

HOME ORGANIZATION THE SMART GUIDE

Make Room For Yourself in Your Home



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HOME ORGANIZATION: THE SMART GUIDE

Make Room For *Yourself*
in Your Home

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addSpace To Your Life!

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HOME ORGANIZATION SMART GUIDE

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Part I
Disorganization Happens . . .

It starts when we're first born --and we're not even aware of it. So it isn't even our fault yet (honest!)! At this point it's what others "do to us." Have you ever noticed that?

Disorganization in our home often begins with the accumulation of material items in our life. Think about the concept of a baby shower. Even before we're born we begin accumulating things through this ritual. Then our family discovers any number of reasons to "shower" us with even more material gifts as we grow up.

Now, gifts are great, but . . . eventually our room of gifts and toys and stuffed animals morphs itself as we get older into a house of stuff --some essential and some, well, not so essential.

In Part I, you will learn not only how to prepare your house for the "de-mucking" that's about to occur, but how to prepare yourself mentally and emotionally to be separated from some of the "stuff" and memories of your life.

Introduction

A favorite phrase of people lately is "life happens." Life, in fact, is exactly what happens while we're making our plans for the future. Before we have our plans setting in cement, it seems our life situation has changed --and so much our plans.

You can make a case that this is precisely what happens when it comes to our possessions. "Muck and clutter happens." Look around you. It's hard to believe at some point your house was empty --totally empty to be redundant! What would happen now, if someone told you, that you had to leave it all behind, how would you react?

Could you, in fact, willfully walk away from all your material possessions right now?

That question is closely related to the one so many like to ask of people. If you were stranded on a desert island with only one item, what would it be? Obviously, it couldn't be that hand-held mixer you use once every six months for your smoothies.

And you probably wouldn't take your vacuum cleaner. Or even your reading lamp?

But would you take that stack of papers over there that you promised you'd look through one day? Or could you choose only one book from that pile you have sitting in your den?

Get the picture? Our lives are filled with material items --very often material items that we seldom, if ever, use.

But you already are well aware of that. After all, you're reading this book. There must be some reason you're interested in the topic. My guess is that you, like hundreds of thousands of others, are suffocating in a houseful of clutter.

SHHH! DON'T LOOK NOW! ANOTHER PIECE OF "MUCK" JUST ENTERED YOUR HOME!

This book is not intended to be a commentary on how materialistic our society has become --and in turn how tragic that is. This book, though, is about the slow . . . incremental . . . nearly unnoticeable way we do accumulate material things and how that affects our home organization.

And how we can --when we're ready emotionally and physically--begin

to clear ourselves of some of the possessions we neither use nor need.

But in order to effectively clear that muck and clutter out of your house --and hopefully keep it that way for more than 24 hours (which by the way is a serious challenge for some people . . .) we need to know a little bit more about our relationship with . . . "things."

Once I explain how we're tied to our possessions probably more deeply than any of us has guessed, then we'll talk about how to part with them with the least amount of pain.

After learning that, then you can go about clearing your house (I like to call it a de-mucking program) and keeping it muck-free for a while (no ultimate guarantees there!)

LEARN HOW TO MAPP IT!

That's why the first section of this book includes a strategy called "MAPP." It's an acronym for the four essential components of any "de-mucking" program: Motivation. Assessment. Preparation. Planning. But it's also a clever way to remember the "de-mucking" process itself.

Don't underestimate the amount of dedication and energy involved in the clearing of space in your home. It, indeed, does take motivation and a plan--and a bit of preparation at that! It's not for the feint of heart. But it is especially designed for all of you sick and tired of living--or is that suffocating?--in a room full of stuff you seldom use and are constantly tripping over.

I'll explain it all in a later chapter (even the difference between preparation and planning). And once you've completed the MAPP, then I'll guide you, room by room, through some of the most efficient hints . . . aids and . . . tips for "de-mucking" you'll ever find.

I've included all the major rooms, including the dreaded "children's bedrooms" as well as closets which serve for a variety of purposes. I've covered hall closets, linen closets and . . . I'm sure you're getting the picture.

I've even provided you with some invaluable hints how to de-muck that stubborn bathroom.

But, that's not the end of the book--not quite yet. The third part

of the book talks about what happens to some people (and maybe even you!) when you actually put the "de-mucking" plan into effect. Just call this last section a little bonus motivation.

You'd be simply amazed at some of the totally unexpected --and seemingly unrelated --benefits people have received through the action of making space for the actual art of living in their homes.

It's as if de-mucking their house left a vacuum that was just waiting to be filled with vibrant energy . . . new opportunities . . . and a better quality of life in general.

That's why the last part of the book deals with what I call "serendipitous" consequences of de-mucking your life. You'll be amazed at the good things that are about to sprout in your future.

USE THIS BOOK WISELY

This book can serve you in several different ways. You can sit right here, right now and read it through in its entirety. Then you can return to the sections of the book that most interested you or spoke to you specifically. Or, you can leave through it now, choosing some of the more interesting sites and read those.

However you choose to use this book, I guarantee you that it will help you de-muck your life . . . allow you to breathe more freely in your own home . . . and the mere process of clearing out "stuff" will bring you wondrous --hopefully even miraculous --events into your life!

Go for it! There's no time like the present!

HAPPY HOME ORGANIZING!

CHAPTER 1: STUFF: IT'S ALWAYS BEEN WITH US!

Few of us alive today remember firsthand the "Fibber McGee and Molly" radio program. Its humorous introduction reminded the listeners of what many probably experienced in their daily lives. The program began with the sound of a closet door opening . . . and then the crashing . . . clanging . . . and clattering of "stuff" falling out of a supposedly "overstuffed" space.

As funny as it may have been, many of us live daily with the fear of opening that closet door . . . knowing the same result is about to befall us. If we don't fear opening the closet door, we run to the

bedroom when unexpected company arrives, hurriedly closing that door. Don't want anyone to see how we keep our personal space!

The accumulation of stuff has been with us for so long, we couldn't imagine living with nothing but the clothes on your back. Do you really think the pre-historic cave dwellers did this? Or do you think some cave wife somewhere was nagging her cave husband to put those spears in the proper space. "After all, Ugh, they're still dirty with that smelly woolly mammoth blood! And for crying out loud, I'm tired of having to walk over them!"

Think back to the Flintstones. Material goods are so embedded into the fabric of our everyday lives that even our shows about cave people have them accumulating as much stuff as possible.

Remember what happens every time Fred opens his closet door? Yep, you're right! A bowling ball hits him on the top of his head.

George Carlin --nearly 25 years ago --created the ultimate skit about our society's obsession with the accumulation of items. It's all about how we value our "stuff."

ONE DEFINITION OF HOUSE

Carlin's definition of a house, in fact, is just a structure that holds "our stuff." If we didn't have "stuff" we wouldn't need a house. "A house is a just a pile of stuff with a cover on it."

If we didn't have stuff to shelter "you could just walk around all the time," he observed.

Actually, Carlin takes the definition of house one step further in this routine, calling a house "a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get . . . more stuff."

After all he says, "Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take your stuff, now would ya?"

Sometimes, families move into bigger and better homes. Why? Most likely, Carlin suggests, "no room for your stuff anymore." And he really isn't far from the truth, is he?

But what about when you go on a vacation? What do you do? You naturally take "a smaller version of your house" with you. Why, of course! "It's the second version of your stuff," Carlin explains.

"And you're gonna fly all the way to Honolulu" he suggests. What's the first thing you do when you get to the hotel room? "You open up your suitcase and you put away all your stuff.

"Here's a place here," Carlin says, "put a little bit of stuff there . . . I'll put some stuff --here's another place for stuff, look at this!" And even though you're far from home, he keenly observes, "you start to feel okay, because, after all, you do have some of your stuff with you."

But wait! A good friend calls. He invites you from your hotel room over to his house on the island of Maui for a few days. Panic momentarily sets in. "Oh, no! Now what do I pack? Right, you gotta pack an even smaller version of your stuff.

In effect, Carlin says, "the third version of your house. Just enough stuff to take up to Maui for a couple of days.

"You get over to Maui--I mean you're really getting extended now, when you think about it. You got stuff all the way back on the main land, you got stuff on another island, you got stuff on this island . . . the supply lines are getting longer and harder to maintain.

"You begin to put your stuff all around your bedroom. And you're beginning to feel all right with everything when your friend says 'I think tonight we'll go over to the other side of the island, visit a pal of mine, and maybe stay over.'"

Now what do you pack? Right! "You gotta pack an even smaller version of your stuff. The fourth version of your house!"

Carlin's skit is so humorous because it parallels the truth so closely.

EVEN OUR ECONOMY IS BASED ON OUR "NEED" FOR STUFF

As our economy has grown, our need for "stuff" seems to have grown right along with it. In fact, it's the perceived need for more that actually drives our national prosperity. The economists don't really care that we don't have much more room for this stuff. And the economists seem little affected by the fact that our stuff is slowly turning into clutter --since we neither really need much of it, or can we store it properly. The more stuff we buy, the better the economy gets.

So is it really a losing battle?

Of course not! But it is certainly an uphill battle. It's not a war that is to be won on a single battlefield, fought in a single hour or even on a single day.

But it is --with a little diligence and self-awareness --a war we can win. One of the aspects of clutter you need to keep in mind is its great adherence to the laws of nature.

THE UNIVERSAL LAW OF CLUTTER ATTRACTION

Especially to the latest and greatest law: the law of attraction. Perhaps you've never thought of the law of attraction in this way. But it seems to work best with clutter (Just our luck, now isn't it?).

A little clutter attracts a little more clutter . . . which attracts just a little more . . . well, you definitely get the idea of the law of "clutter attraction" at work in your house! (Now, if we can only get money to work this way! That would be a system!)

So the goal is to keep your home as free from this useless accumulation of things. Because once you let one or two items in your house, I swear they send out invitations to their friends and family. "Come on over," the pieces of clutter call out, "the water's fine and there's lots of room!"

And once those clutter invitations go out --you're doomed!

And it gets worse, some believe it can even inhibit your financial and spiritual journeys. (No, I don't make this stuff up! I'm being serious.) According to Feng Shui specialists, if your house doesn't have a clear path to allow the movement of good qi (pronounced chee) to flow through it, you'll struggle not only spiritually, but potentially financially as well.

CLUTTER: KEEPS NEGATIVE ENERGY HANGING AROUND

Qi, by the way, is the Chinese word for "energy", good energy. The purpose of feng shui is to arrange your home to attract the good energy --and all the rewards that go with it --and to sweep out all negative energy.

Clutter helps to keep the negative energy lingering around and it also stalls the movement of the good chi. So, clutter is not acceptable in the house that's been properly appraised for the

ultimate benefits of feng shui.

This sentiment, oddly enough, is now echoed by most of my organizational specialists colleagues. I would suggest that by de-mucking your house through the process of throwing out one item you don't need, you can actually help boost your level of productivity at work.

I have witnessed this with my own clutter as well as seeing it happen first hand with my clients. And the day after a client threw a clunky old file cabinet out, she signed a contract with a new customer. Coincidence? Probably. But it certainly gave her the reinforcement that she needed to continue cleaning and organizing her home!

But what's a person to do? Clutter, it seems, is a necessary evil of our consumer society. Even as we return from a shopping trip, we flip the television on only to see commercials telling us we absolutely cannot live without one more appliance, gadget or invention.

As we put our new purchases away, many of us discover we don't even have room to store these due to the backlog of previous purchases.

We watch the news shows as they interview the new authors and their books. We decide, once we see them on Good Morning America, CNN, and even The Daily Show, that we absolutely must read that book. So we buy it (and thanks to the web, we don't even need to leave the house to do that any more!). And there the book sits, unread on the floor in the living room or on the bedstand.

But even worse, in the eyes of some people, is the amount of time we can waste searching for a specific object because of the clutter we've accumulated in our homes and now increasingly spilling uncontrollably into our home offices.

Some experts claim that the average American spends one entire year of his life just searching for misplaced objects. As a professional organizer, I can attest that some individuals spend much more of their time in this quest!

