

- » Looking at decluttering styles
- » Seeing the psychology of decluttering
- » Deciding what to let go of
- » Figuring out where decluttering is needed

Chapter 1

The Basics of Decluttering

The goal of this book isn't to simply inspire you to declutter one or more of your spaces or show you how to go about it. The goal of decluttering is to be able to live your life the way you want to live it by determining your goals, figuring out where there are blockages, and figuring out what's holding you back from achieving what you desire. Then you clear the clutter to help you create the life you deserve.

This book helps you identify which items in your home are truly clutter and what is taking up mental space unnecessarily, which is often overlooked. When you're always hunting for your keys that you lost (again) or searching for your favorite blouse, you will become stressed and distracted, which keeps you from making progress toward your goals. Clutter can be difficult to identify, which is likely why you picked up this book in the first place. Clutter can range from obvious trash to very expensive, large things. To make the issue even more complicated, clutter is different for every person. One person's clutter is another person's joy. Thus, decluttering needs to be an individual quest. Each person will have a different approach to decluttering depending on their lifestyle, and this book will help you determine a method that works for you. The first step is to determine your personal cluttering style.

Determining Your Current Cluttering Style

Decluttering doesn't mean you only need to keep one item of clothing or furniture, or that you have to commit to a minimalist lifestyle.

Some of us can easily declutter and get rid of everything we don't need immediately without giving it a second thought. But for most of us, decluttering is not that easy and goes much deeper into our emotional need for stuff due to our consumerist society. According to the *Huffington Post*, there are more storage facilities than McDonald's restaurants in America. At the end of 2014, there were 48,500 self-storage facilities in America compared to 14,350 McDonald's. This further proves that getting rid of items is so difficult for us that we'd rather pay to store them! People who have excessive clutter stashes can also become hoarders, and approximately 19 million Americans fall into this category. The American Psychiatric Association defines hoarders as people who "excessively save items that others may view as worthless. They have persistent difficulty parting with possessions, leading to clutter that disrupts their ability to use their living or work spaces."

I'm not saying that hoarding, which is considered a disease similar to OCD, is anything remotely close to being a clutterbug. I am using the term clutterbug to describe someone who lets clutter build up over time and hangs onto items for reasons that are more emotional than practical. However, holding onto clutter could eventually lead to hoarding, which is why you should take decluttering seriously and commit to it regularly. Whether you are detail-oriented or a big-picture thinker, you should know your clutter style like you know your blood type to gain a better understanding of yourself and how you can maximize your life.

Answer these questions honestly to start thinking about your clutter style:

- » Do you constantly hunt for things you've misplaced in your home?
- » Do you put things into stacks or piles?
- » When you look at your flat surfaces, such as your desk or kitchen counters, are their piles of things on them?
- » Do you end up buying a second or third item for use in your home because you can't find the one you already own?
- » Do you use shopping as retail therapy rather than shopping only when you really need something?
- » Do you not have room to put away some of the stuff you own?
- » Are there clothes lying on the floor?
- » When you reach for a pen, do you have 50 to choose from but sometimes end up with one that doesn't work?

- » Do you keep every single Christmas card you've been given?
- » Do you keep every plastic food container you accumulate but find that matching lids are missing when you need them?
- » Does your home make you feel stressed out because of all the stuff in there?

If you answered more than half the questions with a yes, you are most likely a clutterbug or on your way there. If you are feeling overwhelmed by clutter right now and you answered yes to several of the preceding questions, you may have some habits that are causing you to head down a self-sabotaging path. Houses with too much stuff in them can be physically, emotionally, and spiritually draining, and that takes away your peace of mind and joy of heart. Don't worry; there's always room for improvement. The first step is recognizing that a problem exists in order to take steps to create your best, decluttered life.



REMEMBER

Don't get discouraged or angry with yourself for your clutter habits — life can be busy and hectic. Setting up a decluttering mindset takes work and dedication. You're not alone.

The next step is to tackle the mental and emotional aspects of being a clutterbug so you can begin to create and maintain new habits that will help you experience clutter-free joy.

There are several different types of so-called clutterbugs. You may fall into one category, all categories, or none of them, and that's okay. I added the clutterbug types in hopes that you may see yourself in the different categories and begin to envision a plan of how you can overcome your own barriers to decluttering. These visions will help move you forward on your quest to declutter.



WARNING

Whatever your clutter personality, many people say, "I will deal with this tomorrow, next week, next month, next year," and we see how this pattern can escalate. No matter what type of clutterbug your personality reveals, you cannot put off decluttering any longer. If you defer this task, it only gets bigger, making you even less likely to deal with it. From paper to tech gadgets to piles of clothing, the task will only get bigger daily. I often also say that people who defer this task are also the ones who end up being the most stressed about clutter.

The emotional clutterbug

The *emotional clutterbug* is the most common type and is characterized by emotional attachment to items that have sentimental value. The emotional clutterbug prioritizes feelings over practicality. It's difficult for this clutterbug to get rid of things, and she often purchases items to fill a void or out of pure boredom.

This clutterbug may also be someone who saves sentimental items due to the powerful emotions they evoke. Most people have sentimental items, and that's okay! They bring joy and serve as reminders of happy memories. You don't need to get rid of all your sentimental items; however, you have to set a limit. If you don't have a limit on sentimental items, it's easy for the amount to get out of control, causing clutter in your mental and physical space.

Here are a few strategies to help get you started dealing with sentimental items:

- » **Commit to regularly evaluating your sentimental items.** If you own a box of concert shirts that are tucked away but you never look at them, why keep them? After committing to regularly evaluate your sentimental items, you may be ready to part with them.
- » **Repurpose sentimental items.** For example, you can frame your favorite concert shirts to make them visible all the time, and then you can discard the rest. Doing so can bring you more joy and less clutter. Plus, having your favorite items on display can help bring more positivity into your life.
- » **Keep only a small dedicated space for sentimental items.** Have a space in your home that is precious real estate and dedicate this space to your sentimental items. This will help you be more conscious of what resides there.
- » **Envision the joy of being able to actually enjoy the true sentimental items you do keep.** When you surround yourself with items that bring you joy and positivity, they are no longer clutter. Ensure that you can make use of every item and get rid of the rest. Trust me, you'll feel so much lighter once you know that every item you own has a purpose — even if that purpose is simply to bring you happiness!

