

Clutter, what clutter?



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The impacts of clutter

By Julie Cheney, RN

Clutter is often a matter of opinion. All that 'stuff' could be useful or has memories attached, but the accumulation of 'stuff' can add difficulties to your life. Having clutter around you has been shown to reduce energy, interfere with decision making and increase stress. In an older person's home, it can also increase risk of falls and interfere with the ability to make realistic decisions about life choices.

We call it 'stuff' because it could be items of every size and shape, every use, from a wide range of interests, and in various states of repair. The impact of clutter is made greater when families are required to come in and sort it at short notice, without having the knowledge of the memories and values placed on the items.

Decluttering is about looking at all the 'stuff' that's been accumulated over time and reducing it to a point where it's easy to manage, safe and comfortable to live with. It also makes it easier if the person has to make large scale, short-notice change to their living circumstances. Making this many decisions is tiring. Be prepared by setting yourself up well.

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One technique – practical processes

There are many ways to go about decluttering. There aren't really any rules. The point is making a commitment to it, deciding when and how you will do it and then starting, which is often the hardest part.

The simplest way we have found is to have a practical process of distributing and therefore re-labelling items. That is to have 4 or 5 boxes into which you place the items as you consider them. Some say 4, but we like the 5th so you can have a maybe, for those of us who really need to give it one more chance!

The boxes are:


1. Keep
2. Maybe
3. Give/Donate
4. Sell
5. Rubbish

In some cases, the 'boxes' are metaphorical, because larger items such as furniture might not fit into a box. For some it might be preferred that the gift and donate box is separated. This is relevant when there is family or friends to give things to. Larger items can easily be labelled, or a list written as the process unfolds to avoid missing things or glossing over items that should also be included.

When looking at each item, ensure a decision is made about it, don't just leave it aside for later. Even if there are some memories to be explored, or uncertainty to be resolved, a decision to put it into one of the boxes will keep the process moving. This is where the 'maybe' box can help. The item is not just put back where it was but is actively handled into a space where a decision must be made. It does, however, give the person a bit of time to digest the amount of decisions they are making.

"If you are going to declutter, take it seriously, commit to it and recognise it as part of wellbeing maintenance."





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Ask yourself

Decluttering a house can be a big task. If you think of it as one task, it can easily seem overwhelming. Break down the task into multiple smaller goals, such as a room, a cupboard, a section or an area. This allows you to feel the progress of your work. Reward yourself each time you complete the mini goal, with a walk outside, or a bowl of fresh strawberries and cream, or something else that makes you feel the achievement.

As you declutter, ask yourself about the items. The questions helps you to determine which box they should go into.

What is it? Sometimes the item is so out of date or so damaged, its hard to tell, or it might be a long past item which could have historical meaning.

Do you love it? If you don't even love it, why would you need to keep it?

When was the last time you used it? If you haven't used it for a year, then it is unlikely to be used frequently enough to justify it. Remembering that for older people, they might not be doing all the same level of tasks and jobs around the house as they once were. Just because they once did the job themselves, doesn't mean they will do it now with that out of date item.

Is it connected to anyone in the family? If the memory attached to the items is also connected to someone else's life, it might be something they would value. This could guide where to put the item when sorting, or to label it for the person.

Is it a collectible or a useful item that others would be able to use? These could be sold, gifted to others or donated to be sold in charity shops.

Is it broken, damaged or badly worn? Then let's face it, it must go into the rubbish. Don't think one day it might be fixed, if it's been sitting broken in the same place more than a year.

At Later Years Support

We endeavor to provide useful, practical ways to support people in their later years, and their families. We utilise current evidence where possible, reputable health related sources and decades of experience with older people to guide our information. We offer suggestions that are general in nature and do not attempt to cover all needs of all people, or to be considered the only advice sought for a person's concerns. We recommend everyone seeks professional advice in any circumstance of complex health and wellbeing concerns.

A checklist to help

<input type="checkbox"/>	Is it more than a 1-person job? Who can help?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have a pad, paper and sticky labels for writing notes, lists and labels. You might also like coloured stickers to denote where larger things will go.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have a marker pen for labelling boxes
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have boxes or baskets set up, or a clear table space, or sectioned off parts of a room, to separate items.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have rubbish bags or bins in the room. Make sure they're not too large to be moved safely. Make sure they are discarded at the end of each session and do not accumulate, so being a temptation to pull things out again.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have disposable gloves available to reduce the impact of dust and other accumulations, or the uncomfortable feeling of wrapping paper in the hands.
<input type="checkbox"/>	It might be necessary to have face mask if there is some history of asthma and dusty items are being cleared.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have a damp sponge or other cleaning wipe, and towel to clean as you go. You might also need a dry cloth to ensure the time is immediately packed and not put away moist.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have packing paper or wrap and wrap up delicate items immediately.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keep the windows open and clean items that are to be kept as you go.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Write on any boxes that will be stored. You can also make a brief inventory and attach for an at-a-glance reference later. This will save you frustration and having to unwrap everything again.

IN SUMMARY

1. Recognise the clutter is doing you harm.
2. Commit to a thorough decluttering.
3. Ask for help if you need it.
4. Set up comfortably in a well ventilated and temperature-controlled environment.
5. Prepare well with boxes, bags and wrapping paper as well as safety equipment and cleaning items as needed.
6. DO IT! Make the decisions, keep going, reward yourself for a job well done.