-



ter is stress,” says Star Hansen, a professional organizer from Los Angeles. “Stress comes from anything that’s emotionally unresolved in our lives, and clutter is unresolved. All the things you own are an expression of your past, future, hopes, dreams, loved ones, heartbreaks, successes and failures, so when you have hundreds of these items together in one space, it can be overwhelming. It’s like a bunch of people yelling at you.”

Decluttering isn’t just about reordering your pantry. It’s about bidding farewell to all of the unfinished business you’ve been hanging on to—from your childhood, relationships, former jobs. So instead of fixating on what’s in your junk drawer, says Levy, “think of getting organized as an opportunity to evaluate exactly what you have, how you’re utilizing your space and how it reflects your current lifestyle. Then it’s a lot easier to tackle.”



When paring down triggers guilt

There's a reason Marie Kondo's organizational bible *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* has sold more than 2 million copies in the U.S. and spawned a new verb ("I feel so good; I Kondo-ed my bathroom cabinets!"). Kondo's advice was simple but revolutionary: she told readers to group their stuff into categories, such as clothing or books, then hold each object in their hands and ask themselves, "Does this spark joy?" This question is quick, decisive and incredibly effective—either something sparks joy, or it doesn't.

More often than not, our stuff sparks guilt (think: the bulky armoire your Aunt Sadie left you that you secretly can't stand).

Levy says it will not dishonor Aunt Sadie's memory if you give it to Goodwill. (In fact, Aunt Sadie would probably be horrified to know that every time you looked at the armoire, you felt a combination of fretfulness and guilt.) "Remind yourself that just because you're finding a new home for someone's clothing or furniture doesn't mean you're leaving that person behind," she says. "They will always be a part of you, even when their things aren't."

Then there is the guilt over an expensive-but-useless buy, like the dress that cost half a paycheck yet hangs forlornly in your closet, unworn, year after year. Bye, says Reich. "The first thing you learn in business school is to ignore sunk costs," she says. "How much you paid is less relevant than how much space it takes up in your closet and that it serves as a daily reminder of the mistake you made buying it. There's a psychological cost to keeping it, so the sooner it goes, the better."

Resisting aspirational clutter

Often, says Reich, people buy things for the life they hope to have one day, rather than the one they actually have. Call it "aspirational clutter"—the clothing that's a size too small, the gym equipment in the basement that hasn't been used in years (but serves as a drying rack for laundry). "Ultimately, looking at this type of clutter is a constant reminder of failure and is very depressing for people," says Reich. Picture that gym equipment as a toxic, undermining

friend, waiting in silent reproach for you to open the basement door. Why keep it in your space?

People who hang on to aspirational clutter, adds Hansen, are clinging to both the past and a future, idealized version of themselves—in other words, everything but the present. "I tell clients to ask themselves, 'Does this item fit the life I am living right now?'" she says. "Commit fully in the current iteration that you're in." If you're a mom with three kids and never wear those expensive stilettos gathering dust in the closet, sell them on consignment and get a cute pair of sneakers for the school run. If you haven't used that bread machine since you bought it 10 years ago, give it to someone who will. It's OK that you never got around to making bread. That's what grocery stores are for.

Rethinking our legacy

If you're still reluctant to pare down, a highly effective motivator is to picture your loved ones shoveling out your teeming house after you're gone. Author Margareta Magnusson was struck by this thought after enduring the deaths of her parents and husband—and her subsequent frustration with sorting through their possessions. In her international best seller *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning: How to Free Yourself and Your Family from a Lifetime of Clutter*, Magnusson main-

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tains that people should start thinking about death cleaning right about the time that they start contemplating their own mortality (usually in midlife).

"Death cleaning" may sound morbid, but it's not necessarily sad. Magnusson says the process is a reminder of who you are and how you see yourself, and it provides clarity on what you'd still like to do with your life. (It also keeps you flexible for life changes such as downsizing a house or relocating for a job.)