I discuss emotional attachment to stuff in most chapters of this book, so you can get ideas on how to handle sentimental items associated with the chapters in which they're addressed. What's important is that you set limits because you want to be able to enjoy your sentimental items, and finding them quickly is key for that. Keep them in a labeled box (see Figure 1-1) or on display so they can be viewed, not stored away in an attic where you will forget about them.

The just-in-case clutterbug

Just-in-case clutterbugs keep things they may need “someday” or to ensure they have them “just in case.” This clutterbug is the type of person who keeps the box a microwave came in just in case he has to return it in ten years. Whether the item is a blouse, a kitchen utensil, or an extra lawn mower, this clutterbug operates from a scarcity mindset and a lack of trust or awareness around items he already has.



FIGURE 1-1:
An example of
a sentimental
storage box.

Image courtesy of author (photo credit: @avalonmohns)



**AUTHOR
SAYS**

I know many of us fall into this category, and I definitely do. I used to save every button from every skirt, jacket, and blouse just in case I needed it, when in reality I had a button jar so big it mimicked an old-school cookie jar. Plus, I take everything that needs work done to the tailor, and tailors have buttons. This example may seem trivial; you may think, “How can buttons become stressful clutter?” The truth is that clutter is not restricted to size, value, or even whether or not it’s tangible. Clutter is defined by anything you own in excess that is no longer practical. Keep this in mind throughout the book and remember not to get discouraged — my goal is to make you excited to declutter. The benefits of decluttering outweigh putting it off any longer.

The “I’m not a clutterbug” clutterbug

We’ve all been in denial at some point of our lives, and the “*I’m not a clutterbug*” clutterbug is familiar with this feeling. This person may be stressed and overwhelmed but has difficulty determining the cause, even though on some level she knows she has too much stuff. This causes the clutterbug to accumulate even more clutter because she isn’t even conscious of her actions. Many people who aren’t aware that they’re a clutterbug carry subconscious stress and don’t know where

their anxiety is stemming from. I've seen many people become less stressed and anxious once they admit that they own too much because they can then create actionable steps toward a decluttered and happier life.

Maybe you secretly know you're a clutterbug but don't want to admit it because you are a perfectionist, and you plan to spend the entire next month organizing and decluttering perfectly. Perfectionists can be perfect at some types of jobs and tasks, but they usually have an all-or-nothing philosophy. If you're one of them, be careful — you may never be able to get started because the task is so overwhelming. You don't need to be 100 percent decluttered instantly, and I know for a perfectionist that may be hard to hear. Take the pressure off and start small. Remember that progress is better than perfection.

The “I’ll do it later” clutterbug

Along the same lines as denial, the “*I’ll do it later*” clutterbug procrastinates decluttering. It's easy to do because often we don't equate decluttering to being fun. I find this clutterbug to be one of the most common types. Luckily, the techniques in this book can not only motivate you to get started but also show you practical solutions on how to go about it.

Constantly putting off decluttering results in the clutter becoming too overwhelming to deal with, and that's why you probably haven't started or just say, “I'll do it later.”

Let's face it: We are all very busy and only have a certain amount of time and energy to spend each day. Starting the decluttering process can be emotionally challenging, which makes it even harder to find the time to start. I recommend choosing to spend just 10 to 15 minutes per day decluttering, as this will bring you one step closer to getting things done. Remember that freeing up clutter frees up more time in the long run, since you'll no longer waste time taking care of things that you don't use or looking for things that are buried among clutter.

The “I can't decide” clutterbug

Here's a fun fact: We are actually wired to acquire clutter, which makes it even harder to decide what is clutter and what isn't! Our instincts say that we should store resources for times of scarcity. Have you ever watched a squirrel gather food for winter? This is exactly that mindset, and they're so focused on it that they don't even think about deciding what to keep. Couple this instinct with our insatiable need to consume and buy new things — because shopping splurges produce dopamine, giving us a happy rush — and it's even more difficult to decide what to declutter. You may often feel sad, stressed, or overwhelmed thinking about what

to declutter, and it may feel easier to not decide altogether. However, the inability to decide can cause greater stress in the long run, and it's always best to get out of this mindset and create a plan.

The decision about what to toss can be stressful, and that's why it's a good idea to give yourself timelines and tricks to help minimize the painful decision process. For example, if you really can't decide on which frilly shirts to donate, turn the hangers the opposite way. If after a season you haven't worn them, make a commitment to get rid of these items. Or perhaps you don't have room for the books you have read but you want to remember them. You can take a photo instead and discard the physical book. Ideas like these can help make tough decisions that you may not make otherwise less stressful. There is always room for compromise and adaptability when it comes to decluttering, and it may take some trial and error to figure out what works for you.

The “techie” clutterbug

Techie clutterbugs have so many cables, cords, and tech gadgets they don't even know where to start decluttering, what works, or what goes with each device. This is not an uncommon type of clutterbug, and with today's fast-moving technological changes, it's easy to fall into this category. I am a victim of keeping my old phones just in case, even though they are so old they probably wouldn't even turn on. I also keep wires for that DSL modem plug-in just in case the Wi-Fi goes down, and that frayed charger just in case I lose the new one. We are so intimately connected to our tech gadgets that we naturally keep their accessories because we can't imagine not being able to operate without them.

Think of tech gadgets as the worst type of clutter to hold onto because with the speed of advancements, tech gadgets become useless faster than most other physical stuff. Plus, tech gadgets are more widely available, and new versions are always ready for sale. Just as with all types of clutter, there is no need to hold onto what is no longer practical. Pay attention to what you no longer use and have the courage to part with these items to create more physical and mental space in your life. Once you've sorted the gadgets you don't need any more from those you do use, organize the keepers in an easily accessible fashion, as shown in Figure 1-2.

The knowledge clutterbug

Today, limitless knowledge resources are at your fingertips, and what you keep for your knowledge database should be a decision you make based on practical and future reasons. For example, if you purchase the newest edition of a textbook, the previous version should be recycled. Start small if you fall into this category.

