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# lesson 1

## why we're drowning in clutter

Clutter in Today's Society • The Reasons We Hoard  
Things • Why We Don't Want to Clean Up

The odds are stacked against us. Our modern society is the most clutter-prone society in the world for one simple reason: We've got so much *stuff!* We're an affluent society, so we have the means to produce and purchase a dazzling array of material goods. We've also attached a tremendous amount of cultural and personal meaning to the ownership of objects. Add to this mix an advertising industry that works overtime to condition our psyches to become mindless buying machines, and it's no wonder we're wallowing in excess stuff.

Let's look at some of the ways our culture sets us up for an overload of possessions.

## IT'S ALL AROUND US

Never before in human history has there been such a blinding array of material goods that can be had so cheaply and so easily. Never has there been a people so rich in cash and credit as we are—and so eager to exchange their hard-earned wages for personal items.

Even when we're not on a buying frenzy, the stuff still finds its way home with us. Have you noticed that every time you attend a conference you leave with binders, pens, papers, and all kinds of promotional products? I once went to a student's house where she showed me her collection of more than 500 pens, and she hadn't bought a single one of them! That's the insidious thing about freebies: They multiply!

If you think we're behaving poorly as grownups, look at the way we're setting up our kids for even more pointless stuff-consumption. Every time your children go to a birthday party, they come home with a bag of little cheapo toys that you'll be digging out of the sofa cushions for the next several months. Children can't even go to a fast-food restaurant without bringing home another useless plastic toy.

When we let our kids collect more junk than they can possibly deal with, we're being unfair to them. Most adults would find it a challenge to organize what the average kid owns today. How are the kids going to learn order and tidiness when they have such an overwhelming mass of possessions to deal with? When the flow of free, valueless stuff never ends, how will they learn to work for and cherish the things they own, take pride in them, take care of them? We're not teaching them the best



a note from  
the instructor

### BEWARE OF OUTLET MALLS

Too many of us get into trouble at outlet malls. We invest the time to drive to them, so we feel obligated to buy something, even if it's not what we really want or need.

It doesn't matter how low the price; if you don't use it, then it's not a bargain. Instead of falling prey to this kind of emotional buying, make a list of what you truly need before you go shopping, and don't allow yourself to stray from that list.

values. In fact, we're setting them up for a life of clutter, one that is possibly even worse than the one we're struggling with!

## **WE'RE EMOTIONAL BUYERS**

We seem to think that buying something can cure every problem. We think more stuff equals more happiness—and when it doesn't, we assume it's because we don't yet have enough stuff—so back to the store we go.

Advertisers do a tremendous job of convincing us that happiness is just one more purchase away. They tell us in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that if we don't own a particular product, we're less valuable as human beings. Of course, this plays right into our insecurity.

My students occupy a wide range of points on the wealth continuum. You may be surprised to learn that those who earn millions of dollars are no more happy or secure than the middle-class students. I've never



a note from  
the instructor

### **DON'T FALL FOR "MIRACLE CURE" ORGANIZING PRODUCTS**

In order to sell their products, those ingenious marketers will even appeal to your need for order. They'll tell you that you absolutely must have the "right" gadget for organizing, or you'll never get things under control!

It's not that organizing products don't have their place—they do. What's important is to first change your attitude about owning things, and get rid of the excess stuff before you buy any organizing products. Once you have pared down and know what you want to keep and need to store, you can make a decision to use what you have or buy the appropriate product. Again, the important thing is to keep the decisions under your control and make them at the appropriate time. Don't succumb to external pressures to buy.

Yes, there are some terrific organizing products out there, and it's often a blast to shop for them. But don't get caught up in the advertising and the fun of shopping. If you're committed to organizing, you'll often find a way to accomplish it without hauling home more gadgets. And if you're not committed to making the necessary changes, no number of organizing gizmos is going to make any real difference.

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seen a direct correlation between a person's number of possessions and their level of happiness. Yet we're "keeping up with the Joneses" like never before. Deep down, we all probably know that possessions don't make us happier or more fulfilled, but in an affluent society like ours, it's easy to forget. We spend too much energy trying to live up to an illusion created by external forces. We're allowing the world around us to take control and dictate the way we should live, rather than letting our individual principles and values guide us.

It's time to step back, define our goals and values, and create the environments that will support them.

### **WE'RE OFTEN EMOTIONAL *HOARDERS*, TOO**

Many of us surround ourselves with clutter for the same reason we overeat: It's a form of protection. Clutter insulates us from the world; it keeps us in a haze of oblivion and excuses that allows us to muffle our pain and anxiety. Clutter and excess body fat are both self-defeating means of protection. Often the underlying issue is loneliness, fear of intimacy, or a need for abundance.

Often people keep things because they're holding on to someone. I have a student who has kept every letter from every boyfriend, even though she says she's actively seeking a new mate. She said, "This is the only way I can remind myself I've been loved." It wasn't until I convinced her to let go of all those keepsakes from the past that she met someone and moved on with her life.

