

The SOLUTION source

Thunder Bay Counselling Centre Newsletter
By Colleen Ginter, Clinical Counsellor on behalf of Thunder Bay Counselling Centre

For You & Your Family

Spring 2015

DECLUTTERING

Spring is almost here. Time to clear out the cobwebs of the long winter. Time to clear our minds and clear our homes. Declutter? It can mean many different things to as many different people. Basically decluttering is just clearing out space that needs to be emptied or utilized in a different way. It can mean organizing yourself to make life simpler. What shows up for you when you hear this word? Dread?

It can have a very wide continuum. It can range from tidying up your desk top to clearing out your son's room as he leaves for University or a job out of town, to clearing out and decluttering as you make room for that new baby about to be born. It can mean clearing out the beloved belongings of a parent who has passed away.

Decluttering can be a surprisingly complex process.

Organizing to Make Life Easier

You are sitting on the couch in your camp, your things are all packed and ready for the trek back home and you watch while your brother scurries around the room, muttering in frustration because he can't find his keys! Sound familiar? Solution, a key rack. Sometimes it's the simple things that can make life just a bit easier.

Help! Where Do I Start?

Sometimes it's not so much the clutter that is the biggest barrier to simplifying our lives but where do we begin?

FIRST STEP: A SINGLE SMALL SUCCESS

At the outset, adjust your vision downward from the big (cluttered) picture, to zero in on one small, solvable clutter problem. Clear one counter, de-clutter one shelf, or bring order to a single drawer and do choose an item that nags at you daily.

Beginning your war against clutter with a small success provides welcome motivation for the long haul. When you feel yourself starting to flag, returning to that one clear space, shelf or drawer will remind you of the goal and give a new burst of energy for the next step.

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SLOW AND STEADY PROGRESS

Clutter tolerance seems to run a fever cycle, much like the flu. Every so often, the cluttered household will become intolerable, sparking short-lived but fiery anti-clutter efforts. Piles will be shifted, boxes will be filled, stuff will be stashed until the fever breaks. Then the clutter tide flows back in, confusion redoubled because of the flushed and furious attempts to get a grip in a hurry.

Just as clutter arises gradually, over time, so it must be fought gradually and over time. Beating clutter requires building new habits, applying new organizational methods, and creating new household routines. The clutter cure takes time, and can't be short-cut.

Resist the temptation to go all-out in fevered, short-term sorties against clutter. Like the fable of the tortoise and the hare, slow and steady wins the declutter race.

SCHEDULE DECLUTTER SESSIONS

A successful attack on clutter requires time, energy and motivation. First things first: schedule time to declutter. Even 15 minutes a day will make a good start. Better, schedule larger blocks of time, from two to four hours once or twice a week. Scheduling declutter sessions brings the goal out of the stratosphere and into real life. By committing time to decluttering, you strengthen motivation and embrace the goal of a clutter-free home.

FORCING DECISIONS: THE FOUR-BOX METHOD

Clutter is evidence of many things: poor habits, lack of organization, sentimental attachment, too much stuff. But, at bottom, each item of clutter is a decision delayed.

The Four-Box method forces a decision, item by item. To apply it, gather three boxes and a large trash can. Label the boxes, "Put Away", "Give Away/Sell" and "Storage." Items to be thrown away belong in the trash can.

Take the four boxes to the declutter area. One at a time, pick up each piece of clutter. Ask yourself, "Do I want to put this away in another place, donate it (or sell it at a yard sale), store it, or throw it away?" You may not release your grip on the item until you have made a decision.

At the end of the decluttering session, reserve 10 to 15 minutes to empty the boxes. Put away items are put in more appropriate places. Give away/sell items should be stored outside the house, in a garage, or in the trunk of the car for drop-off at the donation center. Empty the trash to prevent second thoughts!

The Four Box method will work for anyone, in any declutter mode. Use it to clear a shelf or drawer each day, or apply it as part of a whole-house weekend assault on clutter.

