



“Hollow hands clasp ludicrous possessions because they are links in the chain of life. If it breaks, they are truly lost” (Dichter, 1964).

Rise Out of the Clutter and Regain your Sense of Self

By Andrea Lee

Am I losing my mind? I’m overwhelmed, but Carl doesn’t seem bothered. I can’t motivate – don’t even know where to start, I can’t focus, I can’t sleep. Everywhere I look, I feel assaulted by stuff. It’s a constant reminder of how I am failing our family. When did this mess become my life?

Preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods has been escalating aggressively since the end of the second world war. ([Higgs 2021](#)) The advent of television gave slick Madison Avenue Ad men, men like Ernest Dichter, an invitation into the psyche of everyday citizens. Their subtle but powerful messages, coupled with advances in technology that brought down manufacturing costs, set the American middle class off on a game, best described by Malcolm Forbes as, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” Yet like all games, there are winners; and there are losers.

“Contemporary US households have more possession per household than any society in global history” ([Arnold, 2017](#)). Clutter has damaging effects on our identity, our mind, and our body. It negatively impacts our relationships. Developing cleaning and decluttering skills offers a protective defense against these undesirable outcomes.

We derive a sense of self from our homes and the things we own.

There is a growing body of scientific research into the harmful effects of clutter. An entire branch of psychology, environmental psychology, explores the relationship between humans and their external world. “Our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities” ([Belk, 1988](#)). This construct has evolved into the theory of an extended-self, the “definition of self, created by external objects with which one surrounds oneself” (Solomon, 1994, p. 620). So, it is understandable that people feel deeply attached to the things they own. When the things we own overwhelm us, we can lose sight of our true identity.

Deriving a sense of self from the outer world clarifies the understanding; that disorder and chaos in our home, our most intimate space, has a powerful effect on how we feel about ourselves. There is a growing paradigm that home is our sanctuary away from the world, but the truth is our home is a “living, breathing thing” ([Grosvenor, 2019](#)) that we shape intentionally to achieve our purposes. “Thoughtful design and visual storytelling can have a transformational effect on mood, happiness, success, a feeling of belonging, and an overall sense of well-being” (Grosvenor, 2019).

When we fail to identify home “as a place that makes us feel safe and secure, and that provides solitude from the external world” ([Swanson, 2022](#)) it can take on a “dark side” ([Roster, 2016](#)). The supportive qualities derived from positive place attachment and the extended self are compromised. “Possession clutter has a strong negative impact on psychological home and perceived well-being” (Roster, 2016).

Research shows that uncluttered and organized environments make people less irritable, less distracted, more productive, and better at processing information.

Research conducted at [Princeton University Neuroscience Institute in 2011](#) shows that human brains function more effectively in ordered environments. Persistent visual cues of disorganization deplete our cognitive capacity, lowering our ability to focus and process information. Essentially clutter distracts the mind, making it unable to manage information as successfully as it would in a clean, organized, and tranquil environment. The Princeton researchers used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and other tools to map how the brain responded to organized and disorganized stimuli during task performance. Their research produced solid conclusions. Decluttering the home and office increased focus, information processing, and productivity. Clearing clutter also lowered irritability.

In 2016, Canadian research scientists found that the visual distraction of clutter can overload and reduce our visual working memory. The visual working memory system (vWMS) prioritizes and stores a finite amount of visual information so it can be quickly accessed to perform a task. The findings are particularly relevant to people diagnosed with ADHD, autism, and other developmental coordination disorders. Poor visual working memory performance links to these conditions. The total capacity of the vWMS and its ability to ignore or suppress distraction is highly individualized, existing on a spectrum. While some “high-capacity individuals can actively suppress distractors, low-capacity individuals cannot suppress them in time to prevent distractors from capturing attention” ([Gasper, 2016](#)). However, cluttered and disorganized

environments challenge the vWMS of all individuals, even if some are capable of ignoring distraction. It is a system-wide stressor you can avoid.

Clutter affects our physical health.

UCLA archeologists undertook a massive study that meticulously documented everything that 32 ordinary Californian middle-class families kept in their homes over ten years. Researchers sought to understand how people use their homes and interact with their things. What they found was staggering. Clutter was an overwhelming problem, especially for mothers, who showed marked increases in their stress hormone levels. Men were not as impacted by the burden of too many belongings. Arnold's book [*Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors*](#) is available online.

“The way people describe their homes may reflect whether their time at home feels restorative or stressful” ([Saxbe, 2009](#)). In this linguistic analysis, researchers coded words used to describe homes as either stressful or restorative. Participants that used more stressful words, such as clutter and unfinished, when describing their homes had sustained levels of the [stress hormone cortisol](#) throughout the day. Those that used restorative language had sharper decreases.

We now understand how clutter causes stress and recognize that stress disrupts our bodily systems. We know that “dysregulation of the stress system... in association with potent and/or chronic stress can markedly disrupt the body homeostasis leading to... a spectrum of clinical manifestations” ([Tsigos, 2020](#)). The consistent activation of the fight, flight, or freeze response can trigger changes in several bodily processes, including the immune system, gastrointestinal system, and blood sugar regulation. Blood sugar irregularities are concerning for diabetics struggling to control their levels. Many theories attribute stress to the development of diabetes, but additional research is needed.