I had a friend in fact that kept so much paperwork that it filled his entire garage. He had a gorgeous brand new car that, for 4 years, never saw the inside of his garage. This poor car lived in Florida and unfortunately became sun faded before he made the decision to get rid of his papers.

The unfortunate thing was when he did need that vital piece of paper . . .

he couldn't find it. He usually wasted a good three-quarters to an hour looking for it. Once he was able to give his car a nice home, he never had to spend time retrieving a piece of paper from his garage again!

Short of marching through your house, discovering what needs tossed and what you should keep, I can help you with some all-purpose advice. (You'll have to be the person who changes your lifestyle to become the person who "marches and tosses"!)

INTRODUCING: A FEW "UNCLUTTERING RULES"

Here are several "unmucking rules" that I try to live by. No, I don't always keep these myself, but they are goals to be attained.

Whether you want to demuck your life because you want to create a more inviting chi energy to flow through your home, you want to land that big contract at work or (and this is the goal of most of us!) you just want to walk through your house without tripping, then this chapter was written just for you.

Of course, as we progress in the book we'll add some essential corollaries to these simple rules. But for the moment, these give you a good overview. In that way, if you just can't wait to start your "de-mucking" program before you've read this entire book, you at least have a few nuggets of wisdom to get you started.

UNMUCK YOUR LIFE RULE #1: WHEN IT DOUBT, THROW IT OUT.

This is the simplest – yet the hardest. We've all experienced it. We finally throw out that widget that we haven't used in literally years. The very next day someone needs it.

And that's the horror story we recall every time we reach for an article and begin to pitch it. My counter-argument to this: suck it up and get over it.

If you haven't used it in a year – or more – the odds are that it's just not that important in your life. If you find yourself tripping over it more than using it, then it's probably serving no useful purpose.

And if you just discovered it in a box in your garage with other "stuff" you haven't unpacked from your move five years ago . . . guess what? Odds are you can live without it quite nicely! After all, you have been up until now, haven't you?

This not only applies to books, newspaper articles and magazines, but seriously consider this when encountering that old electric sandwich maker and even that newer, but seldom used George Foreman grill.

UNMUCK YOUR LIFE RULE #2: STORE OBJECTS IN THE MOST EFFICIENT SPACES.

Perhaps you don't use an object because it's not stored in a spot that's easy to access. It's easier to show you what I mean than to take the time to explain it. We all do this quite naturally when it comes to the "efficiency" of our kitchens.

And I do this most when it comes to my morning coffee. My coffee pot is placed on the counter that is immediately below my coffee cups. My coffee beans are not stored too far from that, and my coffee grinder sits on the same shelf as my beans.

If I were to place my coffee grinder on the opposite side of the kitchen that set up wouldn't serve me well. Two events would likely occur. First the coffee grinder would never get back to its proper home across the kitchen. Or I'd give up grinding coffee and switch to using grounds (No, I would never give up drinking coffee!)

As you can plainly see "efficient storage" means nothing less than placing the objects you do intend to use in the most accessible places. Did that George Forman grill land under the sink because you never used it? Or you just didn't know where else to store it?

If you really want to give it another chance, try storing it where it'll be handy for you to use.

Another useful tip along these lines is to store similar items together. For example, if you have several flower vases, store these together. The next time you reach for a vase, you only have to visit one location to find all of them. There will be no going to the first place, only to realize that the perfect vase is hiding under the stairs in the basement.

UNMUCK YOUR LIFE RULE #3: RECYCLE! RECYCLE! RECYCLE!

Did I make myself clear enough? When you think recycling, though, think along creative lines. Take books to booksellers that sell used books or to libraries for their book sales. Recycle newspapers and if possible magazines.

Clothes? Think about taking these to consignment shops or donating them to thrift stores where they'll be sold at low, affordable prices to families who not only are in need of the clothing, but appreciate the cost as well.

Even a yard sale is a form of recycling if you think about it. Don't want to go through the trouble of holding your own? Maybe your neighbor wants several of your pieces of old furniture, or some of your unused kitchen gadgets to sell.

I grew up with yard sales and I do have one word of advice about this method. Make sure to schedule a pick up from a donation facility at the end of the day of your sale. Do not let any unsold items go back into your home!

Churches may also be looking for saleable items for their rummage sales. Ask around. You know what they say: One person's trash is another person's treasure.

UNMUCK YOUR LIFE RULE #4: DO THE WORDS FILING CABINET RING A BELL?

Got papers? Get a filing cabinet. Do not get filing boxes with lids. These typically become dumping grounds for other papers and the lid, once buried, does not open. It turns into a vicious cycle of needing to file but not being able to get into the file!

If you have a home office, it's imperative at some point – even with the age of digital forms and cybersaving sites – that you purchase a filing cabinet. I don't care what anyone says, the "hard copy" of many documents, magazines, warranties and the like, will never totally disappear from the face of this earth.

Don't overlook the fact that every major appliance you buy comes with some type of operating manual. From that hot water tank to your refrigerator to your car, there are papers to be saved from each of these purposes. It's best to have them all saved together than strewn across the floor and drawer space of your home.

Make sure to treat your business like a business and invest in a *real* filing cabinet. Get one that has good slides and drawers that open and close easily.

UNMUCK YOUR LIFE RULE #5: GET ZEN WITH THE SPACE.

Okay, so this rule is a little cryptic. But it's still useful. Instead of brewing and stewing over all the clutter you currently have, start visualizing your house as clutter free. Seriously. Visualize it as clutter free. You'll discover as you go about your day that you'll not only become more aware of the clutter, but you'll slowly do something about it!

This particular rule may take some adjusting to. But I've tried it -and it works. After a while you have an image of your house as it should be clean and without useless stuff strewn around. And the next thing you know, you're taking steps --sometimes just baby steps --towards your vision.

UNMUCK YOUR LIFE RULE #6: DO IT NOW!

Aha! Now we've hit the nail on the head. I can tell by the way you cringed when you read this rule. A lot of the clutter accumulates in our homes simply because we refuse to deal with it "in the moment."

We can take another tip from those Zen masters who always encourage us to "live in the moment." Now, we can add to that "live in the moment to avoid that clutter."

This rule is best illustrated by the daily mail. Every day your postal carrier drops mail off in your mail box. What exactly do you do with that mail? If you're like most of us, you look through it and set it aside. "I'll deal with it after supper," you say, as you hurry into the kitchen.

However, you forget all about the junk mail and instead read a good book while you're watching television.

The next time you find that particular sales flyer for your local grocery store is three weeks after the sale has expired. If it didn't get buried under a mound of other junk mail, it fell under the couch.

Oh, yes, I do understand the nature of muck.

Instead of putting everything aside, you could have dealt with this in a more efficient matter. You could have taken the few moments to separate the bills and placed them on your desk in a small container, where you'll sit the next time you pay them.

Take the junk mail and begin to prioritize that. Mail that doesn't

appeal to you at all throw out immediately. Flyers you may want to look at later – like for your trip to the grocery store – set in another basket, preferably one close to where you sit in the evening. Make sure that this bin holds the papers upright and is small enough to see what is in it at a glance. In this way, their presence triggers you to at least glance through them.

Now at least you know where it is when you decide to check out this week's shopping list. When my weekly flyers arrive, I simply toss them into my small basket and pull out the ones leftover from the week before at the same time.

Procrastination is the thief of time.

--Edward Young

UNMUCKING YOUR LIFE RULE #7: LABEL THINGS

Do you have your objects stored in bins? Instead of opening them every time you want to view what's in there, why not just label them?

Bins with the holiday decorations can be labelled as such or wrapped with holiday themed tape. That way when you're looking for that Halloween costume from three years ago, you don't have to go through those particular bins.

In fact, labeling bins can help you pinpoint with amazing accuracy exactly where the item you're looking for is really hiding!

Don't limit this labeling system only to bins, though. Look through your garage. Should certain tools or garden equipment be in specific locations? Don't be shy about putting a sign on the spot. If you have tools hanging on pegboard, label the space that you hang your hammer as "hammer." If you have to (and for some family members this might work even better) outline the shape of a hammer in this spot! Most kids will love to do this for you! This way every member of your family knows where to hang that rake. No excuses.

One of my client families even does this with their kitchen cabinets. That way they all agree on where to replace the clean dishes and cups.

This is only the beginning of how you can start --with a little determination--the reorganization of your home. It's something each of us grapple with every day to one extent or another.

When you see a home that's clutter free, ask yourself this question:

What did it look like 48 hours prior to this, before this family was expecting company?

Then ask yourself the next logical question: Did Mom, acting like a Gestapo, enlist the help of every person in the house to "demuck" it?

The odds are the answer to the last question is a resounding: You bet she did!

Don't be too hard on yourself because you've let clutter get the best of you. Just hunker down now that you've decided to get rid of it and stick to your guns.

Because you can de-muck your house . . . enlarge your enjoyment of life . . . and breathe freely once more!

In the next chapter, I'll start the motivational process, as well as preparing you psychologically, emotionally and logically, for "Operation Home Organization Relief".

CHAPTER 2: ASI: ADD SPACE INTENTION

Of course, you mean to add space and clear the clutter from your house. And normally in your other activities--both at home and work--you really aren't labeled a procrastinator. So why do you have such a problem approaching the useless items laying around your house?

This is an area in which you live. It's an area where you carry out your most intimate moments with your family . . . reveal your deepest, darkest secrets . . . come to at the end of the day to be . . . well, yourself.

Why are you even allowing all this clutter to stand in the way of who you are, what you do, and how you feel?

Good questions. All of them. And there is a really good--if philosophically deep--answer to these questions. If you were expecting some easy platitude--forget it.

THE REAL PROBLEM WITH CLUTTER

The real problem with muck lies within ourselves. Sure, purely from a physical and spatial perspective it's about space in our

homes. But it really is more than that.

Living that idealized "clutter-free life" is more than just organizing the house and cleaning up. It really involves --at its deepest level -how we see not only our possessions, but our ability to love and be loved as well as our self-worth (I told you it would get pretty heavy from a philosophical approach!)

When you make that decision to live without clutter in an organized and spacious home, it means you have turned a corner in your life. You have decided to not only add space to your house, but celebrate the very fabric of your life as well.

The decision to add space and clear clutter may mean that you've finally embraced a new level positivism, as well as an approach to living that recognizes abundance thinking and incorporates a more spiritual approach to your life.

So when you procrastinate, it's only natural. Think of your procrastination not so much as a "putting off" time as it is a "ensuring it's the right time" for the project.

Doesn't that make you feel a lot better about yourself? And when you view it from this perspective, the chances are much better that when you do start your de-muck your house --and your life -you'll be successful.

Extracting ourselves from our possessions is a complicated process. In the first chapter, we take a humorous approach reviewing George Carlin's take on "stuff."

And of course, Carlin --who used that modern-day "everyman" philosophy --was absolutely right. No sooner than we clear some of the clutter feeling freed, we seem to fill that vacuum with more "stuff" that "we just can't live without."

Oh sure, it starts out small. For a book lover and writer like myself, it may be just one more book that looks intriguing. For a person who buys a specific set of items as a collectible . . . this one small item may be the crowning touch of your collection.

OUR POSSESSIONS GIVE US FEELINGS

It's true! And that's one of the hardest aspects of de-mucking a house. If possessions were merely items we owned, few of us would have a problem getting rid of anything.

But the things we own possess a far more intricate relationship to us as well as make us feel a certain way. You've heard of comfort food that many individuals eat. Those who live with clutter literally have "comfort items."

BEYOND PROCRASTINATION: WHEN "JUST DO IT DOESN'T DO IT."

It may look like procrastination to others . . . even to you. It may feel like procrastination. But for some reason you just can't bear the thought of tackling your closet. That clutter can rot there for all I care, you say loud and clear.

And then you sit down to ponder why certain areas of your home are harder than others to clear. For some people it's the clothes in their closet . . . for others they just can't seem to find the time . . . effort . . . energy to spend on those books --especially those 30 year old college texts that are, well, out of date doesn't seem to be a strong enough phrase.

Perhaps it's not procrastination you're encountering on your route to a clutter-free house so much as fear. Fear? Of what, you ask. What could I possibly fear by cleaning out a closet or clearing a bookshelf?

