



THE ART OF TIDYING UP

how to de-clutter your life

KIM CARRUTHERS

when the 'stuff' of ordinary life gets in the way,
it's time to call Kim Carruthers

SUSAN WYNDHAM, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

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introduction

You are not alone — you just feel that way right now. Sometimes it seems like everyone else lives in an immaculate home. TV programs never show a mess unless it is written into the script as ‘the night after the party’. Real estate advertisements show acres of clear floor space and gleaming glass. We all know someone who manages to raise a large brood of talented, smiling children and unruly pets while still living in a show home.

If you feel that you are the only one with a clutter problem, perhaps it is because only the people who live in clean, tidy homes actually feel confident enough to invite you over.

who are clutterers?

Most clutterers are people who have the rest of their lives under control. They hold down responsible jobs, walk out of the house in the morning looking well-groomed and get their kids to school every day with a sports uniform and lunch in their backpacks.

What no one sees is the incredible effort needed to do that when car keys vanish under piles of laundry, homework is ‘somewhere in that pile’, and making lunches requires a dash

to the shops because there is no bread.

Why do we keep things when they make our life harder?

Many of us were brought up in an era when space was plentiful but possessions were expensive. Did the house in which you grew up have a garage, attic, spare room or shed? More and more families are now living in high-rise accommodation, with limited storage space and no garage.

Chances are you started your life with a mind schooled to store things yet now you live in an environment where you have nowhere to store them.

Often it is the **arrival of children** that turns this attitude into a real clutter problem. Stored baby clothes, toys, maternity clothes, pre-baby work clothes and ‘will I ever get my body back?’ clothes all mount up and there isn’t the time (or energy) to manage them.

Learning de-cluttering skills will help you if:

- You **aren’t sure** how to go about de-cluttering. You start a ‘small’ job and it morphs into a major disaster.
- You are a **perfectionist** — you can’t start a job unless you know you can do it perfectly.
- You’ve been raised to be **thrifty**, and haven’t noticed that today it is more expensive to store than to sell and buy again if needed.
- You want to keep **good records** but don’t know what to keep or for how long, so keep everything just in case.
- You want to be **environmentally friendly**, but haven’t figured out that it is greener to share, borrow, exchange or rent.

EMOTIONAL CLUTTER

Stop and think hard about whether you may fall into the next category even a little bit.

Emotional clutterers share some of these characteristics:

- **Depression** — robs your energy and makes you too fuzzy to choose between what stays and what goes.
- **Anxiety** — you have a constant knot in your stomach, and it takes little to overwhelm you. Making decisions about clutter feels overwhelming.
- **Chronic illness** — it is hard to keep on top of anything if just getting out of bed and dressed is an exhausting or painful effort.
- **Anger** — you've been left holding the baby, literally or metaphorically, and are so mad you could scream. You are utterly fed up with being a life support system for everyone else.
- **The unhelpful spouse** — this is a frequent theme with clutterers. One of my students put it really well: 'I realised I could either spend the rest of our marriage walking around behind my spouse and children, picking up after them and being constantly angry, or give up on living in a tidy house. I chose to let go, which I guess saved my marriage if nothing else. But now I've let it go too far.'
- **Bereavement**—particularly an unexpected bereavement. Throwing away a letter or photo is much harder when you know it is the last one you will ever have from that person.
- **Attachment issues** — perhaps you didn't get a lot of love or affection growing up. Shopping and possessions

make you feel more secure.

- **Uncertainty** — a marriage you expected to last forever has gone or your children are leaving the nest. You sense that the future is uncertain and fear it may not be as good as the past.

Getting help to deal with the issue, and manage the emotional or physical pain, can help you let go of the clutter. Letting go of the clutter will in turn help you manage the pain.

Your GP is a great starting point. Even if you just feel consistently 'blah', run it past your doctor. Something like anaemia or a thyroid problem could be robbing you of the energy you need to de-clutter.

HOARDING

I often get asked about hoarding and squalor, and how it differs from clutter.

My quick answer is 'clutterers want less, but don't know how to do it, hoarders want to keep what they've got and get more'. Hoarding is a serious mental condition and needs professional medical help.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Any 'home' photo you see in a real estate advertisement or lifestyle magazine is styled. Furniture has been removed, cleaners have done their magic and no one is actually 'living' in the house while that is going on.

Let's make our expectations realistic of what a home should be.

When people hear that I am a de-clutterer the automatic reaction is 'your house must be immaculate'. I wish! One of my friends expressed it perfectly: 'Our house is no show home — a family lives here, and a family that is really bad at putting things away at that...'

But, however humble our home may be, it *works*. There are clean clothes when we need them, and the kids can find glue and sticky-tape to do their homework projects. Their toys may be a little dusty on occasion, but we can find a cleanish spot on the floor to sit down and play with them.