FIGURE 1-2:
Organized
tech cords.



Thomas Kolnowski / Unsplash



**AUTHOR
SAYS**

Knowledge is clutter until and unless it is properly organized in a way that makes that knowledge accessible. My parents have every single *National Geographic* dating back to 1969. After I had a surgery with two weeks' downtime, I took the time to organize every single one by year and put them into slipcovers. The joy that this brought my parents was unbelievable — their memories of reading them, the knowledge they brought them, and the beautiful pictures that are still astounding today. These magazines are filled with knowledge you could find today on the Internet; however, their sentimental value made them extra special. Now that the issues are properly organized, my parents often read editions from past years.

If you have stacks and stacks of reports/papers and have no clue where a specific one is, that's clutter. If they are organized so you can reference them, they can be useful and are no longer clutter. To put it simply, get rid of anything you don't use, or declutter properly so that the items are usable.



WARNING

Important digital, mental, or printed knowledge needs to be dealt with properly. Sensitive information should be destroyed or shredded. Perhaps some knowledge needs to be passed on to the next generation or teams. Important documents should be housed in several locations to avoid losing them. Before getting rid of any knowledge, make sure you evaluate it first and determine appropriate steps. For example, I always back up my digital items as well as store them in a digital cloud.

I go into detail for knowledge clutterbugs in Part 3, which revolves around workspace and digital organization. Digital clutter is clutter too! And also very important is Chapter 11, related to decluttering your books. (I'm assuming you like books since you're reading one right now!)

A WORD ON KNOWLEDGE HOARDING

“Knowledge is power” is a common phrase. People have a tendency to want to be the smartest person in the room, so they may hoard knowledge, both in their minds and in the stuff that contains the knowledge they acquire.

Knowledge hoarding refers to both physical objects and mental knowledge that you should be sharing to help others in your organization or even customers or other stakeholders. For example, this could be documents that you benefit other employees, such as training documents or customer data (or knowledge on them) or relevant information for your customers on future purchases or issues. If you are holding onto data for your own selfish reasons (being it to keep your job or to make more money from sales), that knowledge should be shared with the appropriate parties involved. Sometimes it's unintentional, but it can still be discouraging to those around you.

Being a knowledge hoarder and intentionally guarding information for preservation and or future use can be seen as one of the worst types of hoarding and can also have a negative impact on your organization and/or your business. Make it a point to share your knowledge with those who would be empowered by it, either through your words or physical documents.

The collector clutterbug

I'm pretty sure all of us have collected something sometime in our lives, from stamps to dolls to watches to baseball cards. Anything that can be collected and cherished can also lead to clutter. Remember the days when you used to collect CDs? Well, now most people don't even have CD players. For those folks, CDs are no longer usable and are therefore considered clutter.



TIP

The key is to really understand whether you're a collector, hoarder, or clutterbug. Hoarders are not able to let go, and this is a serious issue that is repeatedly brought up in this book. Collectors take pride in what they have collected, whether it is worth something or not. The collection becomes clutter when it becomes bothersome and inconvenient to manage. It turns from collection to clutter when embarrassment, shame, or secrecy surround keeping the collection. Clutter is the result of accumulating items that you don't have the time and energy to deal with. Knowing how and when your collections reach this point is an important but difficult task and should always be monitored by you and your friends or family to help with the process.

The “I can use it someday” clutterbug

My grandma was the perfect example of an “*I can use it someday*” clutterbug, which speaks to how society has shifted and how the era you grew up in makes

a big difference. My grandmother lived through the Depression and still had that scarcity mindset of rationing. She did not grow up in today's consumerist society with the ability to have one-day shipping. So, her affinity for her stuff was different and almost natural. That said, the era you live does not dictate how much of a clutterbug you become. The "I can use it someday" clutterbug of any age or generation can think like this.

I believe this type of clutter is a real problem because it can lead to hoarding. All the clutterbug types can become hoarders, but this one seems the most likely to. Hoarding can be rooted in deep-seated insecurities, whether financial or emotional. Deep down, hoarders feel like they will never have enough resources, and they fear letting go of anything because they believe that they truly will use that item one day. Even if items are useless, worn, or broken, this type of clutterbug hangs onto any and all items.

WHY DECLUTTERING HASN'T WORKED FOR YOU YET

If you don't understand your clutterbug style, you won't know where to begin. Maybe in the past, you approached decluttering in a way that didn't fit your lifestyle (maybe you like an all-or-nothing approach, or maybe you like breaking it down into bits). All of us have different working styles, from the detail-oriented engineer to the big-picture MBA, and our personality style has a lot to do with our decluttering style.

Someone with no emotional attachment to an item can easily criticize you for not simply getting rid of clutter and moving on. While we know that trash is the most obvious clutter, everyone's definition of what is trash can also be different. As the saying goes, "One's man's junk is another man's treasure."

When you look critically at the items in your home, don't automatically overlook something because it cost you a lot of money or it was a gift that cost a lot of money. Even the most expensive item in your home can be clutter. Think about the garage, as this is one area where many big-kid toys reside. These can be the most expensive clutter or non-clutter items, depending on the value and they bring to their owner and how often they're used.

You may be afraid to call antiques or family heirlooms clutter because you don't want to make anyone feel bad. Maybe these items were expensive or have become valuable, but it doesn't matter. Clutter can be cheap, old, new, or very used. Clutter is in the eye of the beholder.



TIP

Depending on how severe your “I can use it someday” tendency is, a good start is to mentally reassure yourself that you will be able to find this item again if and when you need it. You can either buy, borrow, or repurpose the item. You have to give yourself the security that more egg cartons will be produced, more Old Navy black sweaters will be knit, and more magazines will be printed. Resources are and will continue to be available.