You name it . . . you may be fearing it. It's easier to give examples of clutter stashes in your home rather than explain it.

THE FEAR AND LOATHING ON THE CLUTTER TRAIL

Haven't tackled your closet and your own clothes yet? While your spouse may say you're just putting it off or being lazy, your subconscious mind may be avoiding it.

Clearing clothes that are currently two sizes too small may mean you have to come to grips with your current weight. It may mean that you have to admit to yourself you may never lose those 25 or 30 pounds you had dreamed you could.

Of course, you could deal with this easily enough. Toss those clothes out anyway . . . but promise yourself when you do lose that weight, you'll buy yourself new clothes that are currently in style.

Then dive into investigating the healthiest way to maintain a weight loss program. (Why not deal with two goals at once!)

Donating books to the local library book sale . . . books you've never read but keep meaning to? Well, you're not really procrastinating. You having a difficult time recognizing just how busy your life has become.

You're probably still mourning that a host of other activities have taken the place of those leisurely evenings when you had a chance to read that red, hot fiction.

But here too you may be able to deal with this situation. Donate every book you've never read and really don't think you'll have to except for one. Then place that one prominently in your bathroom.

Yes, you read that right, the bathroom. Then on your next truly hectic day run into the bathroom at lightning speed (before the toddler notices you're gone) lock the door, run the water, measure out the right amount of bubble bath liquid. Then put a half cup more in for good measure.

Now enjoy a long leisurely bath and oops . . . look at what just happened to be in here too . . . that one book you placed during your de-mucking process. What a serendipitous coincident.

Perhaps one of the hardest things anyone can do is clear the house of the possessions of a spouse or other family member who has passed away. This is an emotionally draining experience. Yet it's a necessary step in dealing with the grief. Peter Walsh said it succinctly when he said clutter has two best friends, death and disease.

In this particular instance it's difficult to find a bright side. The best one can do is to bring in a professional, trusted family member or friend to help you. In fact, if the friend can perform the actual physical removal of the items while you explain which things need to go, it certainly will lighten your load.

And the upside will eventually be living quarters that don't knock you over the head reminding you of that gaping hole in your life. In fact, if shortly after the "de-mucking" you can re-arrange the room in any way, you should do it.

Don't think of it as tossing the loved one's memory aside. It certainly isn't that. But it is an important step in your healing process as well as continuing with the life you are meant to be living.

But what exactly is muck?

Perhaps we're dealing with this a little later than we should. I assumed all along everyone just knew clutter, which I always consider muck. But then, I could be wrong!

Can you define it? Most of us would be hard pressed to define the word. But, we know it when we see it! Actually, though, the definition is easy and fairly straightforward. Clutter and muck is any item which you own, but you don't use or you don't take care of.

Now, think about this. If you own and use an item, you're probably going to take care of it --at least modicum degree. But if you have some article you don't use, you're more likely not to take as good care of it. For example, there's the souvenir plate from Niagara Falls Aunt Joyce gave you.

Do you really love that plate as much as you say? Then why is it stashed up in the attic with your scrapbook from high school? That souvenir plate has just passed "the clutter test."

DISORGANIZATION AND THE PROCRASTINATOR

As much as this might sound like a new situation comedy show on a cable television channel, it's actually a much more accurate description of how most of us treat the clutter in our lives. If we live it alone, it'll leave us alone.

We find reasons --nor sometimes we create --reasons why we just can't start the de-mucking process today. And even if we do start the process, we find many more excuses not to throw items away.

Trust me, on my crusade to make our personal places less crowded with items we neither need nor use, I think I've heard just about every excuse for not throwing individual objects in the trash, selling them at a yard sale or donating them to an establishment that can sell them.

I'm not sure how many of these excuses pertain to you, but I'm listing the top five here right now. I know how hard it truly can be to part with some material possessions. And we now know why it's not the easiest thing in the world.

But at the end of the day, when you look around after you've tried to de-muck and you still see a myriad of unused "stuff", what have you really accomplished?

Nothing more and nothing less than merely going through the motions. Now you can tell everyone "I've tried." Well, perhaps you perused the situation and called it hopeless. Or you examined a room or two only to find it a little emotionally draining.

But as long as you're carrying around even one of these excuses, you really haven't "tried" at all. You've just successfully --for another day --avoided the entire process.

Yes, I know I just gave you a great argument earlier in this chapter why we all put off clearing the unwanted items for a while at least. But, now it's time be a "drill sergeant." Now that you recognize that items may have a deeper meaning, let's get down to the nitty gritty and see what's actually holding you back from adding space and demucking your house.

How many of these excuses do you recognize?

DE-MUCK EXCUSE #1 WE CAN'T GET RID OF THIS, I JUST MIGHT NEED IT SOMEDAY!

This is such a typical excuse we professional organizers hear that my friend and colleague Patty Kreamer wrote a book by that title . . . *But I Might Need it Someday*. It's highly unlikely that you'll ever need that bobbin for that 1954 Singer sewing machine that you gave to the church rummage sale two years ago. So why are you keeping it?

If you haven't used it within a year, you probably won't suddenly use it sometime within the upcoming twelve months. Take a quick walk around your house right now. That's okay, you can continue reading when you come back.

Just take a quick walk to every single room and pull one item that you know deep in your heart "you're not going to need someday." And be honest. I'm not asking you to get rid of it right now.

This exercise is just to open your eyes to how much clutter you have in these rooms. Now place it in front of you right here back where you started. Got clutter?

Now what were you saying about "needing it someday."

DE-MUCK EXCUSE #2 "BUT WE CAN'T THROW THAT AWAY, I'M GOING TO START WEARING IT AGAIN!"

This is the favorite excuse of the 55-year-old woman who has gained more than 50 pounds since high school and who still thinks that if she loses enough weight she can still wear that mini-skirt (even with her varicose veins).

Shh! I'll clue you in on something. Even if she did lose enough weight to fit into that small piece of material she calls a skirt, she would not look like a high school student anymore! Sorry!

Just so you can't continue to use this excuse as we move forward in this book, here's a rough guideline from me, a professional image consultant, to live by when it comes to clothes. Keep only one set of old, tattered clothes to do housework or your chores in.

Then every other piece of clothing should not only fit you at this moment, but you should love to wear it and it should make you feel good about yourself.

If your clothes don't make you feel like this, you need to toss them. If they're too small and you feel "fat" in them . . . get rid of them. . .

If you don't feel "comfortable" in any piece of clothing, then it's time to find an alternate life for it. Give it to a clothing drive . . . or to someone you know who can use it (if it's in good condition) . . . or just toss it if it's beyond recognition!

If it's too small and you're trying to lose weight to fit into it, toss it anyway. Once you get to that smaller, desirable weight, then go out and buy yourself something new. You deserve that much as a reward for losing all that weight!

DE-MUCK EXCUSE #3 "I COULDN'T POSSIBLY GET RID OF THIS, MRS. TUTTLE GAVE IT TO ME!"

Actually, those were my exact words. And I spoke them about a collection of vintage fans. They were beautiful. Only problem was that they were not beautiful enough to want to hang them up on display or spend the money required to frame.

But Mrs. Tuttle had given them to me. And she was just a very special person and she had already died. So how could anyone in their right mind possibly ask me to just donate them to some random place . . .

Okay! So they moved around with me for years and never did see the light of day from inside their box. I was finally able to let them go to a

good home – a museum! Now they are proudly on display for everyone to see.

Keep in mind now, I'm not advocating throwing everything out that people near and dear to you gave you. After all, that perfectly good blanket that Aunt Bonnie bought you or the afghan that your grandmother crocheted are probably items you use . . . or at least display with pride. They're items, going back to the definition of clutter, that you use and take care of. And that means, by "definition" they aren't clutter.

Now, what about this wooden shoe . . . do I even want to know the story behind this?

DE-MUCK EXCUSE #4 "DON'T MAKE ME GET RID OF THIS . . . I PAID GOOD MONEY FOR THIS . . . WHATEVER YOU CALL IT."

Ah, yes. The "since-I-paid-good-money-for-this-thing" argument. I've used it . . . I mean I've heard it many times before.

You know if you paid good money for that thing --whatever it is -and you're not using it, I have one suggestion for you. Get rid of it! That's right!

Why put yourself through the agony of reminding yourself that you did, indeed, actually spend your money on whatever you choose to name that thing? Just get rid of it and don't relive your mistakes!

If it's not serving any useful purpose right now . . . and hasn't for the past year . . . well? You know the rest of the story!

De-muck Excuse #5 "Don't Toss That Just Yet, I'm Still Trying To Decide If I Need To Keep It Or Not!"

Let me give you a hint. If you need to deliberate that much on whether to keep the item, it's a good chance it's just muck. And if it's just mucking up your environment--toss the darn thing.

Deliberating about whether a particular item is useful or not is a sure sign you don't use it much at all --if ever. If it causes that much angst just to decide its fate . . . that tells me its fate is just about sealed.

You'll be enthusiastic when you run across an item that is really worth keeping. You certainly won't be straddling the fence about it or even waffling one way or another. If you are, then you know in

your heart you really should just clear it out.

Trust me, in the long run, you'll be so glad you did!

MAPP IT: BEFORE YOU EMBARK ON "OPERATION HOME ORGANIZATION"

Okay, so if you really waited to de-muck your house until that proverbial "spirit" moved you, you would probably never get around to it. Let's face it, few of us wake up one morning driven with unbridled enthusiasm to run around the house assessing and gathering unused "things."

Oh no, you may start out at least thinking about. Before the day is over, though, you probably end up saying, this can wait just one more day. Then one day turns into two and two turns into . . .

Well, you get the idea. And the sad fact is that we're quite comfortable with our clutter for the most part. In some cases the level of items we've collected causes us little concern on a daily basis.

That's why it's important you have a plan of attack or as I like to explain to people, you MAPP out your strategy beforehand.

As you might have already guessed, MAPP is an acronym for the four crucial steps to making "Operation Home Organization" a success.

MAPP stands for: Motivation, Assessment, Preparation and Planning.

Now, don't shrug off the fact that MAPP is spelled with two "p's". There is definitely a difference between "preparation" and "planning." And I'll explain the difference shortly.

But first, let's look at the first why you want to clear your house or your "motivation" for your actions.

No, don't take that cup of morning joe and move back into the bedroom, morning paper in hand. You need to find out the best motivation for your desire (and yes, you do have a desire) to live clutter-free.

Is it for yourself? Or your spouse? Would you like to clear the clutter so your children won't learn to accept it as normal?

Or are you just plain tired of tripping over things you never use?

Whatever your motivation, but clear about it. And be sure to accept the reasons you doing it as your own. After all, if you're only clearing your house out because your mother-in-law is nagging you, that reason might not be strong enough.

To effectively execute "Operation Clutter" you need to truly believe in your intentions. Even if you really are fearful of encountering clothes in the closet you may never wear again . . . or a wonderful, carefree college career that was given up when you got a job and got married . . .

Well, you know you're strong enough to tackle them.

Give yourself a couple of days to think of why exactly you have this need to de-muck. Write your reasons down on a sheet of paper. Take a few days to review it, let it soak in.

ASSESSMENT: IT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOU THINK

There you stand, amidst a sea of clutter. It overwhelms you, doesn't it. I know. You have all the best of intentions, but let's face it, the clutter certainly outnumbers you. (Makes you feel like clutter is plotting to take over the world!)

The most efficient--and that with the longest lasting effects -involves a little forethought on your part. (But not so much that you end up procrastinating performing this "cleansing " demucking process altogether. Ask yourself these questions as you approach your task.

WHAT IS THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF THIS ROOM?

Before you clear one time out of a room, ask yourself this simple question: What function does this room serve?

Whether you realize it or not, you're going to approach the de-mucking of a room differently depending on its use in your house and in your life.

It's only natural your expectations and needs for your home office aren't going to resemble the needs and expectations you may have for your living room or even your garage.

Let's say you're organizing space in your home office. There are some of the questions you should ask before begin clearing clutter

and re-arranging the furniture.

What do you want the room to do for you? Do you want it to facilitate the flow of your paperwork? Do you want the office to enhance your work experience? Do you want all the tools and instruments you use on a daily basis within your reach?