She urges us to involve others when purging, to advise and hold us accountable. If you're wavering on something, she writes, a helpful thing to ask yourself is, "Will anyone be happier if I save this?" Often, the answer is no. Your dusty box of *Saved by the Bell* VCR tapes and collection of garden gnomes might be meaningful to you but not to anyone else.



When you take the time to edit your belongings, you get to consciously choose which items still have meaning to you—and which things you've outgrown.

As Magnusson writes, “A loved one wishes to inherit nice things from you—not all things from you.”

Keeping what matters most

We all know this, but it's worth repeating: happiness is derived from your relationships with loved ones and the experiences you have. It doesn't come from stuff. (In fact, studies have found that people who are focused on materialistic interests—like buying more and more things—are at higher risk for being anxious, being unhappy and having low self-esteem.)

How, then, do we determine what items are truly valuable? Hansen says to look for “connecting items”—“things that connect us to our purpose, items that connect us to our loved ones or things that bring us joy,” as she describes them. “You can tell if something falls into this category if it makes you feel a sense of freedom and enthusiasm.”

All the experts say that when people conquer the chaos, they feel lighter—sometimes to the point of giddiness. More importantly, they're markedly less stressed. Tidying up really is life-changing: it frees up extra time, amps productivity, gets your family

out the door faster and makes you feel more in control. It gives you a fresher, cleaner space. It prevents arguments (when you're not frantically hunting for keys or your phone, you definitely use fewer swear words). Having an orderly home can boost your social life—some people are so ashamed of their jumbled homes they stop inviting friends over.

It can even improve your eating habits: a 2013 study by the Association for Psychological Science found that people who worked in a well-organized space were twice as likely to reach for an apple over a candy bar than those who worked in messy spaces. (The researchers theorized that being in a clean room prompted people to do what was expected of them.)

But being clutter-free doesn't mean you have to live in a vast, cold space. “I think being organized has this false connotation that your home must be austere, void of meaningful belongings and perfectly put away at all times,” says Levy. “That's not it at all.” Instead, she says, it means having a serene nest—a calm, restful place to catch your breath, think and pay attention to what's important in life. It helps you be the best version of yourself. ■

Map Out a Happy Home

In feng shui—an age-old Chinese system of getting your home in alignment with you—each area at home is associated with a different aspect of your life. Here's a quick guide to cultivating positive energy

By Nicole Sforza

To plan the eight-point system used in feng shui, stand inside your home with your back to the front door.* Look forward. The part of your home in the far left corner is the money sector. The far right corner is the relationship zone. Got it? You work the magic by placing certain items in each zone; some have symbolic power, others a literal connection to the area. The eight-point system is intricate and layered; feng shui expert Catherine Brophy offers an introduction, with quick tips for stimulating each sector.

Money

Place fresh flowers or a jade plant here. This is also a good spot to keep cash or a valuable treasure.

Reputation

The place to display awards, accolades and good-luck symbols like four-leaf clovers.

Relationships

Bring in pairs (especially potent are lovebirds, butterflies and cranes) or an image of two trees intertwined. If your living room is in this area, place a love seat, a pair of pillows or two matching chairs.

Children and Creativity

Ideal for a bulletin board or a craft zone. If you don't have children,



use this spot to indulge your inner child with bold wallpaper or chalkboard paint.

Friends and Travel

Nice for funny, playful photos, artwork made by pals or a map that reminds you of a favorite trip (or a journey you hope to take).

Career

This area should be as well lit as possible. If it falls around your entry, hang a bright pendant or chandelier. Also consider putting something here that relates to your passion and/or your job. A scientist might want a quotation from Einstein. If you play music, keep your instrument here.

Knowledge

Create a reading nook or an

intimate spot for conversation. If you meditate, this is a great place to do it.

Family and Health

It's really important to keep this area clean and clear. (You know, if you don't have your health . . .) And it's the perfect spot to create a family-photo wall.

One final tip, according to feng shui: fix or discard broken items. They're impediments to vitality. Toss chipped plates; repair clogged drains and loose cabinet pulls.

**This map applies not only to each floor of your home but also to each room. Stand in the doorway to orient yourself and get a handle on which corner is which. If your room has more than one doorway, use its main entrance.*