

PART 1

Declutter Your Home

Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.

William Morris

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**How Do You
Accumulate So Much?**

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; –
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

William Wordsworth

‘The world is too much with us.’ It certainly is. So many of us have more things than we could ever need: clothes we’ve never worn or haven’t worn in ages; CDs, cassette tapes, records, games, consoles, phones and miscellaneous cords to tech devices; books we’ve read and won’t read again; magazines with articles we’re going to read but actually never get round to; trinkets, ornaments and family heirlooms left behind by past generations; gifts you’ve never liked, board games you no longer play; things that need cleaning or repair before you can use them again; pots, pans, utensils, kit and equipment you just don’t use.

You’re not a hoarder – you’re just a normal person with lots of stuff.

Maybe you've a stockpile of cleaning and food supplies: cans, jars and packets of food? A freezer jammed full with most of the food staying there week after week, month after month? And in the bathroom – a test lab worth of potions and lotions? Stuff just seems to be piling up: old letters and bills, children's toys, arts and crafts – all on tables and worktops and shoved inside cupboards, wardrobes, sheds and shelves.

Do you think your home is too small or you need more storage space? It's unlikely. What's more likely is that you just have too much stuff. A bigger home and more storage space – cupboards, wardrobes, chests, storage boxes etc – would just give you more reasons to accumulate and keep stuff.

Get stuff. Buy stuff. Keep it. Get more of it. Keep that, too. When did this become normal?

In the past, it appears that most people lived their lives with scarcity. Material goods – clothes, furniture, books, toys etc. – were not only hard to come by, they were expensive. If you could acquire something, you got it and kept hold of it.

But now, in Western countries especially, we live in abundance: things are relatively inexpensive and easy to acquire. Not only do we have a plentiful supply of the things we need and want, we have an unlimited supply and we're keeping it all; filling our homes and lives. We seem to have dramatically increased the amount of things we own, without really noticing that it was happening.

Having too much stuff is the new normal.

‘Contemporary U.S. households have more possessions per household than any society in global history’, explains Jeanne E. Arnold, Professor of anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles. In 2012, Professor Arnold and a team of sociologists and anthropologists published their book, *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century*, based on a four-year study of 32 middle-class, dual-income families in Los Angeles.

Three-quarters of the families had stopped using their garages to park their cars. They had too much stuff crammed in ‘to make way for rejected furniture and cascading bins and boxes of mostly forgotten household goods’. The families had enough food to survive all manner of disasters; 47% had second fridges. A few of the families had more TVs than people.

The families gained 30% more possessions with the arrival of each child. But instead of bringing satisfaction and contentment and making the world better, those who regarded their homes as ‘cluttered’ reported feeling stressed by it all. These people weren’t on a TV show about hoarding. They were just ‘average’ families.

Yes, all the families were in the US. But is it really that much different in the UK or any other Western country? Back in 2010, British toy manufacturer Dream Town commissioned research to discover what toys children own and regularly play with.

The study found that the average 10-year-old owns 238 toys but parents estimated that their children play with just 12 ‘favourites’ – 5% – on a daily basis. The study of 3000 parents

also revealed that more than half thought their children ended up playing with the same toys day in and day out because they had too many to choose from.

They have too much stuff! We have too much stuff! Stuff that takes up space, thought, energy and time or money without providing any real benefit.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it.

George Carlin

Sometimes, it feels like the items on our shelves, in our cupboards, in sheds, lofts and garages manage to reproduce and multiply when our backs are turned.

Is your kitchen so cluttered there's no room to cook? Is the lack of storage in your bathroom driving you crazy? Is your wardrobe bursting at the seams? You think that it's because your home is too small or you don't have enough storage space. Maybe you've never once blamed having too much stuff as being the problem.

How do we accumulate so much stuff?

So how do we manage to accumulate so much stuff? Through shopping trips, markets and car boot sales; with online shopping on Amazon, Gumtree and eBay etc. Then there are Christmas and birthday gifts, things we inherit and souvenirs we pick up from our holidays.

Most of our clutter doesn't actually begin its existence as clutter; pretty much all of it started out as something useful, interesting, attractive, enjoyable.

But in time – over the months and years – the things we’ve bought or acquired reach a point where they’re no longer useful, enjoyable etc. Instead of recognizing that we no longer need or like so many of these things, we build and buy more storage – wardrobes, cupboards and shelves, chests and boxes – to store more and more possessions. As someone once said, ‘We’re lost in the noise of our own consumption.’