Excessive clutter and stress deregulate your digestion, but they also contribute to eating more and choosing less healthful foods! Research scientists at Cornell's Food and Brand lab found that the more chaotic the kitchen environment was, the more the research subjects ate. The study showed that an “in-control mindset condition” ([Vartanian, 2016](#)) could “buffer against the vulnerability” (Vartanian, 2016) to over-eat.

An interesting study from Indiana University found that people who live in tidy homes are generally healthier than those that do not. However, the study failed to assess if the act of living in a tidy home fostered more activity or if keeping a home tidy was responsible for the

measures increase. The study's author asked, "Are the types of people who take care of their bodies the same types of people who take care of their homes" ([Keith, 2013](#))?

Restorative sleep is critical to good health, and a clean and tidy bedroom is supportive of quality rest. Sleep problems, such as difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep are more likely when you sleep in a cluttered room ([Thacher, 2015](#)). Clutter and dirt increase stress and stress is the enemy of sleep. Air quality including pollutants, allergens, and particulate matter "might be a trigger for poor sleep" ([Cao, 2021](#)) and "affect sleep by disparate mechanisms" (Cao, 2021). Removing dirt, dust, and allergens from the bedroom improves sleep quality.

Clutter's implications on our relationships.

The UCLA study drew multiple conclusions showing how clutter negatively affects relationships ([Arnold, 2017](#)). Tolerance for clutter varies between the two sexes; men are the lesser affected group, and these differences could precipitate arguments. Arnold showed that women correlate a tidy home to a happy, successful family; a less tidy home, produced higher anxiety levels in women. Interestingly, clutter impacts reading facial cues. A cluttered environment created visual crowding and "impeded the interpretation of expressions" ([Cutting, 2016](#)).

We agree that clutter has adverse effects but does cleaning and decluttering have positive ones?

The short answer is yes! Basic logical reasoning bares, that if clutter correlates with higher stress, less focus, less productivity, and decreased mood, it follows that addressing clutter offers improvements in these areas. But what does the science say?

[Saxbe 2009](#) revealed that cleaning and decluttering gave study participants a feeling of mastery over their environment and a way to regulate uncomfortable emotions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that cleaning has a calming effect. It makes sense that when we feel overwhelmed, performing simple repetitive tasks is helpful, it activates our internal work-reward system. Cleaning and decluttering have physical components that help get us out of our heads. The rewards are visible, tangible, and immediate, making for powerful medicine.

Nevertheless, is there any way to measure it? Turns out, there is. In a clever study at Masaryk University, researchers divided participants into two groups, high anxiety (HA) and low anxiety (LA), and asked them to observe an art object. Both groups received a list of questions to consider during their observations. To induce anxiety in the HA group, investigators instructed

them to give an art expert a short speech about their observations, whereas the LA group received no such direction. During the test, electronic monitors recorded the movements and metabolic responses of the participants. After the object observation period ended, researchers instructed subjects to clean the art object. Monitoring the cleaning process allowed researchers to measure how repetitive behaviors (like cleaning) might help people cope with stressors (like public speaking). In all cases, the high anxiety group took longer cleaning. Their movements were more repetitive, rigid, and predictable. The study “offers a novel insight into the link between anxiety and ritualized behavior. Although this link had long been theorized, [their] methodology allowed [them] to operationalize and evaluate these theories in a quantitative way” ([Lang 2015](#)).

The tandem employment of mindfulness practices amplifies the positive effects of tidying. ([Hanley 2015](#)). People who mindfully washed dishes – remained present and aware of their dishwashing process - reported a 27% reduction in nervousness, along with a 25% improvement in "mental inspiration" compared to their mindless washing counterparts.

Tidying habits are socially helpful. Humans are social animals. We are instinctually programmed to care what others think. We feel pressure to fit into our social and familial groups. We suffer when we don't. The impression that others judge our qualities based on the look of our homes is not merely a feeling. Researchers asked their subject participants to rate the personality traits of a stranger. ([Harris, 2005](#)) The participant only received a detailed description of the stranger's home. The account differed in only one way, clean and tidy or messy and cluttered. Participants assigned significantly lower ranking on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and intelligence to cluttered homeowners. Keeping a neat and organized home offers social advantages.

Where do we go from here? The future of Consumerism in America.

Rising out of the clutter to regain your sense of self is incredibly worthwhile and meaningful to the individual. The benefits presented throughout are available to all. Keeping an organized and tidy home environment supports positive place attachment and the extended-self's image. Cleaning and clearing clutter increased focus, information processing, and productivity in demonstrable ways. The physiological impacts of too much stuff are also evident. Increased stress leads to increased cortisol resulting in a multitude of challenges, from our visual processing to our digestion, and sleep. The social costs are also substantial, including stressed relationships and trouble reading the feelings of our loved ones through the background din. Yet this is just some of what the science says.

When examining our opening scene, we naturally feel a sense of pity for the character. A mess of her own making overwhelms her, but it goes deeper still. She is a player in a game that began before her birth and will drag on after her death. In the game of consumerism, she is a clear loser. We must step outside our individualist view and adopt a broad cultural perspective. Rising out of the clutter to regain your sense of self is only the first step of many necessary steps. As a society, we need to recognize that in the game of consumerism, the only winning move is not to play.

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