'excuse my dust'

DOROTHY PARKER

The beauty of having less clutter is that the house gets messy more slowly, and it takes less time to fix it afterwards.

The key thing is that I feel in control of the house, and am meeting most of the needs of most of its inhabitants most days.

If control of your home sounds like heaven to you right now, head on to the next chapter to start regaining it.



towards a new mindset

‘ the best way to keep children at home is to make
the home atmosphere pleasant, and let the air out
of the tires ’

DOROTHY PARKER

Before we move on to how to de-clutter your house have a
think about some of the ideas you may have been brought up
with.

SABOTAGING IDEAS

These ideas may be sabotaging your de-cluttering efforts.

WASTE NOT, WANT NOT –
AKA ‘STORE IT IN CASE YOU NEED IT’

Things were different in our parents’ and grandparents’ era.

Phrases like ‘keeping the old one for spare’ made more sense
when machines regularly broke down.

‘Waste not, want not’ is still good advice, but what we need to
save now is time and space, not things.

Reassure the little voice in your head that you have everything you need except time and space, and that by de-cluttering you are gaining more of both of those.

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

We hold on to things thinking, 'someone I know might want that'.

My grandparents had dozens of cousins, aunts, uncles and other relatives living nearby. It made sense (and was easy) to pass something on within the family; someone they knew would need that crib, table or hand-me-down dress within the next month or two.

Today we might have a couple of cousins, and possibly a sibling or two. There is little chance of one of them needing (or wanting) a hand-me-down crib or other piece of furniture in the next ten years, let alone months.

Yes, it is nice to pass it on to someone you know, but it means you are holding on to a lot of stuff for a long time.

Charity now begins at the local charity shop.

Reassure the little voice that your possessions are going to people who need them.

KEEP IT FOR A SPECIAL OCCASION

How much china, glassware and linen and how many sets of towels do you have stored in a top cupboard or bottom drawer for a special occasion?

I hate to be the one to break this to you, but the Queen probably isn't popping around for tea any time soon. Today is

a special occasion. Treat it as one.

BUY IT WHILE IT IS ON SALE

We've grown up being told that thrift is a virtue (and it is). Sadly, this has given us the idea that we should buy anything if it is on sale.

How often do we end up buying things we don't need, just because the label says 20 per cent off?

Throughout this book we are going to focus on planning your buying, and buying to your plan.

Nothing is a good deal if you didn't need it in the first place, don't have the space to store it until you do need it, or need the money more in the meantime.

Spend a little more money on items by buying them to a plan: you will save a lot more by not buying items you don't need. You will also end up with possessions you need and love, rather than making do with something just because it was on sale.

Reassure the little voice that you will have enough money to buy the things you need when you actually need them.

A GOOD WOMAN IS A DOMESTIC GODDESS

Or in the less-than-encouraging words of a friend's mother-in-law: 'In my day, we took pride in our housekeeping.'

Sometimes it seems like a vicious circle. The clutter at home is horrible, so we escape the house, and while we are out we engage in a spot of comfort shopping, which makes the problem worse.

These days a 'good woman' is expected to get an education, get a job, volunteer, keep fit, look great, take care of the kids and keep the house looking like a real estate shoot. Something's got to give!

If you were given this book by your spouse it is time to take note that the clutter is making them unhappy. Let me point out that de-cluttering (or even a professional de-clutterer) is much cheaper than a divorce lawyer.

If you have the funds for it, and are holding off because you feel like you should be able to do it all yourself, I strongly recommend hiring a cleaner. It is a huge incentive to know that once you've de-cluttered a room someone else will give it a good spring clean for you.

Reassure the little voice that you are a perfectly good person even if you do have a messy house.

' I hate housework! You make the beds, you do the dishes and six months later you have to start all over again '

JOAN RIVERS

THIS PRODUCT WILL CHANGE MY LIFE OR
' I CAN BUY MY WAY TO HAPPINESS '

Advertising is insidious. If we are to believe the lifestyle photograph in the catalogue or the image on the front of the box then this kitchen appliance will have us dancing in the kitchen with a tall, dark handsome man. A new garment will make us look amazing. A vase will transform our home.

The reality is that things won't change our lifestyle nor will they make us feel better. And how many appliances can your kitchen shelves actually hold?

Sadly, recreational (ie unplanned) shopping only makes us poorer and more cluttered. I want you to *stop* shopping and take up something less cluttering and more personally enriching. Walking is great for the mind and the body. The online pinboard Pinterest (www.pinterest.com) is a fabulous way of collecting things without the clutter or the financial consequences of buying them.

And please stop taking your kids out recreational shopping. It creates a clutter habit for the next generation. Find something else you can enjoy doing together.

