



Clutter-itis

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Dana Dunbar used to let her paperwork pile up.

And up. And up.

The personal chef stuffed her clients' menus, contracts and other related paperwork in 17 boxes - from shoe boxes to milk crates - and stored them in her Brewster house. They took up space in her garage, under beds and in the closets of two rooms.

Overwhelmed by the massive paper build-up, she finally called a professional organizer for help - not only to pare down the clutter but also to find out why she was collecting it in the first place.

"She gave me tools to use to break through the psychological chaos," says Dunbar. She also gained an awareness of emotional blocks - like having trouble dealing with her new success - that were causing her clutter.

Clutter is a problem that's come out of the closet in the past decade. Books galore offer tips on how to declutter and get organized, as do magazine articles and TV shows such as TLC's "Clean Sweep" and HGTV's "Mission: Organization."

But there's an emotional side to cluttering that often gets swept under the rug. With spring cleaning season in full swing, it may be a good time to look at that problem.

(Illustration by James Warren)

"It's not just about the stuff," says professional organizer Annie Taber, owner of All's In Order in West Yarmouth. "People have a reason for it."

If you don't uncover that reason, it's likely the clutter will reappear, Taber says.

Clutter can be a bad habit and minor annoyance. But when it disrupts your life, it can be an indication of underlying causes such as anger, depression, sadness, anxiety or fear, experts say.

"There may be deeper issues people need to deal with before they can get organized," says Jennifer Cramer, owner of Jennifer's Organizing Business Inc., in Falmouth.

Widespread problem

It's estimated that the clutter habit affects 2 to 3 million Americans, according to Fugen Neziroglu, a Long Island psychologist and author of "Overcoming Compulsive Hoarding: Why You Save & How You Can Stop" (New Harbinger Publications, 2004). The problem cuts across gender and socio/economic lines.

"You see it in the very wealthy to the very poor," Neziroglu says. "But most people are secretive about it." Hoarders can be rich people who have several homes filled with their possessions; or members of the middle class who rent storage space or "fill every possible corner."

Cluttering problems can range from mild to moderate, with hoarders at the extreme, notes Roland Rotz, a clinical psychologist based in Santa Barbara, Calif. Some people have piles of possessions here and there; others have a messy house. But, at the extreme, "people are tripping over their stuff, and cleaning things up is overwhelming," the psychologist says.

"There are many more people out there who are emotionally and physically cluttered than we know about," he says. "They don't come forward. They are hiding and hoping it will go away."

That's because they feel ashamed and embarrassed about their clutter, Rotz adds. "They will invite a professional organizer into their house before they talk to a therapist about it."

Rotz recalls working with one woman in therapy for six months before he was told by someone else that she was a hoarder.

Letting go

Clutter can have a destructive impact on a person's life, Rotz says, causing stress, family tension and marital discord. It can also lead to social isolation.

"People are too embarrassed to have company over," Rotz says, "or the family won't come to visit."

Out-of-control clutter can become a safety issue or health hazard. It can also cost money when you can't find something you need.

Experts offer a variety of reasons why some individuals accumulate so much stuff and why it's so difficult for them to get rid of it:

- They have an emotional attachment: It's not the item itself, Neziroglu says, but the meaning a person attaches to it or the memories it evokes, whether it's an old stuffed chair or a memento from a trip. Some people are suffering from unfinished grief, Rotz says, and are unwilling to let go of a

Clutter clearing tips

Purge the junk:

■ Toss stuff that's rusted, broken, moldy, mildewy, spotted, dented, frayed or smelly: socks with holes, beyond-usable towels, already used rags, moth-eaten wools).

■ Toss expired items: foods (green stuff in the refrigerator), medicines, coupons and outdated information (old textbooks, maps).

■ Throw out excess paper and plastic bags; recycle or give them away.

Share your abundance:

■ Vow to take two bags of items to a rummage sale in your community.

■ Donate reading material to a library, day care center, waiting room, nursing home or school.

