

MANAGING A CLUTTERED LIFE By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Have you noticed the recent increase in reality TV shows aimed to help people clean up their clutter at home and organize their lives? I particularly enjoy one show called “*Clean Sweep*.” I always get a feeling of deep satisfaction when I see a messy, disorganized, chaotic home be transformed into a spacious and well-organized one.

In case you haven’t seen *Clean Sweep* or a similar show, let me briefly tell you what happens. Initially, the homeowners on *Clean Sweep*, usually appear distressed when asked to get rid of extra items in their home. But the professional organizers are firm, and eventually they insist that many items be thrown out or sold during the re-organization phase. The organizers require the homeowners to work alongside them, sorting their items into various piles, such as Keep, Toss, Sell, or Donate.

Active participation by homeowners is crucial if people are to maintain the final changes in their home. By helping sort through and re-arrange items, people learn to think about their space differently, and to develop a new skill for dealing with clutter. In the future, they won’t have to rely on a professional to walk them through the decision making process of what to do with too many items. By the end of the project, people seem amazed and highly appreciative to have their possessions organized so they can see what they own and know where to find things. Trust me, the relief is visible on their faces.

Clutter & You

The aim of this article is to help you organize at least one aspect of your clutter---your important paper. This simple approach will also result in you touching a particular piece of paper only once as you organize. Once you decide to use this process, you must commit to use it in the future, so you don’t re-establish additional piles of paper clutter.

Barbara Hemphill developed this simple and effective system for dealing with today’s information overload. The system is based on the word, FAT. Each letter stands for the following:

F = FILE
A = ACT
T = TOSS

Lets take each letter of the FAT System and explore what it means.

F= FILE IT.

When you file, **do two things** before sticking it into a file folder. First, put a date in pencil on the upper right-hand corner. In the future, when you revisit that file, you’ll know if the information is out-dated and can be tossed before adding more information into the folder. For ongoing file folders, always place the new information in the front of the folder. That way, articles will be arranged chronologically.

Second, have a file index system on top of your file cabinet. It will become a complete list of your files. Then, when you go to file something about your car, you won't find yourself listing car information under various titles (automobile, vehicle, Ford, etc.).

A = ACT ON IT.

You won't have information clutter if you do whatever has to be done at the time you receive the information. For instance, if you need to respond to a letter, send a quick e-mail and then toss the letter. The idea is to only touch each piece of paper once.

T = TOSS IT OUT.

If you've looked at some information and you don't need to keep it or act on it, simply toss it. Don't keep it "just in case."

Getting to Work

Now that you have a simple tool, it is time for action. Take the FAT idea and make a clean sweep of your paper clutter. Once that's done and you feel successful organizing your papers, you will be more likely to tackle another area in your life. For instance, you might want to select another category of items to re-organize. You could choose your CD or Video collection, your kitchen cabinets, your garage, or your clothing. For instance, if you choose to sort out and re-arrange your wardrobe, clothes could be sorted into Keep, Toss, Sell in a tag sale, or Donate.

Oftentimes, if you sell items you no longer need, you'll have money from the tag sale to be used to purchase much needed equipment for keeping things organized. You'll want to purchase plastic boxes, storage shelves, bookcases, etc. You can't stay organized without adequate space and a system for storing and retrieving items.

Maintain

The key to staying organized is to maintain the new pattern you've established. Here is a good rule of thumb: "If you get something new, discard something old." If you haven't used something in two years, you're very unlikely to need it, so toss it. Many people save things "just in case," and then forget what they've stored, can't find it, or discover it is too out-dated to use when they do need it. Most people never miss the things they've keep in their Rental Storage Units! Oftentimes, storage is merely a delay tactic that is costly and ineffective.

Psychology & Clutter

Why is a psychologist talking to you about getting rid of clutter and organizing your life? We all react psychologically to our environment. The environment affects our mood and our peace of mind. When our environment is in order, we feel overall, more comfortable and relaxed. Understand that a cluttered environment creates stress and a feeling of dis-ease. We function more effectively when our environment is organized and peaceful.

Our home environment as equivalent to water in a fish tank. If the water isn't kept clean and the pH balanced, the fish won't be healthy. We need to realize that there are many things impacting our emotional health. Our home environment is one aspect, if organized, clean and tidy, that can literally improve our sense of well-being and ability to concentrate. This can also create a positive ripple effect on other areas of our lives. Stop

rationalizing your cluttered lifestyle and remember, “A cluttered room is akin to a clogged drain.”

Also, if emotional problems still prevent you from taking these first few steps to overhauling your clutter, you might want to seek professional help from a psychologist. Some people suffer from compulsive hoarding, a form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) that requires the help of a mental health expert.

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