Depending on how you use the room, you may approach the demucking goal differently.

Perhaps your office is strictly for home organizing purposes. But lately you've discovered you ability to organize your house -specifically your household bills --haven't been that wonderful.

That's when you visualize what your ideal office should look like. Not only imagine what the room will look like when you get rid of all the unnecessary stuff, but see yourself working in here. What types of tools do you need for the activities you perform? Where do you want these aids placed to be of maximum use to you?

Are you getting the picture here (pun definitely intended!)?

That brings us to your next step of inspired action. This involves preparation. Before you even begin to move anything, think about what you plan to do with the items you're tossing.

If you plan on pitching them into the garbage and letting the garbage men haul them off, then you need to ensure they'll actually take the items. If not prepared, you can end up with a cluttered yard from all the stuff you've taken out of your house, but didn't have anyplace to toss it!

Or you could have some church rummage sales lined up to take some your "stuff." Have you thought about calling consignment shops, or thrift stores to see what types of items they take.

Well, you get the idea. Go ahead right now and circle around your house like a hawk, analyzing where pieces may go. Before you toss --call.

Depending on what you plan on getting rid of, who is available to take what and just how much clutter is involved, you may want to rent a large dumpster for several days.

I know! I know! It sounds extreme. But then, you're not kept on any kind of artificial schedule. You can just toss at will. And

sometimes that's emotionally liberating!

PREPARATION: ALSO INVOLVES EMOTION

If part of the reason you're conquering clutter is due to a death in the family, be sure that in addition to being prepared physically, you personally are emotionally prepared to handle the situation.

Make sure --even if you think you're strong enough --to have a companion or professional with you. This is essential if for no other reason the person just talks with you while you do this.

You may also find you have an emotional response to cleaning closets if your weight has been an issue for most of your life. Are you ready to tackle the "I will never be a size 4 again" issue? You'll only sabotage your efforts if you force yourself to do something you're personally not prepared to handle.

And now that you've motivated yourself, assessed your personal clutter situation and have prepared yourself, it's time to do some planning.

Planning for your de-mucking involves how exactly you plan on attacking the stuff to sort the clutter from the usable. This is a very personal decision, but here are some hints. Once you start thinking along these lines, I'm sure you'll come up with some ideas of your own.

You may also --at this point --want to check out the room-by-room guide section of the book. Planning ahead with some of those ideas will make the process go much faster.

SORT EVERYTHING WITH SIMILAR GOALS, PURPOSES

Start at one corner of the room, and start placing everything with similar purposes and goals together. For your home office, this may be as fundamental as placing all your desk items together -from computer paper to paper clips.

Place all your tax papers in the same area --don't even get to micro-filing these for the moment. Just gather them up, and dump them in the general vicinity. The same goes for any work related projects. Sort them project by project --or customer by customer. Don't toss and judge anything!

At this point, you're not even ready to decide what you want to keep compared what you want.

So far, this is pretty painless, right? Not nearly as intimidating as you thought it would be, right? Good. Good.

SORT THE "NEEDS" FROM THE "DON'T NEEDS"

Now, we're entering territory that may make a few of you cringe. But if you hang with me for this you'll be quite pleased with the outcome.

Right now we have piles sorted according to function. Now we're going to dig into these piles to decide what stays and what goes. But not only that, if we're not going to keep the item, we make one more additional call: do we throw it away, give it away or sell it.

Now you're on the road to a clutter-free house. Be sure to check out the room-by-room guide for some essential tips . . . tricks . . . and techniques of de-mucking!

Congratulations! You're more than halfway there!

Part II Clearing Clutter and Adding Space: Room by Room

Now that we've talked about some of the reasons we keep items we don't need or use, it's time to actually execute "Operation Add Space" to your house. Room by room.

Don't sweat it. It sounds much worse than it really is. The following chapters show you not only the most effective way to keep clutter at bay for as long as possible, but the quickest ways as well.

In this way you can get through the clearing clutter Process and have some time to spend on more alluring activities.

CHAPTER 3: CLEARING YOUR KITCHEN MUCK

Before we get started in the kitchen, let's review quickly the original purpose houses actually include these rooms. Food preparation. Yes. Back "in the day" moms cooked meals from stoves (not frozen containers zapped in microwaves). Some kitchens, in fact, were so large that entire families even ate in them!

I review this, because today, simply by glancing at the average kitchen, you may think that it's an appliance storage room. From easy grills, to toasters to coffee and cappuccino makers we store it all in the kitchen. We even have televisions in our kitchens – can't miss that news or the latest episode of that talk show! – and even now laptops and printers.

Now is the time to demuck this room in order to bring it back to its original intention: the family hub of cooking and enjoying a meal together. Ready?

COUNTER SPACE: THE SHRINKING FRONTIER

Every one of us complains that the house we have doesn't possess enough kitchen counter space. What's a person to do? Well, you could always move. Yes, I suppose that's an option. But short of that, you may need to do some creative work here and make more room.

And, no, I don't mean physically adding another counter in your kitchen. Just about every person I know has a toaster and a coffee maker sitting on their kitchen counter 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And these are the two objects we use the most.

But when you really examine it, how often do you use these two appliances. Most people only use the toaster in the morning. Same with the coffee maker. So why not stash them every day after they cool off in a cabinet or under cabinets?

And if you can do that with the two appliances you use most often, now is the time to do the same with the toaster over, the George Foreman Grill, the sandwich maker, the blender . . . and the list goes on.

Better yet, before you stash each of those items, seriously think about the last time you used them. Are they really worth keeping? If you only use the appliance once a year, then maybe you can actually live without it. Maybe it's time to donate it to someone's yard sale or a consignment store or a charity that will sell it and do some good with the proceeds?

WHAT TO DO WITH WHAT'S LEFT?

For the moment, you're going to allow them to sit. But you won't quit your chore until you've cleared out a cabinet for these useful appliances. You may want to store those that you use the least

nearer to the top of the cabinets.

But the two most important items, the coffee maker and the toaster definitely need to be within handy reach. Each morning when you make your coffee you won't need to be performing any contortionist stretches at 6 a.m. (And that just avoids any embarrassing visits from the paramedics at that hour as well, now doesn't it?)

WHAT'S IN YOUR DRAWER?

Next, let's look through those kitchen drawers. Each of us has at least one "junk drawer." This is the miscellaneous drawer that isn't big enough to hold a utensil tray or wide enough to contain all our miscellaneous cooking tools like wooden spoons, spatulas and various measuring cups.

Most of us don't want the drawer to be "lonely" so we converted it into a dumping ground of necessity. What many call the "I-just-don't-know-where-to-store-it" stuff. Matchbooks often get dumped here, lone screwdrivers find their way to this drawer, even the last unblown balloon from your daughter's fifth birthday party have landed in this drawer (And what? She's now 22?)

Decide what you really need and don't! And here again only you can be the judge of that. But I am betting that unblown balloon falls into the "let's-dump-it-in-the-trash" category.

I'm also betting you haven't totally emptied that drawer, but we're also betting it at least closes all the way now! And for the future residents of that drawer: think twice before placing anything in there. You should ask if there's a better "home" for the item.

For example, are you placing that screwdriver in the drawer because you find yourself using it often in the kitchen? Or are you merely placing it there because you don't want to take the extra steps to put it in the tool chest in the garage? (Gotcha!) If it's the latter, don't let that tool sit in the drawer then!

Similarly, go through all your drawers. If your house is anything like most, you probably have one more monster drawer to conquer. And that's the one that holds the wooden spoons, spatulas and miscellaneous kitchen tools that don't fit in the silverware tray or in that cute container on your counter that holds most of that stuff.

Here, you may have to be brutal – yet again. Ask yourself these tough questions:

Exactly how many spatulas does one family need?

How many wood spoons are enough?

Do you really need four sets of measuring spoons or cups?

What is the exact number of manual can openers that a family of four needs?

How many vegetable peelers is too many?

Can I live a quality life with only three pizza cutters?

I'm sure you're beginning to get the idea. If you find you need specific sizes of spatulas, for example, then by all means keep one of each size. But if you find yourself keeping an inordinate number just because the other three need washed . . . then you need more help than you ever thought!

Take each of those items that you decide not to keep. If you're collecting a box for a yard sale or a church rummage sale place these items in here now (while you're still strong enough to part with it!).

CABINET MUCK: DISHES, PLATES AND UNEXPECTED SURPRISES

Now that we've tackled several of the more seriously cluttered spots of just about every kitchen, let's take a good, hard look at your glasses, cups and dishes.

Exactly how many cups does a family of four or five need? No, this isn't a Zen riddle. How many coffee or tea or even hot chocolate drinkers are there in your family? If you're like many of us, you probably own several distinct sets of cupware (if there even is such a word?!) and glassware. Brace yourself emotionally. You're about to decide if you really need to keep all those cups.

At least four to six of those cups undoubtedly belong to a set of dishes. If you have all of the dishes and use this set regularly, then you automatically know you're keeping the cups as well (Whew! First decision made!) If you don't have the entire set, then perhaps you really don't need those particular cups or mugs. Be brutally honest with yourself and toss them.

SAVING SENTIMENTAL, SOUVENIR MUGS

Do the same thing with any “souvenir” mugs and cups you’ve collected from your vacations (or others have given you) that just don’t appeal to you anymore. I’m not going to make you toss mugs that your grandchildren have given you or your children. Some items are worth their weight in sentimental gold!

But Aunt Martha meant well when she gave you that mug from Intercourse, PA that you’re really not allowing anyone to see!

Use the same process with every other item in your cabinets. Go through your glassware. (Don’t tell me you still have that sippy cup? If there’s no sentimental value to it, toss it. But be honest about why you’re keeping it. Perhaps it’s better suited to living in the attic with the children’s old things.)

We all have dishes we seldom use because they’re cracked or for other reasons. If you don’t use these dishes – and have plenty of others for your meals – then either toss them, or give them to charity.

Pots and pans . . . casserole dishes . . . pie pans . . . all live and die by this rule. If you can’t remember the last time you used it, then you probably don’t need it.

THE SPICE RACK: WHO USES IT, ANYWAY?

Now go through your spice rack with the same brutality. How many spices do you use when cooking anyway? A rack of 45 or 50 spices makes you look like a great cook, but I want to know who uses each and every one of those anyway!

Don’t forget to go through your food pantry as well. Yes, I’m serious! How many of those foods are you keeping even though you haven’t used in a year . . . or more.

My friend’s father is a wonderful “I bought it because it’s on sale at the grocery store shopper!” He bought jelly because it was a great sale, pickles every time he could save some money and just about every other food you can think of.

When he passed away, her mother brought her much of the food stashed in the pantry. She didn’t need all of it. Well, as her friend and a pro organizer, I helped her inspect much of it before it went in her pantry. And guess what?

Those great bargains eventually expired into losses. Most of the food actually expired and got bad (even the so-called nonperishable food) before she could actually eat it.

Now is as good as time as any to clear your food pantry from any foods like that. If you have non-expired food that you don't eat any longer – either your family's tastes have changed or you've adopted a healthier lifestyle – then give the food to a community food pantry. Not only will you demuck your own life, you'll be lifting your spiritual life up a little – and helping some families in need.

FOOD BASKET ORGANIZATION

A trick I try to use –as often as my family will cooperate – is to buy cheap, plastic baskets at the dollar store. I place them in the cabinets and then organize all sorts of food by “basket.” I have a basket for packages of microwave popcorn. Another for small drink mixes and yet another for bags of taco mix and gravy mix.

I even have a basket that holds the small bottles of spices (I gave up on a spice rack a long time ago) and various specialty meat rubs. Try it. It'll give your cabinets such a nice look that your spouse may even notice. And it certainly will help you find your essentials quicker.

A BAGS TO CONTAINERS SAGA

If you're at all like me, you're probably tired of all the bags of snacks that are in your cabinet (Of course, I'm not tired enough of them not to buy them, now am I?) My mom taught me this little secret. She poured all her bagged foods into some type of container. This included large bags of potato chips – which required fairly large containers, not unlike those that are used in those popcorn gift sets.

