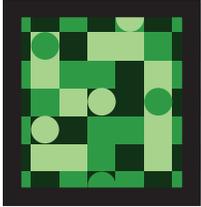


Healthy Homes: Dealing with Household Clutter

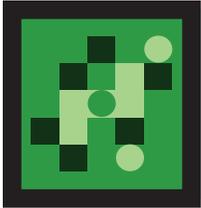


What is Clutter?



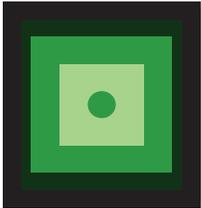
Clutter is a collection of things lying around in an untidy mess, usually because we don't have a designated place for it. It can be all kinds of different stuff that people buy, receive and/or collect over the years. Clutter can accumulate anywhere – it can start in one small space, like a dining room table, and eventually spread to take over a whole room, or in severe cases, a whole house. Some prime sources of clutter include paper (mail, bills, etc.), books & magazines, toys & games, hobby materials, shoes & clothes, tools & hardware, cleaning supplies, and laundry.

Why Should You Be Concerned About Clutter?



Household clutter has a big impact on your health and quality of life. It can be so out of control that people fall and injure themselves because they cannot reach things or maneuver around piles of junk. This can be especially hazardous for elderly people or people with limited mobility. Most people spend 90% of their time indoors – a lot of which is spent at home. Home is the place you start and end your day, the place where you spend time with family and friends. Research has indicated that a clean house can positively affect your physical and mental health. By cutting down on “stuff,” you make room to socialize with the people who matter to you.

Does Clutter Really Affect Indoor Air Quality?



Yes – piles of clutter that are left undisturbed for long periods of time can accumulate dust, dirt and allergens, including pet hair and dander, pollen, dust mites and other pests. Mold can also develop undetected if the area is damp. If someone smokes cigarettes in a cluttered home, the walls and furnishings can become tinged with yellow and smell of smoke. This is especially hazardous for people with asthma, children, and the elderly.

Do You Have a Problem with Clutter?

If you think you may have a problem with household clutter, ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ Do you have to move things around or step over things to get around your house?
- ▶ Are tables and counters filled with so many items that you have few (if any) free spaces?
- ▶ Are your drawers, closets and other storage areas overflowing with “stuff”?
- ▶ Do you have piles of papers that you plan to sort through but never do?
- ▶ Do you lose things and have to search for them several times a week?
- ▶ Do you keep things in a storage facility on an ongoing basis?
- ▶ Are dirty dishes and empty drink cans left out for more than 24 hours?
- ▶ Are you ashamed to invite company over to your house because of clutter?
- ▶ Are your closets full of clothes and shoes that you no longer wear?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, you have a clutter problem! Read on for steps you can take to de-clutter your home.

Take Charge and Clear Your Clutter

Assemble your very own Clutter Emergency Kit – stock it with large garbage bags, a broom and dust pan, a vacuum cleaner, storage boxes, a marker and labels, multipurpose and glass cleaners, a mop, paper towels, and laundry detergent. Why the cleaning products? After you clear the clutter, you will need to clean the newly exposed surfaces. You can also use different kinds of containers to help with your sorting – anything from boxes to different sizes of plastic containers or bags will work.

Start by sorting items into separate piles: keep, trash (or recycle), donate, sell, or uncertain. Experts estimate that people only use about 20% of the items in their home. This means the other 80% is potential clutter. Take a good look at your “stuff” and be honest with yourself about what you really use. Only keep things that you need and will use or that have a strong personal meaning to you. Don’t confuse things with memories. Our memories of people and events in our past will be with us long after the “stuff” is gone.

- ▶ **KEEP** – put items you will keep in this pile. Sort like items together so they will be easier to put away. Create organized centers for things like cleaning products, office supplies, cooking, makeup, hardware, etc. The keep pile may be divided into two separate categories in some cases:
 - ▶ Things to keep and put away now OR
 - ▶ Things that are broken or need repair before they can be put away.
If you haven’t repaired a “keep” item in two months, dispose of it.
- ▶ **GIVE AWAY** – put items you will give to friends or donate to charity in this box.
- ▶ **TRASH/RECYCLE** – put items that need to be thrown away in trash bags or recycling containers.
- ▶ **SELL** – put items that can be sold for a profit on websites (like eBay or Craigslist), at consignment shops, or yard sales in this box.
- ▶ **UNCERTAIN** – put items that you are unsure about in this box. If you have enough room, keep the box for 6 months. If you haven’t needed anything in the box after 6 months, get rid of it.

Be sure to deal with sorted items as soon as possible after de-cluttering. For example, take bags of trash and recycling to the recycling center and give items to friends, the Good Will, or Salvation Army. If you are selling items on a website, list them as soon as possible. If you need to have a yard sale, try to plan to have it within a couple of weeks. Donate the stuff that doesn’t sell online or at your yard sale.

Maintenance

To maintain your clutter free home, the whole family has to understand that everyone needs to pick up after themselves. Doing a little cleaning and straightening every day can save you the hassle of going through this whole process again. Use the 60 second rule – if it takes no longer than 60 seconds to put something away, then go ahead and put it away instead of laying it down for “the time being.” Make a chore chart and assign age appropriate jobs for everyone in the house, so everyone knows that they are expected to do their part to keep things clutter free. Stay firm and don’t do anyone else’s share of the work or one of two things will happen – you will always do their share of the work or the clutter will slowly build back up. Remember, it takes two weeks minimum for a new chore to become a routine.

References

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