Why do we acquire more than we need?

There are several reasons why we acquire more than we think we need to:

For future use; just in case. Even if we don’t need it now, many of us buy and keep hold of things thinking, ‘I might need this some day.’

To improve our lives. We believe that if we buy this, that or the other, we’ll have more fun and be more fun, we’ll know more, be better entertained, look better, feel better and so on.

As mementos and souvenirs. We buy small and relatively inexpensive things; reminders of a place visited, an occasion, an achievement.

We think we need it. Of course we know that buying things we never use is a waste of money. But so often we don’t know if something is unnecessary until after we buy it and it sits in a cupboard, wardrobe, shed etc. untouched for months or even years.

Advertising often encourages us to believe that we ‘need’ and ‘have’ to have things. For our clothes, for example, we

‘need’ a wide range of cleaning products: something for colours and something else to wash our whites; a special liquid for delicates and another one for woollens. Apparently, we also ‘need’ all sorts of cleaning products to remove dirt and dust, stains and smells in our homes: one for the sink, a separate cleaning product for the loo, another for the bath, one for the shower, one for the bathroom floor, another the kitchen floor and something else for the kitchen counter. Washing-up liquid for the dishes and dishwasher tablets for the dishwasher. Of course, we ‘need’ a whole other range of products to clean ourselves – soap, wipes, shower gel, cleanser, shampoo etc.

To solve problems. How to slice and dice? Chop and peel? It turns out every known item of food has at least one tool to help you deal with it: a bagel slicer, pizza slicer, pastry cutters, vegetable peeler, garlic press, roast cutting tongs, a rice maker, vegetable steamer and, of course, a knife cleaning clip. The list is endless. But actually there’s not much you need in a kitchen to prepare and cook food: some pots and pans, a couple of sharp kitchen knives and a few other tools. What you don’t need is a specialized tool to slice your tomatoes, another one for boiled eggs and another one to slice avocados. Do you?

Blogger Katie Berg describes her time living with her partner and children in Nicaragua:

Side by side, we did the same things as Nicaraguan people – eat, play, learn, travel – but we always needed more stuff to do it. It’s easy to say ‘that’s the difference between rich and poor – having stuff versus not having stuff,’ but ... the truth is we had fundamentally different ways of problem solving. If we had a need, we’d ... search for something to add to our lives – most often that meant shopping. Nicaraguans found

solutions with what they already had. Yes, poverty demands ingenuity to use what's available, but the inverse is not true. Wealth doesn't demand we acquire something new every time we perceive ourselves lacking.

www.skywaymom.com/category/nicaragua/

The stress of it all

All this stuff is proving, in many ways, to be bad for the planet and bad for people. We're facing a clutter crisis.

Some of us know we own too much stuff. Some of us don't. Either way, we feel overwhelmed and burdened by our clutter. Clutter drains our time and energy and takes up space. Drawers don't close, cupboards are jammed full and shelves are filled from top to bottom. We often can't see what to wear for all our clothes.

Physical clutter leads to mental clutter, making it harder to think straight. Clutter competes for your attention; it keeps you aware that there's always something else that needs to be done: to be cleaned, cleared and put away, to be fixed or folded or found. We get frustrated when we can't find something – phones, keys and paperwork – amongst all our stuff. It's disheartening and stressful.

In a nutshell

- Having too much stuff is the new normal. Stuff that takes up space, thought, energy, time or money.
- In the past, material goods were difficult to acquire and were expensive. If you could acquire something, you got it and kept hold of it.

Declutter Your Life

- Now, things are relatively inexpensive and easy to acquire but we're keeping it all; filling our homes and lives without really noticing that it's happening.
- We acquire more things to improve our lives, because we think we 'have' to have them, to help us cope with a situation or just in case we need things in the future.
- Most of our things started out as something useful, interesting, attractive, enjoyable. But in time – over the months and years – the things we've bought or acquired reach a point where they're no longer useful or enjoyable. They're clutter.
- Keeping so many things that served you in the past but no longer serve you today means that you're holding yourself in that past.
- All this stuff is proving, in many ways, to be bad for the planet and bad for people. We're facing a clutter crisis; overwhelmed and burdened by our clutter.