You can use this same principle for bags of anything – beans, cereal, unpopped popcorn. Not only does it make your cabinet space look cleaner and more streamlined, it helps to keep the food inside fresher for a longer period of time.

By the time you've completed this exercise (and this indeed may take several hours) your kitchen may be looking a little more . . . well, Spartan.

But you can rest assured that it will probably never really be bare like poor old Mother Hubbard's Cupboards.

THE REFRIGERATOR: NO! NO! NOT THAT!

Now, let's turn to the dreaded refrigerator. No! No! Not the refrigerator! Do you really know what's in that dish with the green fuzzies growing on top.

If your refrigerator is anything like my household, it's more of a (prolonged) pit stop for my leftovers before I toss them into the garbage. Quite frankly, if the leftovers are edible, I can't bear to throw them out. And this is true even when I'm quite sure no one in the house even cared for them enough when they were fresh. It just eases my conscience some to toss them after they are inedible.

If you've been fearful of tackling this job because you dread the thought of actually emptying the plates or containers of these nasty, live organisms, come to terms by just tossing out container and all. Many of the containers these days are considered "disposable" anyway. Those you know you just can't part with? Just suck it and clean 'em, then. Good luck.

THE DINING ROOM: DO PEOPLE REALLY EAT IN IT?

Many clients dining room tables have more use as a school desk than a dining area. Especially when kids are home schooled, they perform countless science experiments at the table, take standardized tests here, and even learn multiplication tables on the dining room table.

When I was growing up, our dining room table was the automatic drop off point for anything dealing with school. As we entered the house at the end of the school day, backpacks and other equipment would be literally dumped on the table as we either went straight to the bathroom or hit the refrigerator for a much needed snack. Sound familiar?

Today, we have so much more going on in our lives. Maybe you have an ongoing jigsaw puzzle on your table. Or perhaps your table is the home of the perpetually living scrapbooking project.

Whatever it is, it's about time that the ongoing project and drop off point find other homes. You're about to reclaim your dining room.

Did you just realize what I've said. We – as a society – seldom use our dining room tables to eat from. So, what hard and fast rule says it has to sit in the middle of the dining room? Some people (myself included) tuck my table up against a wall.

On those rare occasions when we do eat here (and we need to take up more chair space than is available with this layout) I pull the table out. Until then it sits nicely in the corner. The key is that it makes the dining room appear more spacious and less mucky. If you can, give this a try. See if you don't agree with me.

If you think you like it this way, you may want to add a bench to your set. This way the bench can always be up against the wall, available for seating while the table has a permanent home in the corner. The best of both worlds!

RETHINK THAT SIDEBOARD OR BUFFET

My mother called it a buffet; others call it a sideboard. Whatever you refer to it as, give it some thought. What exactly do you keep in there that really needs stored from day to day? Is that a piece of furniture you can give to your children or donate to a charity? Perhaps you can even sell it on a web site?

Go through your sideboard. Figure out where you can house those items (or maybe just toss them some of them) then seriously consider getting the big piece of furniture out of the room.

Not only will it make the room look bigger, it also makes it appear a little less cluttered as well.

What? You say you'd love to get rid of that sideboard, but where would you store your napkins.

Well, how about this combination? If you've already arranged your dining room table into the corner, consider placing a bench against a wall with a seat that doubles as storage – a combination bench, deacon's bench if you will.

Some people actually take a small dresser drawer originally intended for a bedroom and transfer this to the dining room. It takes up less space than the sideboard, but still has plenty of storage room for napkins and tablecloths.

WHY A DINING ROOM AT ALL?

Why, indeed!

Recently, a friend of mine bought a new house. I walked into her house to discover that the space previously assigned as a dining

room was now a mini living room. It held a small stereo, CDs, a small loveseat and books.

As a person with a fetish for reading it gave me a great idea. My next dining room will probably be a reading room. Book shelves, a comfy reading chair, good lighting. And since it's right next to the kitchen – as all well placed dining rooms are – it's close to the coffee maker for me. I can read and sip at the same time.

Perhaps you want your dining room to be a home office. Or maybe a sewing room, if that's your passion. Why waste space using it as something not necessary.

If the time ever comes that you need to host a large family dinner, then you can consider placing a table in the living room or even the family room, which traditionally has more room than that dining room anyway!

These tips are great starters. Yes, you heard me right! Feel free to continue to analyze your kitchen and dining areas. I'm sure you'll discover on your own personal level even more battles where "operation add space" can be mobilized.

In the meantime, let's get a few creative ideas going for the bedrooms! No, don't go running out of the house like that. I promise you, it'll be relatively painless!

CHAPTER 4: BEDROOM MUCK: BE GONE! (INCLUDING CLOSETS!)

Pick a bedroom, any bedroom. It can be one of your children's or if you're brave enough it can be yours. Every bedroom seems to be a natural magnet for muck. If you wonder why, just think about it.

It's out of the way of guest traffic and easy enough to close the door instead of demucking or cleaning. A hallway with the doors to the bedrooms closed looks quite nice. (Of course, that sign your teenager has hanging on his door "Enter at your own risk" is a tell tale giveaway of muck . . . and more inside!)

That being said, you just may be in need of the "turbocharged" demucking system. Here is a quick way to make any bedroom look a little bit right from the very start.

EMPTY THE WASTE BASKET

Yes, it's that simple. Of course, even you can see that it's brimming over with left over Taco Bell wrappers, candy bar wrappers, old newspapers and more. Why can't kids learn to . . .

Wait, this is your bedroom and not your child's. Hmm.

STRAIGHTEN UP THOSE PILES OF BOOKS AND MAGAZINES.

Don't have time to put them away properly. Then just piling them up neatly and placing them along the wall will make the room appear much neater. Especially if they're scattered all over the floor and the bed. (How do they sleep with their books covering half the bed like that?)

GET A BASKET AND USE IT FOR TEMPORARY STORAGE

This is especially helpful for a girl's bedroom. Take all that stuff from makeup to earrings and necklaces and place it in a basket. Now you can actually see the dresser top (and you won't step on any earrings lying around the floor). You actually haven't solved the problem yet, but you've certainly tamed it some – and sometimes that's all we can hope for.

MAKE THE BED

A bed that's actually made helps a room look more organized and well, civilized. Even if you replace some of those books that your children are using back on the bed (perhaps you can arrange them a little nicer) a bed that's made pulls the bedroom together.

RUN THE VACUUM CLEANER

Performing this one single task can make the room look vastly more demucked and clean. It's truly amazing. Of course, this isn't so easy to do if there are 17,000 items laying around the floor!

If unexpected company calls and you can do nothing else with a bedroom, run the sweeper quickly through the room (and by all the means, the rest of your house) Then stand back a moment before that doorbell announces them and view the difference with just that one small chore completed.

Now, let's look a little deeper into this bedroom mess – if you dare!

Personally, I hate dressers. It really doesn't matter what kind of dressers, I hate them all because they typically make you get dressed in two separate areas, the closet and the bedroom. I haven't owned a dresser for years. All of my clothes fit in the closet. If I had my way, my bedroom would be half sleeping area and half reading area. I'd have a chair, a small table, and a lamp across the room from my bed. And here I would retreat on a cozy night, tightly wrapped in a blanket and reading a good book.

But alas, I realize that a certain amount of storage needs to be housed in the bedroom. A client of mine came across a wonderful idea to collect much of this storage into one area. She discovered an old-fashioned apothecary chest in her mother's attic.

You know the kind, I'm sure. It's filled with all sorts of compartmentalized drawers that can hold a multitude of miscellaneous things – just like you usually accumulate on your dresser.

She added this to her bedroom and really enjoyed not only the organizational freedom it gave her, but the quaint look it added to her room. Then she took a tall dresser – not a wide one – and placed that in her bedroom as well.

It took up less floor space than a wide one, and she discovered it held even more clothes than that monstrous wide thing. And since these type of dressers actually have more drawers than the wide ones, you can actually store a wider variety of clothes (and yes, other items) in them.

Don't be afraid to pull that same storage trick in the bedroom that you have in the living room. Choose a hinged end table as a night stand. Or if you're an antique buff, you may discover that an old steamer trunk not only provides a glorious touch of class to your bedroom, but doubles as storage as well.

Even an old fashioned barrel with a lid can add a nice touch to a bed room. You can use the barrel as a nightstand. You can also use it to store off-season clothes.

THE CLOSET

Now what are you doing with that flashlight? And that hardhat? You're venturing into your closet? You're taking the flashlight along so you don't trip over anything? And you're wearing the hardhat so in case anything falls from an upper shelf, you're not injured too badly?

Do I believe there's any hope of demucking your closet? Of course, there's always hope. But the initial steps may be a bit painful for you.

The first thing you really need to do is to go through all those clothes that are stuffed on that rack. Yes, I have noticed you can barely move them back and forth you have so many. Get your box of charity bound items ready, because some of your clothes eventually are destined for this container. Don't panic, quite yet. Items you keep have to pass a test. For every article of clothing in your closet, ask these three questions concerning it:

Does it still fit?

Do I still wear it?

Is the color flattering?

Do I need it? (Aha! That's the clincher there!)

If your answer to any one of them is "no," place the article of clothing in the charity box. It's gone! I'm sure that still leaves quite a few pieces, but this exercise also serves its point: of demucking your closet.

Do the same for your shoes as well. Try on each pair because as we age, our feet expand and grow. If your shoes are over 5 years old, I would wager that they might be a bit too snug for comfort.

Now take a quick look around. What's left? And how well is it organized? No, I don't suggest you store that bowling ball on the top shelf. Bring down on the floor here (now that you've eliminated a half dozen pairs of shoes or so). Are there other items that can be at least stored together in bins.

One of the beauties of the closet is that it doesn't have to be beautiful to be storage container. Take an old cardboard box if that's all you have for the moment to store all those old notebooks from college (but then again, do you really still need them?).

Got other papers that you know you just can't toss? Use a milk crate if you must. Nobody but you and a few other family members are going to see your containers, so it really doesn't matter what it looks like.

And while you're at it, have every member of your family go through his or her closet in the same way. You may have to supervise some of the younger members. There's no use keeping a tee-shirt that is three sizes too small for your youngest child. Donate it to a church rummage sale or have your own yard sale.

Organize any toys or other items in the children's room according into certain categories. Put them all in a storage bin, milk crate or even a box.

WHAT TYPE OF BOX IS BEST?

Have access to one of those great sturdy boxes that reams of paper come in? If you work at an office, you just may be able to get your hands on one or two.

If you can, use these boxes as storage bins in your closets and your children's. Place the lid on the bottom of the box. If you have to move – or your children switch bedrooms, you've got an automatic box for moving. Just place the lid on it and go!

If you're moving from the house, just be sure to mark what's in the box and that it goes back into a closet. When the box reaches its destination, then all you need to do is take the lid off, place it back on the bottom of the box and place the entire thing back in the closet. Moving is painful enough. Every little bit helps.

YOUR CHILDREN'S BEDROOMS

Don't you always dread cleaning up after your children in their room? No matter how often you clean it, it always seems like a tornado permanently resides there, just waiting to scatter things everywhere once again. (Oh, wait! That's no tornado that's my child!)

There are a few things you can do to keep the room spotless, without spending the entire day in there!

THE 9-MINUTE BIN SECRET

Grab a bin. Or a laundry basket. Or a box. Something easy to hold and deep, that will fill plenty.

Going clockwise around the room, pick up everything that doesn't belong and throw it in the bin. This works great for toys, but clothing can get tossed in there, as well as makeup, jewelry, and

anything that simply doesn't go there.

This will eliminate 90% of the clutter, and take two minutes, tops. Stash the bin in a closet for emergencies, family 'get-togethers', or spend about 5 minutes putting things where they need to be in that room.

The toys that go in that room, put back in the toy chest. The jewelry gets put in the jewelry box. Leave the dirty laundry in the bin.

Are there things from other rooms in there? Great. Take the bin and go to those rooms, and put things back. Make your end stop by the laundry, and dump the rest of the clothing in the washing machine. Simple, easy, and hassle free.

If your child happens to be a teenager, or rambunctious boy, the room probably smells freshly of dirt, sweat, and dirty laundry. It happens.