Understanding the Psychology behind Clutter

I don’t have a psychology degree, but I’ve done enough research on this topic to inspire others to get motivated. You get peace and satisfaction from being in a decluttered space, both physically and mentally. I could end here, but I want to keep going with this point. You can also empathize with the idea of feeling defeated and overwhelmed by the amount of clutter that exists. When clutter exists, your energy is affected physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Clutter always reveals your mindset. If you operate with low self-esteem, you may own more expensive clothing than necessary because you use retail therapy as a means to feel happy. If you are worried about money, you may keep items that you don’t necessarily need. If you’ve dealt with loss and grief, you may be more attached to sentimental items than someone who has not gone through similar experiences. The bottom line is that clutter is a symptom of deeper things going on in your psyche, and when you deal with clutter, you can transform into the person you are meant to be.



REMEMBER

Go back to a time when you were surrounded by clutter and think about how it made you feel. It could be a cluttered desk, a stuffed attic, or your mind full of so many tasks you didn’t know where to start. You don’t need a psychology degree to understand that when you think back to these times you get a bit stressed — or in medical terms, your cortisol levels rise.

The negative effects of clutter

Here is where I can get really real on the psychological effects of clutter. The biggest effects are stress and increased cortisol levels. A study done by UCLA observed 32 middle-class LA families and found that all of the moms’ stress hormones spiked during the time they spent dealing with their belongings.

Clutter can harm relationships, and studies have shown that where the word “clutter” is used to describe couples’ current households, a higher percentage of divorces ensue. Clutter can often be the root of disagreements that can lead to larger problems. Whatever you’re living situation is — whether you’re living with a roommate, significant other, family, stranger, or dog — those you live with define clutter differently, and that, of course, affects your living situation and your daily moods. Here are some tips:

- » **Listen to your partner’s feelings about the clutter each of you leaves in the house.** Make sure you share decluttering habits with your partner. Share your reasons for wanting to declutter and your strategies. For example, you might show your partner the new boxes you labeled “Donate,” “Recycle,” “Trash,” “Sentimental,” and so on. Remember, your partner may get worried upon hearing that you’re decluttering and fear that you are going to get rid of everything. Be willing to listen to your partner’s concerns, voice your reasons for wanting to declutter, and ask for support throughout the process. You can even shed light on the negative effects of clutter to help your partner understand how getting rid of excess stuff can and will improve both of your lives.
- » **Get rid of what you don’t need to improve your emotional well-being.** I bet you’re thinking that today’s consumerist society and keeping up with the Joneses mean that we have to have a lot of stuff and keep buying more stuff to put in our bigger houses and so forth. However, if you see your stuff spreading to a level that you can’t organize or keep clean, this can cause stress, especially if you take pride in having a tidy home. Therefore, having a cluttered environment can result in feelings of low self-worth and even depression in some cases!
- » **Improve your focus.** I talk about this at length when I get to workstation decluttering, but I also think it needs to be discussed in terms of life in general. I think that you know that clutter is and always will be distracting. This is not rocket science or anything new. Clutter can compete for your brain’s focus, thereby not allow you to give your full focus to what is important. It takes more energy to actively avoid and ignore clutter than it does to actually deal with it.
- » **Change your behavior.** A large part of your energy can be attributed to your surroundings. Waking up to an efficient home with things you use daily versus waking up to a big pile of junk makes a difference. This can also influence the behavior of your kids, friends, and even fur babies. Clutter can cause a chaotic environment not only for you but also for those who are surrounded by you. For example, entering a doctor’s waiting room that’s so busy you can barely sit and fill out forms affects your mood differently than entering a sterile, clutter-free environment. Never discount the powerful effect of clutter on your mental and emotional well-being.

Why decluttering lets you do more and stress less

Research has proved the positive effects of decluttering and being organized. However, in a fast-paced life, it's impossible to avoid all stress. You're stimulated by stuff and people all wanting your attention. While avoiding all stress may not be a real option, how you deal with your stuff can help manage one aspect of your stress. The more stuff you have, both physical and mental, the more your stress is triggered.

Therefore, if you want to feel less stress, decluttering your life is a good start so you can focus more on the other areas of your life. The process can even be therapeutic once you start eliminating other stresses!

Here are a few strategies to help relieve decluttering stress:

- » **Stop making impulse buys.** This only leads to more stuff.
- » **Clean and tidy up your bedroom.** Where you wake up has a big impact on how your day is affected.
- » **Go through your closet.** You don't want to be stressed wondering what to wear or waste time in your closet.
- » **Clean out your car.** It's amazing how great a clean car can feel during an otherwise stressful drive.
- » **Remove unwanted apps on your phone.** If you're like most people, your phone is with you all day every day and you spend hours staring at the screen. Delete what you don't need.
- » **Unsubscribe to emails.** The less spam mail you get, the less stress you feel. Unsubscribe to what you don't need.



TIP

I juggle many things in my life, and I know you do as well. From personal and business obligations to family and friendships, the time struggle is real with ever-increasing obligations. How you juggle so many things can heavily depend on the clutter you have lingering in your home, workspace, and mind. To really reduce stress and be more focused and productive, start relating clutter to stress and slowly reduce it. Tackle one day or category at a time and be consistent.

If You Don't Use It, Toss It

You've probably heard it said before: "If you don't use it, toss it." This is easy to say. However, I want to give you some quick tips on how to implement this advice. It requires a mindset change. You need to program your mind to say no a lot more. I don't mean to party invites or customer inquiries; I mean to stuff.

Say no when you want to buy something simply because it's your favorite color or it's on sale for half price. The common sale purchase only works if you would actually have paid full price for the item in the first place; otherwise, it will likely end up being clutter.

Before investing in potentially more clutter, always ask yourself these questions: Why do I need this? Do I already have this? Will it serve a purpose?



REMEMBER

Decluttering does *not* mean going without. Losing clutter should be a relief, not something to be scared about. I know when you picked up this book you were already worried you might have to give up too much stuff or be asked to live so minimally that you'd only have one fork and two knives. That is completely not the case.

Removing clutter all around should make you feel more comfortable in your home, office, car, mind, or wherever you spend your time. If the act of decluttering makes you scared, don't give up. You simply need to change your mindset, and you're probably decluttering in a way that doesn't fit your clutterbug type or your lifestyle.

So why not practice getting better at identifying what needs to go? Start by dividing your belongings into categories according to how often you use them: Daily, Weekly, Sporadically, Rarely, and Never. By putting the items into these categories, you can visually see which ones you don't use. It helps calm the process and makes it easier and totally visual. You can use bins, boxes, or bags to organize these items.