(Cynthia Ewer, Complete Idiot's Guide to Getting Organized)

Mindfulness and Decluttering

"Decluttering your home or workspace can often seem overwhelming, but in truth it can be as peaceful as meditation, and can be a way to practice living mindfully and in the moment.

1. Clutter is a manifestation of a) holding onto the past and b) fear of what might happen in the future.
2. Letting go of clutter is a way to live more mindfully and in the present.
3. The act of decluttering itself can be a mindfulness practice.

CLUTTER IS HOLDING ONTO THE PAST, OR FEAR OF THE FUTURE

1. **We don't want to let go of the past.** Often clutter comes in the form of emotional attachment to objects that have significance to us. They might remind us of a loved one, or a vacation, or a special event like a birthday, funeral, graduation, etc. It might be a gift from someone. All of this is living in the past. I'm not saying we should forget about the past, but letting go of these objects (and they're only objects, they're not the events or loved ones themselves) it is a way of releasing our hold on the past. It's a way of living more in the present
2. **We're afraid of the future.** Clutter might be things we think we might need sometime in the future. We hold on to them just in case. We're afraid of being unprepared for the future, but the truth is we can never be totally prepared. We can't control the outcome of the future, and trying to do so means that we're never really living in the present moment. We're always preparing for what might (or might not) come.

Books are usually examples of one of these two reasons. We hold onto books we've already read, as trophies of our reading accomplishments. We hold onto books we might read in the future (but probably won't), with the optimism that our future selves are going to be more amazing readers than we've ever been in the past. In truth, you only need three or four books, the ones you might read in the next month. Then after you've read those, donate those books to charity, and check out a few books from the library.



LET GO OF CLUTTER TO LIVE MINDFULLY

So if clutter is holding onto the past, and fearing the future how can we live in the present instead?

I slowly get rid of clutter, and in doing so, I release my mind of these attachments and fears. It's a liberating process. Clutter is the physical embodiment of these attachments and fears, emotional stuff that we don't realize we have. By decluttering, we are clearing ourselves of these tangled webs.

When I've gotten rid of clutter, I'm freed. I can forget about those things, and live instead in this moment. I can fully appreciate life as it happens. It's of course possible to live in the moment even if you have clutter. There is no prerequisite to mindful living. But decluttering can be a beautiful process of helping ourselves let go of the things we don't realize we're holding on to.

CLUTTER AS MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

And so, as I declutter, not only am I freeing myself up to live in the present, I am living in the present during the process of decluttering.

1. **Pick one cluttered flat surface.** It can be a tabletop, countertop, shelf, the top of a dresser, floor of a closet, floor of a room (just a section of that floor to start with). Don't worry about all the rest of your cluttered spaces for now just pick this one space. Small is good.
2. **Clear that surface.** Take everything off and pile it on the floor or another table. Clean the surface while it's clear — wipe it with a cloth, slowly and mindfully.
3. **Take one object from the pile.** Forget about the entire pile, just look at that one object. Ask yourself why you have it. Is it for emotional reasons, or do you really use it? Is it for "just in case"? When was the last time you used it? If you don't really need or use it, put it in a box for donation or trash it. If you do really use it, put it in another pile to be put back on your now clean surface. If you're on the fence and can't bear to give something up, put it in a "maybe" box and put that box away for six months (mark the date on your calendar).
4. **Repeat, one object at a time.** Practice doing this mindfully. Make a decision with each object, keep, donate, or maybe box. No waffling or putting off decisions. Deal with each object once, and then move on.
5. **Put the objects back, and make a "home" for each one.** Each object needs to have a spot that is its home, and you should always put those objects back in their homes. If you can't find a home for an object, you don't have space for it. Donate the items in the donation box, and put away the maybe box. Eventually you won't need a maybe box as you get good at this.

(Leo Babauta)



Decluttering the Mind

"Fact: No two physical objects can occupy the same space at the same time. This is just basic physics. We have to choose between this piece of furniture and that piece to fill a given space in the corner of the living room. We have to choose between a handful of blueberries or a handful of nuts to go into this bowl. We have to choose between this dress or that suit to clothe our bodies.