To remedy this, take a dryer sheet and put one in the bottom of every drawer, at least one at the bottom of a dirty laundry bin, and a few in the closet, wrapped around a hanger or discretely taped to the back of the wall.

Sound extreme? Maybe, but dryer sheets are cheap and easy to replace. Just try it and see the amazing different it makes as they slowly release the scent into the air. Change them once a week to once ever two weeks, and you'll be far more willing to step into your child's bedroom!

THE CLOSETS

No one wants to step into it. Ugh, you don't even want to think about it. Cleaning the closet has to be the hardest part of cleaning through the house! There's no room to move, you have too much stuff, and you have no idea what to do with any of it!

Well, cleaning the closet actually doesn't have to be that hard. In less than ten minutes for each closet, you can have it sparkling and like new, with a bit of organization fit into so it won't get that bad again. Sound like a plan?

HALL CLOSETS

Does it seem like the hall closet is where everything ends up? Old

jackets, books, movies, snow shovels, forgotten or broken toys, board games... going through one of these babies is like discovering a gold mine of new and exciting things.

The easiest way to clean these suckers out is to take everything out of it and put things back one by one, finding the place for them and throwing what you don't need away. That's a hassle! Not to mention it would take hours to get done properly.

Instead, let's take it section by section, working down.

Grab a stool or small ladder, and get eye level with that top shelf. Yes, you know the dreaded top shelf. (It's particularly dreaded if you're a little on the short side, as I am!)

Stack the board games on the left, largest on the bottom. Gloves should go in a small basket if you have one, along with scarves and ear muffs. Take the 'hunting', 'camping' and 'other' equipment that fits up there, and stack it neatly in the corner.

Everything else on that shelf can be stacked in the remaining space if it fits there. If it doesn't belong, put it in a bin outside of the closet, but don't leave that area! It will be hard to get started again once you've stopped.

Now, check out what's hanging. Assorted clothing, winter items, a hundred jackets, and probably even some hunting or fishing gear. It's truly amazing it all fit there to begin with, huh?

Be honest with yourself and go through everything. If you haven't seen this jacket in three years, you won't wear it – put it in a garbage bag to give away, and move on. Clothes that don't belong there, like dress blazers, light sweaters, and pants go into your bin outside.

COATS, JACKETS, AND MORE --OH, MY!

Winter coats on the left, light jackets in the middle, and assorted equipment to the right! Going through this quickly, you shouldn't spend more than five minutes on your coats. It's not hard, and be honest!

Now, get off the stool and on your knees. Oh yes, the floor of the closet. It's probably littered with forgotten toys, shoes two sizes too small, and ugly gifts given by well meaning friends.

Get rid of everything that doesn't fit, and things that don't belong go into your bin to start with. Stacking neatly and orderly works best, and while this can be the most time consuming part of the cleaning process, it is the simplest!

After you're done, take your bin around the house and drop off items where they belong. Don't just dump it in another closet!

Congratulations! You're just about finished with "Operation: Add Space" Closet Edition. I'm sure you have a few more ideas for your this project . . . ideas aimed specifically at your personal style . . . your specific items . . . and the habits of your family.

Sure, why don't you go right ahead and do them right now, before we move on to the living room. I'll wait for you!

CHAPTER 5: LOOK, WE'VE RECLAIMED OUR LIVING ROOM!

It was here when I left for the grocery store, I swear it was.

Maybe I shouldn't have left it alone with a husband, two teenage boys and a golden retriever. Now I can't seem to find it. I hear this all of the time.

What is it that you're looking for? Oh? Oh! Your living room! Yes, that could become a problem. Are you sure it's under all this clutter. Don't panic, we'll find it. Yes, yes, I know you need it tonight, guests are coming!

For some households, the living room is the heart of the house, where we gather to watch TV, play board games, video games, do homework, have those serious heart-to-hearts, and spend time together.

But that also means that you probably have more stuff than what actually fits in your living room. Because of this, it can often be an embarrassment to your house. Fixing this problem, though, isn't as hard as it might sound to you. A little work, and some knowledge on what your end goal is, and you're going to have a really great living room.

FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU WANT TO DO HERE

Is this room a mini library with a TV on the side? Is this where the majority of your entertainment, as far as television watching and video game playing goes on? Maybe this is the room where you all

sit around on a Thursday night and talk about your weekend plans, and what you want to do in the week to come?

There are all sorts of uses for the living room, but remember that it can't do anything and everything – unless your living room is a lot bigger than mine, because I know I sure can't fit it all.

Try to cut back on certain things in the room first to help remove some of the clutter. If you've got a mini-office going on in the corner, see if you can't move it to a room where it will be more out of the way. All that sewing material has to go somewhere, I realize, but is the coffee table the best place to pull all of that out and work on it?

Narrow your focus of what you really want the end result of your living room to be, because if you don't have that goal in mind when you start, you're not going to be going anywhere.

REMOVE WHAT DOESN'T BELONG

Now that you have an idea of what you want in your living room in your mind, remove absolutely everything that doesn't belong and find a place for it in another room. Don't just toss it in there, either – we're not looking to create more muck, after all.

Have something that you don't use? An old book you'll never read, some materials you don't understand, or something else? Make a pile to give it away! The major point of adding space to a room is getting rid of the muck, after all – and there's nothing wrong with giving something to a friend, or donating it to your local Goodwill. Someone else can put it to good use, and it's probably not doing anything but sitting and cluttering that room, after all.

BIG FURNITURE, SMALL ROOM

In many living rooms, we try to stuff as much furniture as possible into it. I still have no idea why, or how this started, but having oversized furniture or just too much furniture in a room that it doesn't fit just makes the entire room seem more cluttered.

It's possible that a brand new furniture set is out of your price range right now, and that's totally understandable. But maybe you've had another set in mind, and have some of the money saved towards it, but not all.

Considering going to a website like Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace and selling your old furniture to help your New

Furniture Fund. Even if you don't sell everything, getting rid of pieces that aren't used and just taking up extra space can make your living room seem more open and welcoming.

THE FAMILY ROOM

Are you even afraid to enter your family room? You're not alone. Many people are. In fact, this room – which really is misnamed in most homes – ends up to be the number two “catchall” for the muck in the house. It ranks right below the garage for piling up items that have no other home.

This only means one thing: you have your work cut out for you here. So just what do you do with those old homework papers lying around, the old newspapers . . . the board games with pieces missing . . . and even those old flower arrangements (wait! That one's not fake. Those flowers are actually dead. Please tell me no one sent you black roses!)

You may have to set aside more time for the family room than you originally thought. But, once you have this area demucked, you can then include it on your route of regular speed cleaning stops. And who knows, the family may actually gather here once more?

“But where else will this stuff go?” Good question. That's why I've included some tips . . . tricks . . . and techniques that have worked for my clients in the past to get some of that stuff off the floors, tables and coffee tables and hidden away until you need it next. (No, just throw that newspaper from last year away. I highly doubt it contains anything valuable in it.)

PROPER STORAGE: THE KEY TO ADDING SPACE

First, let's start at the top! That's right. Think “floor-to-ceiling” storage. Even as ruthless as I am in throwing items away, I realize that a certain amount of “stuff” actually makes a house a home. And you just can't toss some of those games that your family actually does play. It may be that you only play Scrabble once every three months or so, but hey . . . a home just isn't a home if it doesn't own at least one Scrabble board.

The family room is just the right room to place this type of storage facility. Hopefully, you'll find (or create) one large enough to handle other storage problems as well . . . like those Christmas ornaments and decorations.

In fact, consider placing those barely-used-but-essential items on the top shelf. You really barely notice that you're actually storing them when you place them up there!

As your shelving gets lower, store items that are used on a more regular basis – or items that the shorter individuals of the family can easily access.

While you're at it, why not make a special shelf – or even buy a special bookshelf – for items that have been borrowed or rented from local libraries or video stores.

A SHELF FOR LIBRARY BOOKS?

One way to keep your sanity – and your library late fees to a minimum – is through the use of a separate shelf. If you know you had to return it, the book goes to a special area, no matter who rented it. This way you won't waste time – and as it happens at times, also money – on lost books and late fees.

Consider also, the joy of a trunk. At one time I had a coffee table that doubled as a trunk. I stashed all my blankets and afghans in it. And my husband was perfectly happy using this unique piece of furniture to put his feet up on as he watched the Travel and Food channels.

My friend has a wonderful end table that has a hinged top. He actually uses this as a nightstand. His books and other reading material go in there after he's finished reading at night. Both of these ideas work in the family room as well.

And don't forget to check out the versatile armoire. That hard to say piece of furniture is easy storage for toys and books. Look at in a new light. Imagine your children's toys in some of the drawers and books in other places. It's time we adapt those classic pieces to modern living and put them into good use.

CHAPTER 6 BATHROOM MUCK: HEY, THERE REALLY IS A SINK HERE!

So . . . the last time you had company and they wanted to use your bathroom, what did you tell them? Did you tell them all you had available was an outhouse?

If your bathroom is that mucked up, then we need to tackle it right now! It might be almost as frightening as your closet but we can have you back on track in now time flat – guaranteed.

First, let's tackle that medicine closet. (By the way, if I open this door will "things" fall out of it? Take a critical look at your medications – both prescription and over-the-counter. (If you wear reading glasses, I suggest you bring them along!) You're about to toss everything out that has expired. If you have any medicine that is no longer current, you're going to toss it. No questions asked. (And this is more than just a clutter issue --and you know it!)

Not only is this just wasting space, but this could be dangerous. Taking expired medicine has untold ramifications – so be sure to go through each shelf in your house where you may be storing any type of medication (many of us keep it in the kitchen!). Toss what's old and expired!

Got beauty products you haven't used in at least three months? Whether they've officially expired or not, toss them. Once they're opened, the oils with which they're made can go rancid. You needed a good excuse to buy new ones anyway.

Take all those old toothbrushes. Toss them as well. Dentists recommend that you buy new toothbrushes every two months. But how many of us really do? Now is a good time to do it.

One more thing. See that toilet bowl brush sitting in the corner. You might want to trade that thing in now too. I'm certain its packing quite a bit of bacteria. You can go to your local discount store and find disposable toilet bowl cleaners. If you're environmentally conscious, you can buy either buy a "green" cleaner or create a home-made cleaner of your own.

DEMUCKING BATHROOM HINT: THE INVALUABLE BASKET

Take a hint from what we suggested you do with you kitchen cabinets. In the kitchen we bought baskets so we can segregate like items into baskets. Looking for a packet of Kool Aid? It'll be in its own basket.

Now look at your bathroom. You can use the same universal organizing principle here. You can place some of the smaller items in baskets. These baskets can be segregated into categories of what they hold – all hair items are contained with one small basket or container. There are also simple little plastic three drawer containers available almost everywhere. Most bathrooms have room to fit one off to the side of the pipes below the sink.

You can also divide items by family member. Your teenage girl's bathroom necessities can be stored alone in one (or more reasonable several) container. Once you've done this all you need to do is find an appropriate home for this container. Some individuals like to store them in the bathroom itself. And if you have enough room, this is my favorite practice.

But if your bathroom isn't featured on one of the home improvement channels or the magazine *House Beautiful*, then you may not have the storage space in it for these containers.

You may need to consider that these "bathroom bundles" be stored in the family member's bedroom – or even a nearby linen closet. And each member totes his own to the bathroom when he needs it.

I know one woman who came to summer camp as a counselor toting a fishing tackle box. I really didn't think a lot about it, since the camp had a great fishing lake. Soon I discovered the tackle box didn't hold bobbers, lures or other fishing paraphernalia. It held all her bathroom needs. Makeup. Eyeliner. Hair ties. I thought it was a clever idea.

If you don't mind lugging something bulky around with you, give it a try.

I know, I know! For such a small room, I seem to have much to say about it. But precisely because the room is small and storage space is normally at a premium, is the reason I'm spending so much time trying to help you demuck it. Look at your walls. You may want to look up and see if you can add shelving or a wall-mounted cabinet to help store necessary "stuff."

You can either put towels in these areas or you can place your toiletries bottles out of sight. If you decide to store towels, consider rolling them for storage instead of just folding them only. I first saw this method at a very nice resort like bathroom – and I fell in love with the look. Give it a try, especially if you're using only shelving and the towels will be "on display" so to speak.