REAL ESTATE LISTINGS AND HOME STYLE MAGAZINES

No matter how hard we try, our house is never going to look like a real estate shoot.

In the words of a friend of mine who recently sold a house: 'Before a viewing I rushed around hiding everything in what furniture we had left, then sprinted out the door with the baby under my arm and sat in the car in my business suit on the phone to my husband crying about how it was all too hard. Later, I was horrified to discover that a woman up the road with a newborn had been brought to the viewing by her mother-in-law to show her that it was quite possible to have a baby *and* a tidy house. I wish I'd known that at the time so I could have invited the poor woman over to witness the usual scenes of chaos that certainly never made it into the real estate agent's photos.'

Of course it *is* possible to have children and a tidy house. Just

not for more than thirty seconds at a time.

Reassure the little voice that your house is a home and should not look like a magazine photo.

Mother-in-laws are getting a bad rap in this chapter, so let me take a moment to say that I have a lovely mother-in-law.

GARAGE SALES AND CHARITY SHOPS

There are two dangers here.

It is a bargain — Yes, that toy is an amazing find for two dollars, but what your kids actually *need* is space (not clutter) in which to play with the toys they already have, and your time to sit down and play with them. Buying yet another toy, no matter how cheap it is, won't meet either of those needs.

Reassure the little voice that by not buying it you are getting a de-cluttering bargain.

It won't be here next week — It doesn't matter — if you really needed it you'd already have bought it.

Reassure the little voice that between the internet and yellow pages you will always be able to find an item again if you change your mind about needing it.

CURB-SIDE TREASURE AND OTHER 'RESCUED' ITEMS

I know the old chair sitting out on the grass verge is too good to let go to waste. And it would look lovely with a coat of paint and new upholstery. But let's face facts:

- It won't go to waste if you leave it there to be picked up by someone who really needs it.

- You've already got half a dozen rescued items sitting around which you haven't got around to painting.
- You don't need more chairs.

Leave it where it is. You will have forgotten all about it by tomorrow.

Reassure the little voice that when you need a chair you will be able to find one, either on the verge, via freecycle (www.freecycle.org), through a friend, or in a shop.

I MIGHT NEED THAT AGAIN

Yes, you might. But could you find it again in all your clutter anyway?

Occasionally you are going to give away or throw away something that you need again. The cost of buying it again is nothing compared to the cost of being cluttered.

Reassure the little voice that mostly you won't find yourself in this situation, and if you do, it is ok to go out and repurchase what you need.

GREEN REASONS

The environmental footprint of an item is created when the item is made. Holding on to something you don't need doesn't reduce that footprint, in fact it means another item (and footprint) is created for someone who could instead have been using yours.

The green solution is:

- Donate, share or recycle what you can.

- Dispose thoughtfully of what you can't.
- Avoid future purchases through buying secondhand, borrowing, hiring or renting.

Another form of green clutter occurs when you want to dispose of something properly, but haven't got around to finding out how. The key is to find out how to dispose of it *before* you store it! Call your local council and find out when the eWaste or chemical collection days are.

Reassure the little green voice that you are being environmentally friendly by parting with these things responsibly.

STORAGE

One of the first things I hear at any of my clutter courses is, 'I need more storage.'

My students are surprised when I tell them how lucky they are not to have storage. Storage leads to more clutter that you need to deal with later.

To de-clutter means to *get rid of* possessions, not store them more cleverly. You can't store your way out of your clutter problem.

Remind the little voice that storing clutter only postpones the problem.

WHY DE-CLUTTER?

Before we start thinking about *how* to de-clutter, I want you to think about the benefits of having less.

De-cluttering is good for your health:

- A de-cluttered fridge and pantry and established shopping system results in more healthy, home-cooked meals.
- You will be less stressed.
- De-cluttering helps you avoid falls, fires, ceiling collapses and poisoning.

De-cluttering makes you look better:

- You will find clean well-matched clothes in a de-cluttered wardrobe.
- When you aren't wasting time finding your car keys you will have time to do your hair and put on makeup.

You will have more money and less stress:

- You will avoid late fees.
- You find receipts to claim from tax, work and health insurance.
- You will replace things less often.
- You will spend less on food.
- You will spend less as your mindset moves from 'I should get it while it is on special' to 'I don't need this right now.'

You will feel better living in a calmer environment:

- You will have less 'I bought it I should use it' guilt.
- Your life will be calmer when you can find the things you do need.

- You will have more time to enjoy yourself when you have less to clean and maintain.
- You will have more space to use and enjoy what you do have.
- You will feel good about having friends over.
- You will enjoy your children more.

Being organised and clutter-free gives you:

- A greener lifestyle, through reduced consumption and increased recycling/donation.
- A feeling of altruism that comes from donating the things you don't need to others.
- A sense of peace and feeling in control of what is going on in your home.