
WebMD: Clutter Control: Is Too Much 'Stuff' Draining You?

Get your clutter under control, and your attitude and health just may improve, too.

By [Kathleen Doheny](#)

The magazine rack is overflowing, the dining room table holds a week's worth of mail, the stairs are an obstacle course, and you're pretty sure it's official: You're in dire need of clutter control!

Having too much stuff can not only drain and frustrate you, it can make it difficult to get things done. That's why WebMD went to five organizational experts for their top advice on what *you* can do to control that clutter.

Clutter, Defined

What one person calls clutter another calls collections or treasures, so the first step is to figure out what qualifies as clutter. "Other people can't decide what is clutter for you," says Cynthia Townley Ewer of Richland, Wash., the editor of the web site Organized Home.

Peter Walsh, an organizational expert and former host of The Learning Channel's *Clean Sweep* show, divides clutter into two general types. "Memory" clutter is stuff that reminds us of important events, like old school programs or newspaper clippings. "Someday" clutter refers to items you won't toss because you feel you might need them someday.

"It's about balance," Walsh says of clutter control. "If you have so much stuff it drags you into the past or pulls you into the future, you can't live in the present."

Clutter, Control, and Your Health

Professional organizers who are called to cluttered homes and offices say their clients use the same words, over and over, to describe their reaction to the mess: their energy is drained, they can't find things, and it's beginning to interfere with crucial parts of life -- such as getting to work on time or navigating staircases.

"A lot of people express that they are overwhelmed," says Lynne Gilberg, a professional organizer in West Los Angeles, Calif. "They become nonfunctional and nonproductive," she says. That's when they call her in desperation.

"Clutter is bad for your physical and [mental health](#)," Gilberg says. Too much clutter can be a fire hazard. Dust, mold, and animal dander that collect in cluttered homes are all bad for [allergies and asthma](#).

"When people see clutter, they use language like 'suffocating,' and 'I can't breathe,' agrees Walsh. Clutter can be a physical manifestation of mental health issues, Walsh tells WebMD. Those overwhelmed with "memory" clutter may have an undue preoccupation with things in the past and become depressed.

Those who can't toss out items because they worry they will need them may be too anxious, he says.

Clutter may even be making you fat, says Walsh, who wrote *Does This Clutter Make My Butt Look Fat?* after he noticed an association between the amount of clutter people have & their excess [weight](#). The common denominator? A life of consumption: too much stuff, too much to eat.

Clutter Control: Start With a Vision

Instead of handing his clients a to-do list and a schedule to get the clutter in control, Walsh first asks his clients to ask themselves: "What is the [vision](#) for the life I want?" That becomes the criteria for what you decide to keep.

For example, do you want the bedroom to be a calm, restful place to spend time with your partner? Then you may need to put the computer or the TV in another room. Instead of asking, "What do I need for the house?" ask "What do I want from this space?" suggests Walsh. You'll soon figure out what's clutter and what's not.

Clutter Control: The Decision Dilemma

Work on your ability to make a decision, and you're on your way to clutter control, Townley Ewer tells WebMD. "What clutter is, is ducking decisions or refusing to make them," she says. So when the mail comes in, for example, decide right then to keep a piece or toss it.

"Do bills online to cut down on clutter," suggests Ewer, who wrote *Houseworks: Cut the Clutter, Speed the Cleaning and Calm the Chaos*. Toss old magazines, and [allay](#) your [anxiety](#) knowing you can look up an article online or even trek to the library if you really need it later.

Basically, make a pact with yourself. When something comes in, something must go out. If you buy new clothes, part with some old ones. Ewer did that to combat her "twinsset habit." She vowed that if she bought one twinsset, one of her favorite clothing items, she would donate two old ones. "Once I started doing that, I stopped buying them," she says.

Clutter Control: A Little at a Time

Cluttered clients often think they have to clean the entire house in a fell swoop, but clutter control isn't all or nothing. "Create a pocket of order," suggests Cindy Glovinsky, MSW, a psychotherapist and professional organizer in Ann Arbor, Mich., who wrote *Making Peace with the Things in Your Life*.

The key is to start small: Tackle one room or even one bookshelf at a time. Cleaning the clutter from drawers? "Don't dump the whole drawer," says Gilberg, "it's too overwhelming." Instead, take out items that can be thrown away, then things you can donate.

Deciding what makes the cut can be tough, but making a list of parameters can help. For instance, when cleaning closets, you might decide to throw out anything stained or torn, to donate clothing you haven't worn for six months, and to organize the rest.

Once you've learned how to get rid of the clutter, shift to maintenance mode, organizers advise. Make an appointment with yourself for clutter maintenance, Gilberg says. "Literally write it on the calendar." If you keep your calendar electronically, enter clutter control as a recurring appointment.

Clutter Control: The Benefits

As people start to control the clutter, they begin to take better care of themselves, Gilberg tells WebMD. Their attitude improves, maybe because they're not rushing around so much looking for car keys buried in rubble or bills that are misplaced.

"As people clean up, their energy seems to rise," Glovinsky agrees. And "once clutter is cleaned up, some people begin to work on other issues." One of her clients, a professor unhappy with her job, got a better position once the clutter was under control. Another, so [overweight](#) she was housebound, joined an online self-help group after the clutter was cleared away.

"I think sometimes when people begin to see they can have an effect on their lives in one area ... then they begin to take action in other areas of their lives," Glovinsky says.

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