Sometimes people use disorganization to distract themselves from other problems in their lives. Their finances may be in a shambles, so they gloss over it by saying, "I'm just disorganized."

Clutter may come from some "mechanical" dysfunction, like not having enough storage space, the right storage space, or the right tools for organizing. Other underlying causes for clutter are emotional: fear of success, loneliness, loss, or a need for protection.

Is your clutter an excuse to avoid dealing with the real problem in your life? You'll need to answer this honestly before you can deal with your clutter permanently.

If we want to live clutter-free, we must first understand our reasons for clutter.

## PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS GIVING US STUFF

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Birthdays, Christmas, Hanukkah, bar and bat mitzvahs, anniversaries... every time we turn around, another gift-giving event is coming up. Many people get tremendously stressed out trying to find the right gift. Not everybody's a talented gift-buyer, and few of us have the time to shop as thoughtfully as we'd like. As a result, we don't always do a good job of choosing gifts for others.

Odds are that the prettily wrapped gift we give someone is destined for the bottom of their closet, along with last year's useless gifts—that is, if they'll *fit* in the closet. One of my students once received as a gift a plastic duck the size of a refrigerator!

If people ever find out that you like (or even get the *impression* that you like) a particular animal or symbol, you're doomed! In high school I used to wear a sweater with a rainbow on it, which somehow gave people the impression I was crazy about rainbows. You wouldn't believe the number of rainbow-related things I received over the years. I couldn't make it stop! People would visit my room and say, "Oh, good. Now that I know you like rainbows so much I'll always know what to give you as a present."

How do you turn them down without hurting people's feelings? These gifts are almost always well intentioned, but we simply receive too much stuff to keep and appreciate it all. A friend of mine who received 100 gift baskets when he was ill came up with a wonderful solution: He donated all of them to a homeless shelter.



a note from  
the instructor

### A COUPLE THOUGHTS ON CREATIVE, CLUTTER-BUSTING GIFTS

I'm an advocate of re-gifting as long as you're careful. If you've ever accidentally re-gifted an unwanted present back to the original giver, you know what I mean!

Consumable gifts like wine or cookies work well as gifts because they don't take up space forever, but give these only if you're sure you know what the person likes. Otherwise, you're still burdening them with another unwanted thing.

Many people express hesitation about giving gift certificates. They fear that the recipient of the certificate will think it's a cop-out. To some, it may seem like the giver couldn't be bothered to put a little effort into finding out what the person likes. I think that's an unfortunate misconception. If you have to give a gift to someone who feels this way, why not give them a gift certificate to their favorite coffee shop, or a store near them that features their favorite hobby?

Gift certificates can be a great way to say, "I know you, and I care enough to know what you like." I once gave a gift certificate from a gourmet cheese shop to a couple who had a passion for cheese.

Services make wonderful gifts and take up no space. How about theater tickets, a day at the spa, or a ride in a hot air balloon?

One of the best gift-giving stories I heard recently was told to me by a couple whose best friends had given them a handmade gift certificate good for an evening of baby-sitting. They went out on the town and had an incredible time. They made a memory that they'll cherish forever, which they'll always associate with their friends, and which will never take up an ounce of space in their closets.

## ORGANIZING SEEMS OVERWHELMING

People often put off organizing because they're overwhelmed by the seemingly enormous task, or they're daunted by the prospect of where to start. It's not until they have to face the issue because of some external force, such as moving or expecting a baby, that they take the first step. When they do get started, they find that organizing brings a great deal of instant gratification.

I once had a friend call me in a panic after totaling his car by driving it into a telephone pole. The good news is that he walked away unscathed. Unfortunately, he had misplaced his auto insurance renewal



A donation to a charitable organization can also be a wonderful gift. In choosing a charity, first think about and listen to the recipient of the gift to find out their area of interest. You wouldn't want to make a donation to an animal shelter if your friend has a fear or strong dislike of cats and dogs, but a donation to an art museum could make the perfect gift for a friend who majored in art history and frequents museums every chance she gets.

bill, and his policy had lapsed. That was an expensive wake-up call to the importance of organizing your paperwork.

My students report to me an immediate sense of relief after they've dealt with even a small portion of their clutter. Simple things like cleaning out your wallet or the junk drawer in the kitchen can bring immediate relief.

While some people avoid organizing because it seems like a chore, it's ultimately a matter of attitude. You can make a task more enjoyable by the way you approach it. Turn it into a game, a challenge. Make a party of it: Invite a few friends, turn on great music, and set out snacks.



a note from  
the instructor

## HOW CAN YOU MOVE FORWARD WHEN CLUTTER IS BLOCKING YOUR PATH?

Having too much clutter and too many items from your past can keep you from moving forward in your life. In these, and many other ways, it can act as a roadblock to accomplishing your goals:

- It's difficult to have clarity about your life or accomplish tasks when you're surrounded by clutter.
- Living in a cluttered environment will sap your energy and lead you to procrastinate.
- Clutter can put your life on hold. I've had students who wanted to relocate but couldn't because of the disarray in their homes. They couldn't put their house on the market in its current state, and the thought of moving to a new home immobilized them.
- Living in chaos can lead to isolation. Many of my students have not had guests in their homes for several years because they're too ashamed.