Source: Helen Volk, author of "De-Clutter, De-Stress Your Life" (Beyond Clutter Publications, 2001)

Keep or pitch?

"If you have stuff you don't know where to put, it's probably clutter," is professional organizer Annie Taber's advice for deciding what should go or stay. Jennifer Cramer, another local organizer, suggests asking yourself the following questions when making decluttering decisions:

loved one. So they hold onto that loved one's things.

- Throwing something away causes them emotional distress: Larina Kase, a Philadelphia psychologist, says this includes both the Depression-era mentality of "you may need it someday" and "you spent a lot on it."

Other aspects of their personality affect clutter control: They may, for example, have difficulty with time management or trouble making decisions; may be chronically disorganized; or may suffer from problems such as attention deficit disorder, depression, or addictive tendencies like shop-aholism, according to the National Association of Professional Organizers.

The emotion-based tendency to clutter can be complicated and difficult to change without help, Rotz says. Cleaning out and getting rid of the clutter is often just a temporary fix.

"You have to find a way to break the cycle," he says.

Also, if the reasons for cluttering aren't addressed, the clutter is likely to build up again, experts say.

Making a change

The good news is that experts say clutterers can get over their emotional stumbling blocks and make their way to an uncluttered lifestyle, though that often requires help.

Individuals create these stumbling blocks in their own minds, Neziroglu says. "It's their own illogical beliefs which cause them to feel anxious," such as "I may need this information or possession in the future, so I should keep it." By changing their erroneous thinking - such as asking themselves when was the last time they actually needed or used the information or possession - they can begin to throw things out and not acquire more, she says.

Sometimes intervention from family and friends is needed to help hoarders, Neziroglu adds.

"Breaking a lifetime habit is hard," organizer Taber says. "You need to get to the pain point. There are emotions around that pain. You have to convert it to the positive energy you need to take action and move forward."

Taber advises clients to imagine clutter as noise. "Think how disturbing and distracting it is," she says, and how your life would be better without it.

Some clutterers can make changes on their own; others need professional help. But Rotz has found that neither just working with an organizer or just therapy is enough for people who are emotionally stuck. Instead, he collaborates with a professional organizer to "break the cycle." Rotz also offers a free monthly support group for clutterers to share strategies.

"It's very hard for family members or friends to help," says Cramer, the Falmouth organizer, because they're too close to the situation. "A professional is trained to gently but effectively bring people through it."

■ Is my stuff taking up more living space than it should?

■ Is this clutter affecting my life?

■ Why do I need this item?

■ What is my reason for keeping it?

■ What will happen if I let it go?

Eliminating clutter can be emotionally, physically and mentally exhausting, says Taber. "It's like throwing someone's life away." But the emotional benefits of making a change are worth it. "It's like a weight has been lifted off their shoulders," she says.

By clearing out clutter, people can feel a sense of accomplishment and regain control over their life and environment, Lase says. They also feel less stressed and no longer ashamed.

"I hated to admit as an adult I needed someone to help me," Dunbar says.

A new system

Cramer helped Dunbar not only with the physical but emotional aspects of decluttering.

During the clearing, Dunbar gained a new awareness of her working style and, in the process, realized the root of her clutter issue.

"The real block is that I'm a bad organizer and it's emotional," she says. "I was having a hard time being newly successful. This stuff was calling out to me to take care of it. It was my excuse not to go forward."

Cramer gave Dunbar the "extra push" she needed to get her paperwork under control.

"She suggested I take little steps at a time so I didn't feel overwhelmed by all the things I was putting off," Dunbar says. Physical changes, like using a five-subject notebook and a new datebook, "helped me with the emotional side of it," she says.

With Cramer's coaching, Dunbar spent two months sorting through the 17 boxes and piles of paper. She filled eight trash bags and winnowed the boxes down to seven.

She also started a new system to reduce the paper buildup and, so far, it seems to be working.

"It's going to take me awhile to turn this around," Dunbar says. "But I see myself differently as a person who wants to live a less cluttered life."

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