A COAT RACK IN THE BATHROOM?

Got enough room in your bathroom for a "tree" coat rack? If you do consider buying one. Your family members can hang their pajamas and robes here as well as that change of clothes instead of using that floor (even though the floor is a darn right convenient "hanger".)

And to one of the biggest problems we have with bathrooms, especially small ones. You've just returned from your favorite "big box" store – whether that be Costco or Sam's Club or whatever is available in your area.

And you've bought an extremely large bundle of toilet paper. So large, in fact, that you're sure you won't have to buy toilet paper for another six months (always my goal. I just resent spending money on it!). If you can't find any place to store the toilet paper, then you may need to re-think your cost-cutting strategy.

Yes, I've pulled this paragraph from personal experience. I realized when my husband and I moved into a smaller space much of my "industrialized shopping" days were over. There was simply not the convenient storage space I was used to!

THE LINEN CLOSET

This particular closet isn't quite as scary as the clothes closets. But you still need to examine this space with a critical eye. Why may I ask are you keeping those frayed and bleached out towels when you've just bought a new set. It's time to get rid of them. Can't stand to get rid of them? Then donate them to an animal shelter. Many shelters use them to help keep their dogs and cats cozy. It keeps them from sleeping on the hard floor.

So how many towels does one family need?

I'm glad you asked that! Phyllis Harbinger, who not only is an interior designer, but an certified practitioner in the art of feng shui, has a suggestion. She suggests that every family should have enough towels to sustain each member for two weeks.

Her recommendations: two washcloths, two beach towels, two bath towels (four for those individuals who use a towel to wrap their wet hair) per family member. Additionally, you'll want two sets of hand towels as well. These hand towels two serve purposes.

As a Professional Organizer, my suggestion is that you keep two sets of sheets for each bed. Three sets tops, and only if you like to sleep on flannel during the winter. Store each sheet set into a bundle with the fitted and pillow covers wrapped up like a taco within the flat folded sheet. This will end the tiresome chore of finding the proper pillowcases when you remake the bed!

CHAPTER 7 BASEMENT . . . ATTIC . . . GARAGE: THE TRUE TEST OF YOUR WILL POWER

Why do people store \$50,000 cars in their driveways – exposed to all the elements 24/7? Because their garages of filled with junk they can't bear to part with.

And while that may sound like yet another Zen riddle, it's sadly the truth for the majority of us. Okay, so maybe your car isn't worth \$50,000. But then all the accumulated junk in your garage isn't worth nearly half of what your car is. So just where is the logic?

You can see this coming, can't you? Here's another yardstick to measure the toss or not toss question by. If it's been sitting in your garage for three years without being used, please, please toss it. Donate it to charity, sell it at a yard sale or simply put it out with the garbage, depending on what "it" is and what "it's" condition is.

The goal of this exercise is to get that poor car, which has been sitting out in the cold, rain and sun back into its rightful home – the garage.

Need some help in deciding exactly what should be tossed? Here's a quick checklist of some of the more popular items people think they have to hang on to.

CANS OF PARTIALLY USED PAINT

We all have at least one can --and we all know better! But for some unknown reason we keep it. Get rid of it. Especially if it's in that custom-mixed color partially ripened melon. Where in the world are you ever going to use that color again. You painted your daughter's room that color more than 10 years ago. Even if you didn't repaint her room "Truer than True Black" during her Goth stage, you couldn't match that other color with anything even if you tried.

Sports junk that's broken. No one is going to play badminton with that broken racket. The same thing goes for that tennis racket. Just toss them. Even the thrift store can't use them.

CAR ACCESSORY ITEMS

We're talking about touch up paint for the 1985 Pacer that you sold some 10 years ago. Do you really still need that can of paint? What about those wheel rims for the 1988 Reliant K Car (yeah, the one that looked like a box!). Why in the world would you keep that?

You ended up have a junk yard tow truck come and take that thing away! Is it really a reminder of those "good old days"?

LADDERS THAT ARE MORE DANGEROUS THAN HELPFUL

You know the ladder I'm talking about. Anytime anyone ever brings this ladder out of the garage you jump out of your chair, flaying your hands and yelling, "No, don't use that ladder, you'll kill yourself."

Unless you're seriously hoping your spouse will use the ladder while you're gone so the murder does look accidental, get rid of it. (Otherwise make the fake accident worth the effort – you better have lots of life insurance on him!)

BICYCLES AND OTHER AGE-RELATED TOYS

Bicycles, tricycles and other recreational vehicles that are either hopelessly beyond your capability of repairing or your children have totally outgrown. If you can't repair the bike or (and this is usually the case) you can't find the bike for all the rust, toss it.

There comes a point when keeping an item because of its potential worth to someone, somewhere in the great unknown of this world just isn't really reasonable nor practical. I think you've hit that point with that bike right there!

WHAT ABOUT THESE DANGED TOOLS?

Or you should have heard my friend the other day. She ranted about her husband's tools. And rightly so. She bought him an early Christmas present - a large tool chest. The type that professional mechanics use. And when he was done installing a small gas burning stove in the basement, where did he stash his tools.

Bingo! In the box that the stove came in. Oh yes, he had a good excuse. But part of the purpose of buying that tool box was to help clear the muck from the garage. Even the best of intended demucking plans go awry without the cooperation of every family member. (And in the husband's defense, he did have a very good excuse. . .)

My Dad used the old fashioned method to store many of his tools. He simply bought pegboard to hang in the garage. He then bought hooks. He hung the most used tools closest to his work

bench. From there he branched out to those that he used with less frequency.

TWO OF THE MOST FEARSOME PLACES: THE ATTIC AND BASEMENT

These two rooms are by nature assigned to the clutter hall of fame. While we may abhor muck in every other room in our house, we somehow give ourselves permission to create it here.

Let's start at the bottom. The basement. If you live in an old home, your basement may not be finished. Heck, I once lived in an older home once where half of the floor of the basement was nothing but bricks – yes, bricks.

Another home I actually grew up in did have a basement with a cement floor, but there was nothing “finished” about it. While Mom did the laundry down there, I even hesitated to play down there, it looked that bad and felt that damp.

Today though, if you have a basement, you've probably at least have a portion of it finished. You may even have a rec room or other livable space in your basement.

So you need to treat it like any other spot in your house. Don't use it as a dumping ground for boxes of items you don't know what to do with.

Now, I totally understand that the basement can cover a lot of ground. So while you stand there with garbage bag in hand, eyes glazed over with fear, let's steer you in the proper direction.

ONE BOX AT A TIME: BREAK YOUR GOALS DOWN

See that corner right there? Start there. The point is to pick a corner. Then work sections at a time. Do you have an abundance of boxes. Check them out as quickly as possible. If you discover one box is entirely holiday decorations, then using a permanent marker, mark it so. You can always come back later to sort through that (and perhaps place it in a nice plastic storage bin). At least for now, you know what's in there.

Demucking a large space like the basement appears overwhelming unless you break the task into smaller more manageable tasks. Today's goal may be to just discover what's lurking in each of these boxes and toss the most grievous of this junk. And that's great. Just keep in mind that once this first step is completed, you'll still

have several more steps to go.

This is your initial clean up. When you find a box or bin with items you can tell you aren't going to want to keep, then dig into it. However, for the time being – and to conserve your time and help you to stay on track – don't try to transform the basement all at once.

When you have one corner completed, move on – clockwise – to the next area of muck. Do the same thing here. If it's a box with needed supplies, mark it and set it aside. If however it's storing that flower-power outfit from the 1970s that you are never going to wear again (and your children refuse to wear) toss it. Those days are thankfully long gone.

If you truly believe that an item is salvageable, but you don't want it, consider giving it to a thrift store or church sale (for real vintage period clothes in good condition a community theatre may benefit from your collection). Otherwise, consider this all past-prime material and toss!

If you don't own a dehumidifier and use it in the basement, or have already waterproofed your cellar, then you may be disappointed by condition of some of your "treasures." You may discover that the damp basement has claimed some of the life of certain collectible pieces. You may even discover that some of your items are damaged beyond repair by the damp, dank conditions of your basement. If that's the case, it's best to cut your losses and toss the items out. There's no use crying over items already damaged.

THE ATTIC: BUT IT'S SUPPOSED TO LOOK THIS WAY!

Unless your home is old, storing items in your attic is actually more trouble than it's worth. I lived in one old house where a portion of the attic was transformed into my own cozy bedroom. The rest of it had a huge amount of storage with doors leading into deep recessed areas.

Alas! This usually isn't the case. In the next home I had, I feared going up into the attic. The floors weren't finished. Even one of our cats feared venturing up there. We swore the attic was haunted. The poor cat was never quite the same after being closed up there for several days (yes, accidentally, of course!)

If you've stored anything in an attic then you know that the attic is hot –very hot – in the summer. And just like your basement, you need to be careful exactly what you store there.

Antique and collectibles expert warn us never to store our collectible items in either of these spots. Both areas have the potential to damage our treasures. I can certainly understand why.

If you're using your attic as storage, you need to use the same strategy for demucking that you used in the basement. It may take two or even three stages of demucking before you actually make the progress you'd like. But trust me, it's definitely worth the effort.

Congratulations! You've just made it completely through your home executing "Operation De-mucking." Now take a moment, step back and see what a difference even these seemingly trivial steps have added up to.

Pretty impressive, huh?

Some people claim the rewards you reap from this process go far beyond merely reclaiming the space of your house. Some say there are emotional, spiritual . . . and even financial benefits to this process.

And that is exactly what we cover briefly in the next chapter.

Part III

The Unexpected Benefits of Adding Space To Your Life

Ah! Yes. Life is good now isn't it? You can kick back and actually relax in your living room. It's almost pleasant to cook in the kitchen with the counter clutter gone. And your bedroom actually beckons you to visit it.

But . . . wait. Did you experience it too? Yes, when I got through de-mucking my house, I experienced several financial improvements in my life. In fact, it was right after that I was able to relocate to California . . . and my husband received a new job.

Coincidence? Not according to some individuals. Discover in Part III, the totally unexpected benefits some have received because they instituted an "Operation De-Clutterization of their own.

CHAPTER 8:

SERENDIPITOUS BENEFITS FROM ADDING SPACE AND DE-MUCKING YOUR LIFE

Muck. I can live with muck, you say. I've been living with it for quite a while. What's so wrong or unproductive about living with clutter? That's just the way I am. If you don't like it, don't visit my house.

Well, yes, I suppose that is one argument, now isn't it? But that monologue (and did I detect a defensive posture?) indicates that perhaps you really don't have the entire scoop on this clutter thing.

Muck does more than just take up space. Studies are not revealing what feng shui experts have been trying to explain to us all along. Clutter can affect your health (and not for the better!), make you feel sluggish and congested, draining energy from you.

Okay, so I don't expect you to believe me right away. I can read the skepticism in your eyes. You don't have to believe me or your friendly, neighborhood feng shui expert.

But how about at least listening to a few well-documented scientific and clinical studies? Would something like that at least plant a bit of doubt about the negative effects of clutter in your life?

Let's just tackle this from a purely logical viewpoint. You're all prepared to tackle your new jogging program. You've outlined your goals . . . you've committed yourself to a time . . . you've even chosen the track you're going to run every other day.

So you wake up to the big morning you're going to start your new program. You're all dressed, ready to leave the house and

BAM!

Your whole program is held up . . . put on hold . . . and living in limbo . . . all because your closet is too cluttered to find those jogging shoes.

Not only that, but now you're getting really irritated, ticked off and ready to throw something (if only you could find those jogging shoes to throw!).

By the time you do dig them out of the closet, you've really lost

your motivation to jog. You put on a pot of coffee and drive to the closest bakery to buy a couple of doughnuts for breakfast.

That's just one way that muck can have a detrimental effect on your life.

But the adverse effects of clutter can go deeper --far deeper --than that. Health experts, public health officials and natural health experts are all beginning to agree on one thing: Muck / clutter can negatively affect the state of your health. And in a big way.