We have to choose because we can't have both occupying the same space. We have chosen to give away the physical clutter that piles up in our spaces in exchange for serenity, for simplicity, and for a richer life.

But what about non-physical clutter that fills up our minds and fogs our vision every day, every second even?

What would we do if we knew for a certain fact that a positive thought and a negative thought cannot occupy the same space in our mind at the same time? That they cannot co-exist at all? We would have to start choosing our thoughts like we choose our clothes for the day.

Farnoosh Brock states "You see, I was committing to the positive thoughts as much as I was holding on to the negative ones. I was thinking 'I am powerful beyond measure. I can run a successful business.' as much as I was thinking, 'This is not going to work. I am going to mess it up. It is too late for me to start over.' I repeated and reinforced the good as much as the bad."

And since both thoughts could not occupy the same space in my mind, the power of habit sided with the one that it was used to nurturing: the negative thought. It was the familiar voice it knew, and it takes a lot less effort to believe the familiar than to get on board with the new and unfamiliar.

So how do we apply this principle to clean out the mind clutter for good?

1. **Get ready to move out of your castle.** Imagine your mind lives in a giant castle filled with the stuff that fills up minds: thoughts, worries, anxieties, fears, memories, desires, questions, yearnings, and more thoughts.

Now imagine you are going to move out of this giant castle. It has been good to you no doubt but the rent is up and you can't afford it anymore, and you are moving into a clean, open, well-lit but teeny tiny space in your favorite spot in the world.

2. **Choose carefully what you pack.** You have to pack very light. And you can only take with you what you plan to use. Ask yourself (really, loud and clear, ask yourself):

Am I going to use the worries, the anxieties, the fears and the negative thoughts? Am I going to use the memories, the desires and the positive thoughts?

Decide on each one as if this were a real move (because it is). Decide consciously and with intention. What will you choose to take, and what will you choose to leave behind?

3. **Find a space for everything you brought as you move into your new place.** Everything has to occupy a space and no two things can occupy the same space at the same time so it would be best if you brought not quite so much. There's room only for half the stuff in your head anyway!
4. **Apply the rule to live clutter-free now.** If you chose to leave behind the worries, anxieties, fears, and negative thoughts, then you have de-cluttered your mind from the get-go.

But not all of us can detach so quickly from our cozy familiar world even if it means our negative thoughts.

So if you chose to bring everything, the good, the bad and the ugly, your tiny space will be beyond cluttered. That's okay. Just consciously apply the rule: No two things can occupy the same space in your mind at the same time. Choose either a negative thought or a positive one for this day or this hour or this very minute. Discard the other.

For instance, you can either choose a peaceful memory or a big worry, fear or courage, acceptance or denial.

You can choose the worry if you want. Just choose it consciously. No fooling yourself. And then, worry. Worry until you are sick of it. Worry a lot. Then choose fear if you must and fear as much as you can. Then choose anxiety and be anxious for a few hours.

And it's where you begin to think simpler now: You can have one thought at any given moment, but not two or ten.

Sometimes you choose right, sometimes you learn, but if you keep applying the rule, every day you will get closer to the freedom and peace that only a clutter-free mind can give you.

Every time you give up the choice, you return to what you know, you go back to default, to the familiar face, the good old smell and taste.

So as you settle into your new tiny clean clutter-free space in your favorite spot in the world, make room only for positivity, for joy, for serenity, for optimism and for happiness.

Choose to fill your new abode in this manner one thought at a time and you will be surprised how the small stuff adds up to take you where you always belonged: with a quiet clutter-free peaceful mind.

(Farnoosh Brock of Prolific Living)

The Counselling Centre of East Algoma provides professional counselling to individuals, couples, families, and groups from either our main office in Elliot Lake or our satellite office in Blind River. Our counsellors work with you to fully understand your circumstances and help you to make changes that will move you toward a healthier future.

Our dedicated counsellors can...

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- Assist you to improve your interpersonal relationships
- Assist you to improve the quality of your life
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