You will likely keep the items in the first two categories, so find a permanent place for them. The key to decluttering is not only to get rid of things you don't use but also to make sure you have a spot for the things you do use.

I advise getting rid of the last two categories of items. You'll have to make a tough choice as to whether the sporadic bin is worth keeping. If the items are not practical, get rid of them!



REMEMBER

Stay positive and take mental breaks if needed, but keep decluttering.



TIP

When you let go of something, keep track of how much it cost originally. Don't do it to justify keeping anything. (Keep in mind that decluttering doesn't focus on how much an item costs, but rather whether or not it's useful.) This trick is simply to help give you perspective and prevent you from buying things you don't need.

Discovering how much money you're actually now donating or throwing in the trash may be depressing, but this exercise will help you save money in the future! You've already paid for the items, so the money is gone anyway. Use this tip to help keep you motivated to buy less and live better. I call the money you realize is gone the "sunk costs" of decluttering. You have to move on and do it swiftly. The trick is not to make the same mistake again.

Why minimalism works

In short, minimalism means less of everything. Less stuff, fewer bills, smaller dwellings — you get the point. And first and foremost, minimalism can save money and free up your financial resources. When you choose to live simply, you can be more productive and get an automatic financial benefit.

Minimalism does not mean you have to get rid of everything or that you have to live in a sterile, all-white home with one expensive couch in the middle. That may be what you've been trained to believe, but minimalism in this book simply means thinking about getting rid of what you don't need. And then you can enjoy what you have more! It also means that you can give more value to certain material things by buying less and focusing on quality rather than quantity. Figure 1-3 shows the minimalism example some people envision, but it certainly does not have to be the norm.

Aside from the money savings that come along with minimalism, the time savings can be of even greater value, given that time may well be your greatest asset. You can spend less time dealing with all the extra things in your life and focus your time on the things you need.

In conjunction with more time and money, you'll have more energy as your refocused time can be available for other activities. The reduction of a highly materialist lifestyle can prove to be healthier and give you better results. Last but not least, you'll increase your efficiency. Less stuff, more time, more energy, and more productivity. It really is a no-brainer.



REMEMBER

I want to reiterate that you don't have to keep only one pair of shoes or one book to adopt this lifestyle. The great thing about minimalism is that the choices are yours to make, and you can do what works for you. You can choose what and how you want to downsize, and there's no right or wrong way to go about it. Once you start on this journey, you may find that you want to embrace it even more after seeing the benefits.

FIGURE 1-3:
What most
people see
when they
think of
minimalism.



Pexels / Pixabay

You don't have to figure it all out right away; the process can take some trial and error.

Knowing how much is too much

Many people ask me for some concrete rules to help them figure out whether they have too much stuff. Although this differs for everyone, I have some guidelines:

- » **Constantly misplacing things?** When you are wasting time looking for items from keys to blouses to wrenches, this could be a sign you have too much clutter.
- » **Do you have piles of stuff?** Clothing may be the most obvious thing to think about, but the concept applies to stuff in general.
- » **Are you replacing stuff you have lost and can't find?** This is a clear sign of having too much clutter.
- » **Are you purchasing items and then realizing you already had them?** When you start to have doubles and even triples of most things, chances are you have too much stuff. Two copies of the same book? Five pairs of similar shoes? Twenty boxes of crackers?

- » **Are you always worrying about stuff?** For example, do you stress about having people over because they have to walk through your overstuffed, cluttered entranceway?
- » **Do you have a difficult time knowing where to start?** Are you so overwhelmed with the clutter in many areas of your life that you can't even choose one spot to start?
- » **Do you feel overwhelmed even thinking about decluttering?** Similar to not knowing where to start, do you feel overwhelmed about the entire process?
- » **Are you always late paying bills and arriving at appointments?** This is another clear sign of clutter buildup.
- » **Can you not use places in your house?** For example, can you not park your car in the garage?
- » **Do you want to just start over because of clutter?** Maybe you're tempted to say "Forget it, I'm moving to Indonesia."
- » **Are you renting a storage unit that you never get items from?** Clutter starts before you even rent the locker — if you're considering renting a locker, you have too much stuff. When you have a storage unit, you accumulate even more, and the longer you keep the unit, the more stuff accumulates. When you'd rather pay for a place to store your stuff miles away than let it go, you've reached a turning point. This also often leads to a waste of time and money.
- » **Do your kids have so many toys they never know what to play with?** If you're overwhelmed by clutter, chances are your kids may be as well. Having too many toy choices is also known to hamper creativity, especially in the earlier years.
- » **Do you find you never eat all your food because you over-shop and food goes bad?** This is easily done, especially in North America where we have massive fridges. Europeans, on the other hand, still shop daily and have less food storage space available, which automatically cuts down on food waste.
- » **Do you have to move things to sit down?** This is an obvious sign that you have too much stuff.
- » **Do you have more than one junk drawer?** I forbid junk drawers. I say having an essential drawer for rubber bands and matchboxes that you use is okay, but junk just accumulates, much like clutter.

Too much of anything can be considered clutter. If you start to accumulate too many shoes, for example, they may become an overwhelming pile of clutter that you never use. Similarly, a collection intended to bring you joy can turn into clutter if you're not careful. You may have to do some serious soul-searching to figure out how much is too much.

Taking stock of anything in your home that you have a large selection of is usually a good way to start identifying what may be clutter. What is the right amount you should have? That needs to be determined by your lifestyle.

Determining the right amount for your lifestyle

Items that used to be functional can turn into clutter, and this is where you need to get realistic about what you use. You need to be brutal with your real lifestyle — not the one you think you have or want to have. If you love camping and have every item possible but have not camped in ten years, it's probably not part of your lifestyle and you don't need those items. Having a fantasy about the lifestyle you want and keeping items “just in case” is a common downfall. Chapter 10, which covers decluttering your garage, can give you more insight, as previous “lifestyles” usually end up in the garage.