A house strewn with clutter can make you ill . . . mentally . . . emotionally . . . and even physically. And I hate to harp back to your feng shui consultant, but she is absolutely right. Muck really does create an unpleasant and stagnant energy that affects all who are living in the home.

Your body absorbs this stale energy and over a given time period, eventually absorbs it like it absorbs any toxins from the environment.

Some experts see muck not as a "house" problem. Rather, they view it as a "person" problem. Confused? At least that's the opinion of David F. Tolin, director of the anxiety disorders center at the Institute of Living in Hartford. He's also adjunct associate professor of psychiatry at Yale University.

"The person [experiencing the clutter/muck problem] needs to fundamentally change their behavior," he explains. Excessive clutter as well as inherent disorganization are, many times, symptoms of a health problem --not a spatial problem.

Consider this as food for thought. Those individuals who have suffered an emotional trauma or have experienced some type of brain damage very often find that housekeeping tasks are insurmountable chores.

But they aren't the only ones who find it difficult to keep their houses spic and span. Those people with attention deficit disorder also struggle in this area, as do with chronic pain and those who are dealing with grief.

Or perhaps some emotional blockage is keeping you from buying into this muck-free living. Many times our resistance to clearing our houses . . . freeing them from the clutches of unused, unnecessary stuff, can be summed up in a single word: fear!

Indeed, we touched upon this briefly in a previous chapter. But it's true. And the rewards of overcoming this fear are great.

Some psychologists tell you that an individual who fears clearing muck really has a deep-seated fear of success. He worries that if you clears the muck he won't be able to life up to the potential he knows he possesses (but isn't using).

Other mental health experts say that clearing muck brings you eye to eye with the past. You have to confront certain failures. Maybe by pulling out those college notebooks and textbooks reminds you that you never did get that job you always dreamed of writing for The New York Times.

But more than that, clearing the muck jabs at your side that the person who went to college with is now business editor of National Public Radio. Shouldn't that be you on the radio today and not her? Just how did you let that happen?

Muck, indeed, can be comforting. It can be the material equivalent of a pint of your favorite flavor of Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

DE-MUCK: RECLAIM POSITIVE ENERGY FLOW

From I've just described, you might think that clearing your house of muck in order to re-create that positive energy flow is a complete waste of time. You may be tempted to rationalize your avoidance of muck clearing simply by saying, "I'm just going to mess up the house again, so why try?"

In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Knowing what you know now, it's more important than ever that you clear your house of the unwanted, unused material items. It's more important than you can even imagine that you clear out the old, stale, negative energy (by clearing muck) and allow the new, fresh, positive energy to flow through the home.

When you start on your amazing --if challenging --journey of adding space and de-mucking, remember that it is also a journey of rediscovery. Keep in mind, during this process --whether it's a day or a week-long process --the five basic principles of de-mucking your world.

If you're aware of these as you go through your clearing process then you'll recognize the significance of your act. Just that fact

alone makes it all the more likely you'll be able to make this round of "de-mucking" stick.

You'll be especially successful in the long-term if you always remember these five principles of "de-clutterization."

DE-MUCKING PRINCIPLE #1: YOUR EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT REFLECTS THE INNER YOU

You can deny or you can accept this fact. Most of us, though, shake our heads in agreement. When I let my house fall back into a cramped up everything on top of everything else space, that's when I find myself disagreeable, hard to live with and just generally dissatisfied with life.

When, however, I've got my ducks in a row at home, so to speak, (no I don't have real ducks, yet!), I discover that I'm more tolerant, much more productive as well as overall happier.

DE-MUCKING PRINCIPLE #2 IDEALLY, YOUR HOME ENVIRONMENT SUPPORTS WHAT IS CURRENTLY MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU

It's true! Walk into a "grandmother's" home and you'll find the walls filled not only with photos of her children, but with dozens -or more --photos of her grandchildren as well. Her external environment reflects her pride of being a mom and grandmother.

Don't think for a moment that this "just happened." I'm sure this woman consciously arranged her home to display her family photos.

A person whose passion is gardening decorates and organizes her house to reflect this. It's almost an unconscious act for many of us. And so it should be with you. My daughter and I sublet an apartment in New York City several years ago from a friend. Three glorious weeks at the height of the Christmas season.

What was the most important thing in our friend's life. Her budding acting career. She had autographed photos of several nationally known actresses as well as herself in various productions.

And so it should be with you. What are your passions? Your family? Golf? Tennis? Teaching? Organize and decorate your home to reflect this.

Currently, I'm manifesting a new home. One shelf on my bookcase is covered with images of my new home. There are so many images in fact that they are beginning to overflow onto the floor by my bed. But this is a total reflection of my intention at the moment.

And I'm quite content with the shelf like this. In fact, I prefer this. Every day when I lie down to sleep, the vision boards talk to me. They tell me to spend my last waking hours seeing my new home as it will be.

DE-MUCKING PRINCIPLE #3 CLEAR THE CLUTTER AND ADD SPACE ONE AREA AT A TIME

If it makes it easier to begin, clear the muck one small corner at a time. Recently I realized I had lost motivation.

Then I looked around me. Sure enough, the muck had begun growing. I didn't realize that there were some clothes in the bedroom I hadn't put away. They had morphed into a large pile of clothes at the end of the bed.

Papers were clogging the creativity in my office. I vowed I would start getting rid of every project that was still waiting but had never yet been started from the past years good intention. Every time I sat down at my desk, I perused another incomplete project and made a quick decision to toss. As I left my work area, I took one piece of something or other out with me.

It got thrown away or put away on that particular trip. By midmorning of my first day, I had made a small difference in my home office. And I was beginning to feel it too. My breathing was easier and my writing was moving along at faster than the snail's pace than it had been.

If you can't stand to tackle a whole home, break it up into segments then . . . give yourself some time of deadline and then stick to it. You'll be surprised by even starting the "add space" program how much more organized and neat your rooms look . . . how much better you feel . . . and how much more satisfying your life truly is.

DE-MUCKING PRINCIPLE #4 DON'T BE AFRAID TO INSTITUTE THE INFAMOUS 12-MONTH RULE OF DE-MUCKING

Oh, yes! You know what it is. If you haven't used it in the last 12 months, it's highly unlikely you're going to need it in the near future. Toss it! It's nothing but muck!

Whoa! Slow down there! Don't throw those tax returns out!
Important documents are the exception to this rule.

But I know there are a few of you who will whine that the moment you throw it away you'll need it. Perhaps. But chances are slim to none. So toss it.

DE-MUCKING PRINCIPLE #5 BE CONSISTENT BUT DON'T EXPECT TO BE PERFECT

What? Me? Not perfect as a professional organizer? Imagine that! Your home may never look like those in House Beautiful magazine. But you've done a great job of clearing some of the negative energy that had been hanging around.

And you know that this isn't going to be the last time you have to do this. But until that next time gets here, you'll be living (relatively) spacious and clutter free --and experiencing the awesome liberating effects of its energizing potential.

COMPULSIVE HOARDERS

While the chances are good, you're not a compulsive hoarder, there are many out there. For these individuals, clutter is taken to the most extreme form where it's nearly overtaking the entire house. Some of the people live with clutter that is so bad that they don't have an entire couch to sit on or a bed to sit on.

Not only is this dangerous from a health standpoint, it's a downright fire hazard in many situations.

At one time, science wasn't quite sure what to make of these individuals. Why? Why was it so necessary (and that's the only word) for these persons to hang on to all this stuff for so very long --at the very endangerment of their own health and welfare?

Now that technology has advanced, science has had the privilege to actually study their brain waves. This gives us some understanding --and even more compassion --for others and ourselves as we struggle with the problem of clutter. It also shows you quite vividly that clutter in some aspects has nothing to do with storage space and everything to do with attitude!

Dr. Tolin recently conducted a study of these individuals who compulsively collect clutter and muck. He used some of the newest brain

scan technology available. The hoarders, whose brains were attached electronically to the scanner, viewed a variety of possessions. They were told to make decisions whether to keep the item or throw it out.

The items were shredded in front of the individuals, so they knew the decision they made was final. When the hoarder made the decision to save or toss, increased activity appeared in a portion of the person's brain.

The activity appeared in the orbitofrontal cortex. This is a portion of the brain involved, not surprisingly, in decision making and planning.

The scan just didn't show regular increased activity though, according to Dr. Tolin. It displayed an unusual degree of function.

"That part of the brain," Dr. Tolin commented, "appeared to be stressed to the max." Interestingly, he compared the activity to those who didn't suffer from this hoarding problem. Making similar decisions caused no extra brain activity and certain no stress.

Why am I telling you all of this, even though you're not a hoarder? Yes, to give you a fuller understanding of your situation, but to also help you to learn from these individuals and this research.

The spectrum running from cleanliness to messiness as it were includes those people who are chronically disorganized (at least at home) and who, additionally, may be suffering emotionally, physically or even socially.

Cognitive behavioral therapy appears to help many hoarders. Within six months of starting such a program, there is an amazing decline in the clutter in the person's living space.

GIVE UP THE MUCK AND FIND AN UNEXPECTED REWARD

Have you heard the story about the divorced mom who successfully started a business, but hit a stagnant period in its growth?

Once she received her divorce and had to search for a serious job to support herself and her child, she had to give up her first love: community theatre. It obviously wasn't paying the bills. But more than that she couldn't justify spending the large amount of time

required away from her child or her job.

She had stashed a large box of scripts and other memorabilia from her stage days under the kitchen table, there being no other room after she downsized from a house to an apartment.

Finally, she had kicked the box one to many times and just tossed it. Out it went. One box of muck. Not only did she realize she felt good about getting rid of the box, but she also felt an emotional release. She finally recognized that theatre was --at least for the moment --an activity that was in her past.

Her time, she now realized, should be spent on her business and her child. As soon as the box hit the curb, curiously, it appeared as if the floodgates opened on her business and her profits and activity soared to the next, very successful, new level of income.

This is not an unusual experience. I see things like this happen all of the time with clients.

NEED TO LOSE WEIGHT? LOSE YOUR MUCK FIRST!

Peter Walsh author of *Does This Clutter Make My Butt Look Fat?* regularly sees a link between individuals who get exasperated and intolerant of both their body weight and the clutter in their home at the same time.

More than one individual has made the decision to change the way they live and begin to lose weight at the same time. They say to themselves: I'm not going to live like this any longer. I'm not going to hang on to this clutter. And then in the next breath say: I'm not going to hold onto my weight another moment longer.

Which came first the decision to toss the mountain of unused items or the desire to lose weight? It's hard to say. In fact, it might be impossible to separate the two decisions.

A vivid testimony to this phenomenon is the action of one overweight individual. Her garage had been one gigantic storage bin, from top to bottom. Once she cleared her garage --as well as the rest of her home --she lost 50 pounds.

It wasn't so much about her weight, but about "uncluttering . . . multiple levels of her life."

So if you have any doubts about the many benefits of your

"Operation Add Space" they should be eliminated by now. Trust me! I was a pack rat early in my life. But the freedom, the financial rewards and the spiritual uplifting my personal "Operation Add Space" brought into my life, has converted me once and for all and now I help others do the same!

If you want to find that "mojo" . . . that perfect space in your life where all seems to be going along fine . . .or experience those exciting synchronicities in your daily routine . . .

Consider the possibility of adding space and living muck free for a while.

It's guaranteed not only to change the appearance of your house . . . but your own outlook on life as well!

CONCLUSION

Congratulations! You've just successfully completed one of the toughest assignments in our society today: Operation Add Space.

You should be feeling pretty good about yourself. I know only too well that the challenge ahead of you is to keep your house looking this way.

But I have supreme confidence that after all the work you've completed . . . the great feeling you're experiencing now you'll never go back to those old habits-not for long at least.

And perhaps you've already felt some residual financial . . . emotional . . . personal , . . or even spiritual rewards. These exciting serendipitous consequences of living clutter-free always encourage people to stay clutter-free.

As you stay muck-free, by the way, you'll discover more hints and insights into keeping your house well organized and appearing neat and tidy.

Use any and all tricks that you can. That's my motto when it comes to adding space and organizing your home.

This is where our paths part --at least for a while. In the meantime, keep up the good work!

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