

Are You Suffering From Mid-Life Clutter?

Springtime may be the perfect time to clean it up, clear it out and declutter your home environment

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Orlando, FL, March 10, 2008 -- If you waste a lot of time looking for items that somehow get lost in the clutter of your home or office, or if you feel you do not have enough storage space or your lack of organization is causing you stress, then this "spring cleaning" season might be the perfect time to declutter your environment.

For many people, as they approach their mid-life years, they take stock of where they have been and exam what the future may hold. Fifty years or more of living gives people many opportunities to buy and inherit a wide range of household items, clothes, and stuff in addition to providing the opportunities to accumulate boxes of old tax returns and files. Midlife is also a time of sorting through one's emotional baggage – both the happy and disappointing moments -- that can inhibit one from living fully in the moment. Midlife can be a time of life where one can discover both cluttered emotional and physical environments.

I admit that I am writing this article as a way to reinforce my own efforts to declutter my office and home. So as I have tackled my own personal tasks of sorting through stuff, my mind has pondered the basic question -- why do people clutter?

After exploring Extension resources and books on the subject, what I learned is that some folks just do not know where to put something, so the item is set aside. Some people intend to use it soon so they do not to put it out of sight. Another common reason is not being able to part with a piece of the past. There actually can be a mental illness associated with clutter (which I won't attempt to deal with in this article since I'm not a medical professional).

The dictionary defines "clutter" and "cluttering" this way: "to litter or pile in a disordered state." Too much of anything in one area can appear as clutter. Whether piled, jammed into a closet, or spread about on a surface or the floor, clutter takes different forms. The form of that clutter relates to basic individual personalities, preferences, and habits.

No matter the form of clutter, research shows disorganization and clutter can cause negative **stress**. Have you ever felt a release of stress after cleaning the garage or a closet? People who do not accumulate "stuff" lead more simplified lives.

Clutter can be classified into the following categories:

- Travel clutter:** Are you one to keep souvenirs of every place you visit?
- It-once-was important clutter:** Do you have keys, clothes or toys that were part of another period in your life? Some items actually may be obsolete, such as old electronics, phonograph records, computer software and floppy disks.
- Inheritance clutter:** All of your grandmother's linens fit this category. You ask, "why don't my children want their great-grandparent's stuff?"
- Bunny clutter:** Doesn't some clutter just seem to multiply? Collections and craft items grow.
- Get-to-it-someday clutter:** Are you really going to finish all those craft projects someday?
- I-might-use-it someday clutter:** Do you have garden tools, appliances or furniture stored in the garage that you will use if you have more time or move elsewhere?
- Memory lane clutter:** Every piece of paper or time has its own story, and you're not ready to give it up.
- Garage sale clutter:** Those boxes in the garage are going to be ready when you have another garage sale.
- Valuable clutter:** The silver and crystal that were wedding gifts. When was the last time you used any of your sterling silverware when entertaining?
- To-look-at clutter:** All the figurines, collectibles and pretty items that are displayed but need constant dusting cause clutter and eat-up precious time.
- Mystery clutter:** There is a drawer in many homes that is full of items or parts from items that no one in the family can identify.

Disorganization, not lack of space, is the cause of clutter in most homes. Many people do not have a strong skill for organization. In this case, you can hire professionals to help you sort, organize, and downsize; or you might call a family member to help you get started.

Organizing and getting rid of things may result in less housework and more leisure time for you and your family which can reduce your individual and family stress levels as well as improve family communications.

A challenge for many people is realizing that life does have a time limit. One sad story is of a woman's family who, after she died, rented two trash bins and cleared out her entire home in one day. Stuff is valuable to some people only if they can use it. Family members may not place the same value on your stuff as you do partly because they do not have the same emotional experience or attachment with the "stuff."

In the process of downsizing and decluttering, I'm not sure which step comes first: releasing your emotions from the past or releasing the stuff that frees up your emotions. In either case, you are freeing yourself to live a more simplified and balanced life.

To help you get started, ask yourself these questions: Does your “stuff” benefit or hinder your quality of life? Will organizing, simplifying or downsizing add time and enjoyment to your life? How much space and what is the value of that space (space equity) needed to store your possessions – possessions that often keep you emotionally tied to your past instead of allowing you to fully live in the moment. Can that equity be better spent?

If you answer “yes” those questions, I challenge you to get organized. I’ll do the same. As you get organized, remember to recycle and donate your discarded items. Check out these websites for ideas on how to recycle your items:

The Freecycle Network, www.freecycle.org

Craigslist, www.craigslist.org

Freecycle America, www.freecycleamerica.org