AUTHOR
SAYS

A personal example is that I gave up my cheerleading shoes ten years after I graduated and stopped cheerleading. For ten years I wanted to hold onto the fact that I was a cheerleader, but in fact, I was a “retired” cheerleader and those shoes were taking up space in my garage — plus, I was limiting the shoes’ ability to be used by someone who was actually cheerleading! I ended up donating them to my local high school, and they were used for many more games and competitions. This makes me happier than if they were collecting dust in my garage. Get realistic with your current lifestyle, not your past, fantasy, or future lifestyle.



REMEMBER

You can always repurchase something next year or ten years from now — for example, if you decide you want to start camping again.

Your lifestyle changes, and that's normal. When you have kids, you may no longer need your rock climbing or motorcycle gear due to time constraints, but if you do start again, there will likely be even better technology for you to get when that time comes.

Lifestyle changes happen to everyone, even those who are self-described minimalists. This is also completely normal as your life circumstances are always changing, and therefore your needs also change. If something was once useful and now you see it collecting dust in the corner, it's clutter. The thing about clutter is that what may have been useful or brought you extreme happiness in the past can now be clutter, making it even more confusing.

It's important to be diligent when decluttering, make it an ongoing process, and adapt to your lifestyle changes. You have to question items every time you use them, look at them, or pick them up. Be honest about whether you'll ever use your expensive motorcycle jacket if you sold your bike and don't ever really have

a desire to ride again. As I'm writing this, I'm thinking I finally need to declutter my big box of motorcycle accessories that I haven't used since my motorcycle accident in 2009. I knew that I would not want to get on a motorcycle again, yet I've held onto my riding clothes for ten years! (Excuse me while I take a writing break to declutter.)

Another factor that affects your lifestyle is where you live. You own different items depending on whether you live in a city or the countryside, and how much time you spend in your home.

You obviously have too much stuff if you don't have room for it in your current dwelling. Even if you know or think someday you'll get a bigger place, if what you have doesn't fit in your current space, then you need to declutter today. Live in the present, because chances are if you save items in anticipation of having a bigger space, they may have turned into clutter by then. This can be a really tough challenge, especially when you're downsizing to a smaller space. It doesn't seem fair that some of your belongings can't join you in your new smaller space. However, it's a blessing in disguise as it forces you to make tough decisions regarding what to keep. You also have to really assess your storage space in your new place and make sure that whatever you're storing isn't clutter and doesn't take up space for other important items. The bottom line is that your space does matter, and often the smaller the space, the more likely you are to be forced to declutter naturally.



TIP

If something doesn't bring you happiness or you don't use it, then it's clutter and it has to go. Whatever method you see fit for determining this is up to you, and the remainder of this chapter focuses on giving practical advice to help you tackle that very question.

Places in Your Life That Probably Need Decluttering

When most people hear the word decluttering, they automatically think about “stuff” and places where they have too much of it. Common areas are the closet, attic, office, and garage. While those may be the most obvious spaces, in the following sections I give you an overview of the four major categories I associate with clutter — the first and foremost one being your mind.

Your mind

The problem with clutter is that it's usually referred to as physical stuff — things you can use, feel, touch, buy, donate, or sell. Lots of options exist for getting rid

of physical clutter. However, the real problem is that clutter is also in our minds, taking up very valuable space in our precious brains! You only have so much real estate in your home for the things you love, and the same goes for your precious mental space. Just as you spend time taking care of your body by exercising and eating nutritious food, so must you also remember to declutter your mind to make it the most effective. So how do you know if your mind is cluttered?

Do you sometimes feel like your brain is in overdrive and you can't keep track of things, projects, or life in general? There is absolutely no correlation between mental clutter and how much personal responsibility or work a person has. The busiest person with a decluttered mind can seem more in check with his mental space than someone with significantly fewer responsibilities. The amount you have on your plate is not the problem; it's how it is organized! If your mental space is a chaotic mess, then you should probably declutter your mind. And don't get discouraged or skip over this part because it may seem stressful or "airy-fairy." All of us are victims to having a cluttered mind at some point; the key is to recognize it. Just like your cabinets and cupboards, your mind can also benefit from tidying and decluttering from time to time!

A big tip that I firmly stand beside is adding a focus to your time and giving the task at hand priority instead of working on multiple cluttering tasks at once. I believe so much in this that I sell "time cubes" on my website. Their sole purpose is to decrease the amount of time you spend multitasking. You may feel that you're a great multitasker or that life often demands multitasking. However, just because you're good at multitasking doesn't necessarily mean it's the most productive use of your time. Multitasking occasionally may be necessary, but it increases stress and creates more clutter. Trust me on this: Multitasking keeps your brain in clutter mode.

Try to keep on a single task as much as possible. Always have a focused to-do list that is centered around your high-priority goals, and don't have more than seven items on that list. Otherwise, you'll be overwhelmed, and the temptation to multitask and clutter your brain will be even greater. Keeping this to-do list not only helps to keep the tasks you can accomplish in a day realistic but it also prevents you from starting your day being cluttered, as a cluttered to-do list can already set you on the path to stress.



REMEMBER

Less outside information coming in means fewer distractions when it comes to making important decisions.

If the preceding points don't convince you to declutter your mind, this one should: The media can totally consume your life and also have a negative impact on your health and mind. Plus, just as it makes sense that the more stuff you bring into your home the less room you have, the same is true with your brain: The more stuff you let in, the less room you have. You can spend hours online reading blogs,

watching YouTube videos, perusing social media, and catching up on the news, and this information can cause stress and clog up your mind! Of course, lots of this information can be useful when needed, and you can use it to be constantly learning and increasing your self-development. But it's important to limit the amount of information you consume and get the other stuff from the media that's not useful or negative out of your mind. Tim Ferriss, a productivity guru, suggests taking media detoxes. He says if something that is happening in the world comes up in a conversation and you don't know about it, ask about it then. (The amount of time wasted on media was his reason for his media detoxes.)

So, you're probably thinking this is impossible, but it's not. Set limits on how much time you spend on social and other media. Today there are even apps to monitor your screen time. Having a set amount of time keeps you hyper-focused during that time to make the most of it instead of clicking on a cute kitty video that pops up. And you're allowed to be selective about the content you consume. Just as you can choose what to feed your body, you can choose what to feed your mind. Avoid negative content, follow reputable sources, and organize your email and notifications so that nothing can sneak past to add clutter to your brain.