Do whatever is necessary to get yourself onto the task because the longer you put it off, the worse it's going to get.

## WE THINK WE DON'T HAVE THE TIME

We've all used this excuse. We don't have time to organize our lives. We're scrambling as it is just to make time for the essentials! But we all know, whether we want to admit it or not, that streamlining, automating, and organizing our lives will give us *more* time because we won't waste as much of our precious time on unnecessary tasks.

I recommend that you break your decluttering sessions down into smaller tasks. Pick a room and then an area of that room: your bedroom closet, or that awful drawer in the kitchen. While I'd like to be able to tell you it takes three hours to tackle a closet, or one hour to organize a drawer, I can't. The truth is that it takes different people different amounts of time to do things. In addition to working at varying speeds, some people work straight through without distraction, and others take





a note from  
the instructor

### WHERE DOES ALL THE TIME GO?

- The average person will spend one year searching through desk clutter looking for misplaced objects. —*Margin*, Dr. Richard Swensen
- According to numerous studies, we lose an average of one hour per day searching for misplaced items.
- According to the National Soap and Detergent Association, cleaning professionals say that getting rid of clutter would eliminate 40 percent of the housework in the average home.
- A Gallup Poll found that 50 percent of all Americans claim that they lack enough time to do what they want; 54 percent of parents say they spend too little time with their children; and 47 percent of married couples complain that they lack time together.

time out to answer the phone or deal with family issues. Finally, everyone has their personal comfort level and feels the need to organize to a greater or lesser degree.

To learn how to estimate the length of time it will take you to tackle a particular organizing project, start with some small organizing tasks you have (for instance, a kitchen drawer or single bookshelf). Keep a log to see how long each task takes. After completing a few tasks this way, you will be able to more accurately estimate the time needed to complete future tasks. Once you reach this point, always remember to give yourself a little extra time. It's frustrating to run out of time halfway through a task. If you think the closet will take four hours, then give yourself six. If you simply don't have large chunks of time, tackle small projects that you can complete in the time allotted. It's amazing what you can get done this way if you stay committed to it.

### **WE RESIST STRUCTURE**

Many of us don't like the idea of scheduling our time. We believe that structure will cramp our style and limit our creativity. "It'll take away my freedom!" they lament. I always have the same response: "Your freedom to do what? Spend three hours looking for your keys?"



### student experience

"I thought getting organized meant losing my creativity, but now I realize that the opposite is true. When I'm organized, my mind is clear, I'm not as stressed, and I'm more focused. I'll have more energy and time to spend on my passion: photography."

—Nancy, professional  
photographer

The truth is, it's their disorganization that's robbing them of their creative freedom. People who refuse to get organized for fear it will damage their creativity remain in a state of chaos and disorganization, and *that's* what ultimately restricts their creativity.

Creativity loves organization. When you implement an efficient system tailored to your individual creative needs, you'll find that all your materials are ready at hand

and in good condition when inspiration strikes. You'll have the free space to spread out with a new project. Your mind will be clear of distractions, and you'll be able to focus more easily. Organization increases productivity.

One student of mine, an advertising executive who had aspirations of painting but never found the time, told me that after gathering all of her art supplies together and setting up a dedicated space for painting in her home, she began to paint, participated in a regional art show, and sold her first painting.



### a note from the instructor

#### IS WRITER'S BLOCK MADE OF CLUTTER?

A high percentage of my students come from creative fields: musicians, artists, writers, and the like. Many of them express the fear that organizing their lives will rob them of creative freedom, but when they actually get organized, they discover that their creativity is healthier than ever!

The effect is especially profound with writers. Some of my students who write tell me that clutter creates a kind of "noise" in their heads—a serious distraction. Clearing the clutter allows them to take back their concentration.

They also report that organization has the effect of channeling and focusing their creativity. It seems that writer's block is at least partially a result of having unlimited choices. Several writers have told me that it's actually by narrowing the scope of their choices that their creativity finally becomes "concentrated" enough to get them moving again.

It's not hard to see why we're struggling to slay the clutter beast. We've got an awful lot of factors, both physical and emotional, working against us. Now that we've examined some of the causes and hazards of our clutter, let's take a look at a few of the benefits organization offers.

## UNCLUTTERING LESSON-END QUESTIONS

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### Lesson #1:

1. Are you an emotional buyer? Do you regularly shop to:

- cheer yourself when you're depressed?
- calm yourself when you're upset?
- fill a void in your life?
- distract yourself from a problem you should be confronting?

2. If so, describe the events, situations, or emotions that drive you to shop:

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3. Do you use your clutter as an excuse to avoid:

- pursuing a relationship?
- taking responsibility for your finances?
- moving your career forward?

4. In the past week, how much time did you spend searching for lost items?

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**5.** Which items do you end up searching for most often?

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**6.** What projects or activities would you be more likely to do if the objects you needed to do them with were organized and ready at hand?

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