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Stressed? Clear up the mess

Katherine Kizilos

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There's a panic that comes when the stuff in your house is out of your control. Symptoms vary. Maybe you don't pay your bills on time (because you can't find them). Maybe your clothes now live on the floor. Or maybe the house looks fine but you're too scared to enter the shed, the garage or the spare room.

Other people's mess is a comedy, but being a victim of your own stuff isn't much fun. Professional organiser MaryAnne Bennie calls chaos Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome. Her clients sometimes feel ashamed of what they have let their homes become. They tell her: "I am terrified that someone will come and knock on the door and see the state I am in."

Many of her clients are high-achieving professional women who despair at their inability to keep their private space humming as efficiently as their work space where they have the support of colleagues and personal assistants. Bennie says: "If you think about being organised and disorganised, that's one continuum. And being good and bad is another continuum. People judge themselves by how organised they are but people are not their stuff."

Bennie became an organiser in 2002 after working as an academic for 12 years when she taught marketing and co-ordinated an international business degree at RMIT. She says she saw hundreds of students and noticed how "the ones who weren't organised were the ones who got derailed". She saw first hand "how being organised impacts on success. I saw lots of clients held back by clutter."

"Being organised is a platform. From that platform you can do whatever you want. If you are not organised you can't keep up."

Along with the other organisers quoted in this article, Bennie emphasises that she does not believe in imposing a standard of order and tidiness on others. Rather she helps clients work out what they want and develop systems and habits to keep their paperwork, their pantry or their wardrobe manageable.

The changing make-up of society, including changing of gender roles, has played a part in our battle with clutter. Bennie says while men and women once had clear roles, "now no one does anything. It's very fluid and on the spur and very rushed. My parents and earlier generations - they had regular routines." The contemporary two-income household is not only busier, it also consumes more. Clutter becomes crisis when you find yourself buying a new torch (or suitcase or stapler) because you can't find the ones you already have. In January this year Josh Fear, of the Australia Institute, released a paper, *Stuff Happens*, which looked at the extent of clutter in the nation's homes and the stress it caused. Clutter was defined as "too many items that you rarely or never use". In a national online survey of 1002 respondents, only 12% said they had no areas or rooms that were uncluttered "meaning that fully 88% of people had at least one cluttered room in the house". Clutter was most likely found in the spare room, followed by cupboards and the garage. The bigger the home, the more clutter there was in it. Four in 10 respondents said they felt "anxious, guilty or depressed" about the clutter, with women more likely to succumb to these feelings.

Fear also refers to a 2004 study by the Australia Institute which found "the average Australian household wasted \$1226 in that year on items that were purchased but never used. This equates to \$10.5 billion across the nation - or more than Australian governments spent on universities and roads over the same period. Fear was assisted in his research by organiser Lissanne Oliver whose book *Sorted! The ultimate guide to organising your life - once and for all* was released last year. "We are not taught how to organise and declutter," she says. "A big part of my role is to train people, skill them up a little bit."

It's exactly like getting fat. You just add a little bit to your house every day. All that stuff starts to add up, then you get overwhelmed, it gets worse and you don't have people over."



Efficiency dividend ... get organised before clutter becomes a crisis.

Photo: Marina Oliphant

Oliver sees many clients with "decision fatigue" - a state in which they do not know what to keep and what to toss. She helps them make choices. "A lot of it is about fear, the fear of letting go. I try and help clients understand that much of what they own is just stuff. It's not who they are and the majority of it is replaceable." Oliver is keen to dispel the idea that she's a perfectionist "undie folder". "I am a problem solver," she says. "I make the decisions easier. I fix things that are bugging them. It's a fascinating job. Every client is different. I embrace the diversity of my clients' lives."

Jacquie Wise, who runs a CAE short course, Declutter Your Life, and also works as a life coach and counsellor, says she takes a holistic approach to the problem. "It's important for people to understand why they have clutter. It's partly emotional, partly bad habits." Her rule of thumb is "if you love it, use it or need it, then it's not clutter".

And for people who are worried about throwing away too much, she suggests packing an "undecided box". "Keep it sealed in an out-of-the-way place, just date it on the outside, but make no note of the contents. If after one year you can't remember what's in it and have missed nothing, get rid of it without opening it!" Next week

How to clean up your act with papers and photos; and in Annie Lawson's battle with clutter, find out who won.

My battle with clutter on the home front

Annie Lawson

I'm told that observing household clutter in its raw form is necessary for a professional organiser to draw up a battle plan. Even so, I spend an hour furtively tidying up the three-bedroom, semi-detached house I share with two messy toddlers and a (moderately messy) husband before Justine Law arrives.

After an hour of forensic investigation, Law, who runs the personal organisation company Domestica, identifies several "clutter hot spots" that my cleaning has failed to mask.

She picks up a teddy in one of the boy's rooms and a chewed, rotten apple rolls out from the pile of soft toys on to the floor.

Clearly I need help. Our unrenovated home is cluttered enough to raise my stress levels. The living room looks like a public library - the centrepiece being a beige filing cabinet, circa 1978. "These are graveyards for paper," Law says, opening one of the drawers stuffed with tax returns, electricity bills and group certificates dating back 10 years. It is known as a "fat" filing cabinet in professional decluttering jargon. "This is among the worst I've seen," she says.

I fear our house is teetering on the bad end of the clutter scale. Open one of my husband's drawers and you'll find a scrunched tie, a door handle, a squash ball and old telecommunications cords. Our bedroom floor is topographically textured by dirty socks, old receipts, Christmas wrapping paper and shoes. But Law assures me she has seen worse.

I'm not totally blameless. The pile of washing in the corner of our bedroom keeps growing, as does my fear of spending two hours sorting, folding and putting away clothes. The amount of clutter our boys have brought into our lives has made me less tolerant of mess and craving the sort of minimalism achieved by some of my friends. But to work. Law opens the bathroom cabinet and surveys the mounds of sun screen, shampoo, shoe polish and razors. She suggests grouping together items such as hair products, moisturisers and make-up in separate baskets to avoid mess.

Law pulls out all the toys and spends three hours sorting them out: large plastic toys are placed in a chest, smaller cars, trucks and puppets are put in small, accessible baskets, and books, puzzles and wooden toys are grouped together on shelves. It is exhilarating having a stranger rifle through your stuff. I now feel the urge to rearrange the entire house.

You need to declutter before you reorganise and beautify each room," she says. "It can be intimidating, so start off with a bedside table or a kitchen drawer and work through each room in your own time. We are not looking for showroom-house minimalism, but you need to be able to find things and have systems that work in your space."

Law, 35, started her business four years ago, after a stint as a nanny for a British family in London. She charges \$70 an hour for a minimum of three hours. "I have worked as a housekeeper, cook and a personal assistant, all jobs that require good organising skills. I like the difference helping someone through the process of organising can make to people's daily lives," she says.

Living in St Kilda means we don't have the luxury of a double garage or an attic to store our stuff. Instead, our garden shed is crammed with several sets of soup bowls, martini glasses, a broken microwave, and a damaged jumping castle. There are piles of obsolete electronics, not to mention several fans and vacuum cleaners that no longer work.

Law insists the (working) vacuum cleaner, a kids' circus tent and boxes of alcohol stored under the dining table be moved into the shed, even though there is less than 30 centimetres of free floor space. In fact, she says rearranging the shed and throwing out about a third of its contents will restore order to our lives.

What about the unsightly, beige cabinet in our living room, which is sucking our will to live? "Get rid of it." She makes it sound so easy.

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