Take time to unwind, disconnect, and be creative. Maintaining a focused and decluttered mind doesn't mean that you don't need mental breaks and what I call "creative time." I have the best times when I can simply reflect or my calendar is free for a few hours. Yes, I do have lots of spaces in my calendar. Although I believe in being planned and focused, free time is where my creativity blossoms. Chapter 2 provides more practical strategies and resources for how to declutter your mind and how it relates to your lifetime goals.

Your home

Often the problem is that we are busy, and when we come home, we are too tired or overwhelmed to even begin to think about decluttering. I hope to change that mindset gradually and not only show you that decluttering is fun but that you can also incorporate it into your daily routine naturally. This section takes a look at some practical solutions to get you motivated to start decluttering your home. Part 2 provides several chapters on tackling specific areas of your home, including closets, bathrooms, kitchens, laundry rooms, kids' rooms, garages, and storage spaces. You may have other rooms I don't touch upon, but you can use many of the same principles and tools I provide throughout the chapters.

Here are a few benefits of decluttering your home, no matter what area you declutter:

- » **Knowing where everything is.** This not only helps you save time but disallows more clutter because you don't buy duplicates or more than you need.

» **Setting the mood for the day.** I don't have to tell you your home and/or where you start your day can have a drastic impact on the rest of your day — and your life! That old saying that says make your bed to accomplish the first task of the day is spot on and relates directly to decluttering.

Your workspace

You have invested time in your mind and home to declutter, and I suggest tackling the workspace as well. The next section takes a look at digital organization, but this section focuses on the workspace itself. Problems arise when you are not holistically decluttered. I think you know that a messy workspace is less efficient than an organized one, but what you may not know is that it not only makes you less efficient but it can also frustrate your co-workers and limit your chances of getting that next promotion. If you've wasted time looking for things, have been chronically late for meetings, or can't find your meeting notes, these are all signs of a cluttered desk.

Start decluttering your workspace and give everything a home similar to the way you would in your own home. Start by getting rid of nonessential items and make organizing your workspace a daily habit before you leave for the day. Put a reminder in your calendar to take ten minutes at the end of each day to organize your space. An office swap is also a great time to do a deep and thorough declutter. If your office is moving to an open concept shared workspace, that's even better for decluttering. Embrace the new age and skip to the digital organization chapter if you're really interested in decluttering your workspace and going digital, a must for many new office shared spaces. Chapter 12 provides an in-depth view of office decluttering.

Here are some benefits to help you get motivated. Workspace decluttering

- » **Helps your productivity:** This should be obvious as you can find things more easily, waste less time looking for things, and increase your overall mental awareness.
- » **Helps your business succeed:** You may think this is a long shot, but the success of your business and career depends on you, and you want to be the best, most efficient business lady or gentleman that you can be. When you're comfortable in your space and are able to focus, you save time and are more productive. It's a no-brainer. I assume that at some point in your work life you have tried to put an important file on your desk and then couldn't find it because of your cluttered workstation. Being comfortable at your work is the most important key to success. Keeping your workspace tidy and clutter-free and your space more open leads to greater productivity. Remember or think

back to how hard it was or is to complete a task when you were in an uncomfortable place, physically or mentally, and then vow to never work like that again. Take action and make it comfortable.

- » **Increases the likelihood of you getting that promotion:** Being organized and clutter-free boosts your performance. Yes, you read that correctly: Being clutter-free can really help to boost confidence, which in turn increases your likelihood of being promoted or doing better in your business. So how exactly does this work? A cluttered desk may mean that you have lost something important or wasted precious time at some point. Maybe you needed it to make a sale or your boss requested it. Having files and resources you need when you need them helps boost confidence and credibility and leaves a lasting impression.
- » **Makes a better first impression:** First impressions of your workspace are as important as first impressions in interviews. I worked for a decade in the construction industry in operations, and the mentality was that the more stuff you had in your office, the more knowledgeable you were. I would walk into seasoned plant managers' offices with stacks and stacks of books, papers, procedures, and manuals, and they were proud of it. I had worked there so long that I knew and used all of these resources. Yet when I asked them to find the latest safety procedure on cleaning concrete drums, it took them hours to find it.

Having an overload of stuff can truly make some people feel that it affects job security. If you walk into a lawyer's office and see a lot of fancy legal books that he's probably never opened or read since law school, do you assume he is better equipped to take your case? Many professions do require manuals and resources that may only be used once in a career but hold information on a specific case or project. If you're in this type of career, then you need to be aware and try to declutter for yourself and to be ahead of the times. Most jobs/careers don't require you to have thousands of papers sitting behind you to confirm your knowledge.

- » **Keeps you healthier:** The more clutter you have, the harder it is to clean your desk, which means more germs are lingering, especially if you have lots of co-workers or customers who stop by. Clear the clutter and use disinfectant wipes (I recommend using the organic ones).
- » **Helps you prevent procrastination:** Everyone procrastinates at some things — some people more than others. It's human nature to do the things you love first before you do things that you don't like doing. Lingering clutter can add to your procrastination, and at some point you've probably even procrastinated decluttering your workplace. Don't worry; that's okay. I've done it many times, and I bet you have too. The first step is admitting it. However, learning to avoid procrastination without being forced to do so is important. If you're forced, you may miss an important detail, feel stressed the entire time,

or have to give up another task to complete it. Many people say that procrastination has its benefits because they work better under pressure, but it can also mean you don't get anything done.

» **Builds time management skills:** Today time management skill is needed for practically every job, business, or career. You see it listed on every job posting, and customers demand it. Time is your greatest asset, and how you manage it is completely up to you. Even if someone else manages your calendar or schedule, you still need to make the rules. So how does decluttering benefit time management? Clearing the clutter helps you clear your mind to more effectively plan for achieving your priority tasks. Starting to declutter may seem like a daunting task that takes lots of time, but it will save you lots of time in the future.

If, after reading the preceding benefits, you want to declutter your workspace, here are some steps to get started right now:

1. **Remove everything from your workspace/office.**

For a complete workspace overhaul, or if you are forced to leave your huge cushy office for the shared workspace concept, begin by removing everything from the room. And I mean everything: desk drawers, stuff in cupboards, and so on. If your office is moving, you have to do this anyway, but do it even if you're staying put. Trust me: What you put back in will be valuable, because taking everything out of a room and then putting it back in is a lot of work.



TIP

Once the room is empty, take advantage of the chance to clean it. Vacuum, dust, scrub the walls — anything you can do to get that room in the best possible condition. You don't often take things completely out of your space, so when you do, take the time to clean as well.

2. **Evaluate the stuff you moved out.**

This may sound easy, but where do you start? Consider everything to be on a level playing field; all the stuff is equal. This makes you see everything as potential clutter — furniture, files, pens, wall art. Everything is in the same category, whether potential clutter or necessity.

3. **Choose practical necessities.**

This is the tough part because you'll want to put everything you like or sometimes use back into your workspace. You need to be tough — brutal even — with your things. Only bring items you use daily back into your office.

4. **Place things in their new place.**

Once you've made some brutal decluttering decisions, find a special place for the items you're moving back in. You need to think carefully about where to put things and give each item a special place to not only maximize space but

also to help you continually declutter. Anything that doesn't have a spot should not stay in your office. If you're doing a total workspace overhaul, furniture makes the biggest difference in getting to that clutter-less space. Make sure your furniture is functional and is in the best spot to maximize efficiency.

This step is extremely important and should not be overlooked, as decluttering is more than just throwing things away — it's getting to your optimal efficiency level.

5. **Make a commitment to regularly declutter.**

You will see this advice pop up in practically every chapter and section of this book. Decluttering is not a one-time occurrence but should be done all the time. We all know that clutter will seep back into our lives, and workspaces are no exception. Make a commitment to continually evaluate and update your space and efficiency, and you will leave a lasting impression on customers, co-workers, and everyone who looks up to you. Figure 1-4 is an example of a decluttered workspace that can be a reality with regular decluttering.



FIGURE 1-4:
A clear
workspace.

Thomas Q / Unsplash

Your digital life

Digital life is complicated, as we do so many things online! I have dedicated Chapter 13 to digital organizing, and as our society moves more away from paper, I suspect that digital organization will become more important. For example,

we have work files, games, movies, songs, emails, tweets, Facebook posts, pins, webinars, photos, blogs, recipes, Skype calls, and the list goes on. I know sometimes I even save or document something that I would never keep if it were in paper form, and I would never print it. But yet I allow it to take up valuable real estate on my computer, and what's more disturbing is that it could cause me to lose time while sorting through files and documents I no longer need.

When email was invented back in the day, I created my very first Hotmail account. Yes, I am dating myself, but I still use that account from 1996 sometimes; I just can't get rid of it. I may need to take my own advice about email declutter and let go of this email sometime soon!

Think back to when you first got email. I know I used to print them all. I was scared that if I didn't, they would be gone forever. I mean, how could a computer or the Internet be smart enough to store my emails?

Fast forward to today, when you should not be printing emails. However, in my work with corporate offices and small businesses to improve business processes, I still come across this practice, even in 2019, when email and cloud services are very secure. I see VPs, admin assistants, controllers, event planners, and plant managers with printed emails in their office. When I ask them about it, the response is usually, "Oh, I really needed to make sure I follow up on that email," or "It is very important," or "I file it under that person's name"! Those answers are mind-boggling to me.

The problem remains that we have so many digital things to save on our computer. And to be honest, most of our business and life is now digital, but we really don't spend any time dealing with the digital files we have created. What's even worse is that sometimes we have files saved in multiple places in our computers without even knowing it. Chapter 12 tackles this topic in further detail, and Figure 1-5 shows a digitally organized computer screen that will be the result of digital decluttering.

Now, I am not a technical genius at all and there is much that I don't know about computers and technical gadgets, so my digital decluttering may be basic. But what I do know is that you don't need to be technically inclined to have a thriving business online or to clutter your computer. I also know that regular digital decluttering can improve productivity and good work. I am a firm believer in decluttering regularly rather than waiting until you get that dreaded note on your computer stating that you've run out of space.

FIGURE 1-5:
Clear computer
screen.

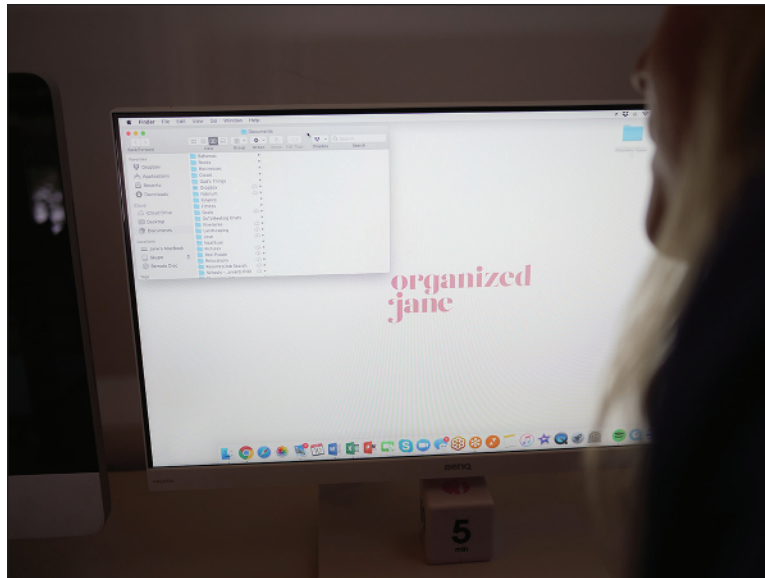


Image courtesy of author (photo credit@lohmmedia)

Following are a few tips on digital decluttering:

- » Set up your digital decluttering strategy before it is too late. Create an easy-to-manage system, such as organized folders for invoices and receipts.
- » Name things properly so that you can find everything quickly in your digital world.
- » Don't get overwhelmed by spam; deal with it immediately.
- » Unsubscribe to anything that causes you stress.

