



Clearing Out Mental Clutter

“The worst place to keep anything is in your head.”

COSTS OF MENTAL CLUTTER

We all know that the clutter of papers, files, journals, magazines, newsletters and other unnecessary artifacts can be a real drag on productivity and fun. When we grant excess paper, knick knacks and other “stuff” permission to occupy a place in our working environment, we allow them to divert our thoughts from what is important and to occupy space otherwise available for generating something new. As anyone who has ever cleaned up an office can attest, a great feeling of freedom can result from the simple act of removing physical clutter.

We may be less conscious of the ways in which “mental clutter” interferes with our ability to get things done and to enjoy life. “Mental clutter,” or the accumulation of recurring, unrecorded ideas and thoughts, also fills up available space, frustrates our efforts to focus our attention and limits what we will — or can — accomplish.

As with physical clutter, mental clutter just hangs around. We keep tripping over the same stuff, each time equally uncertain how to dispose of it so that we can move on to something else.

As with physical clutter, mental clutter demands an inordinate amount of our time each day, as we ponder what to do with it. We pick it up and put it down again, aimlessly, at all times of the day or night. Some

items niggle and tug at our attention; some are a source of disproportionate worry or concern. For example:

- You gave someone something to do and have no idea what has happened to it since.
- You promised to do something, then never did it and never reported back on the status.
- You have countless actions you’ve been “meaning to do” for months, and you never quite find the time for them. You’ve no idea when you’ll do them, but they keep popping up as things to be done.
- It’s time to take your computer capacity or other office system to a new level but the project looks too daunting to even begin to tackle.

It’s enough to make you wince.

Mental clutter is costly. It diminishes our ability to concentrate on the matters at hand, leaves us too preoccupied to be with clients, colleagues and loved ones, produces feelings of overwhelm, discomfort or despair, and reduces our interest in taking on new projects or completing old ones. At times, mental clutter can seem insurmountable.

Yet, a messy mind, like a messy office, can be neatened, organized and “cleared out.”

And, the freedom we find in clearing out our mental clutter makes it well worth the effort.

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ACTIONS TO TAKE TO ELIMINATE MENTAL CLUTTER

You may never have imagined that it is possible to have life be free from the discomfort of niggling thoughts, the oppression of “overwhelm” or the anxiety of things left undone. It is achievable! The steps to “clearing out the clutter” are outlined below. Each is important — don’t skip any of them.

Step 1: Take it on! Decide that you are ready for a change. When you reach the point at which you are unwilling to tolerate your mental clutter any longer, you are ready to take action. Forgive yourself for all you have left undone, and give yourself permission to begin newly.

Step 2: Visualize! Be clear in your own mind about the result you intend to produce. Begin to visualize what a clutter-free life might look like. What would be possible if you had one? Be specific in your definition of your end result. Write it down.

Step 3: Itemize! Make a complete list of your “actions to take” to resolve or eliminate your mental clutter. Your list may include such items as:

- Write to (name of person) and thank him for the Christmas present.
- Buy an earthquake preparedness kit for my car.

- Return that unwanted/unused item to the store.

Do not be daunted if your list is several pages long. The object here is to “empty your head”!

You may see an interim action to take which, though it will not remove the matter from your mind, will allow you to be at peace with it. For example,

- Call the Salvation Army and schedule a clothing pick up.
- Ask my niece if she wants my old crafts project (and throw the project away if she says no).
- Design a project to file properly all my old photographs, and schedule the time to do it.

Step 4. Schedule! Schedule every item on your list for a date in the future. (Be sure you can really imagine yourself taking that action on that day.) Establish the relative priorities of the items on your list by scheduling important items earliest, less urgent ones farther into the future.

Step 5. Communicate! If there is anyone in your life who is counting on you for a particular task or result at a particular time, be sure that you are set up (scheduled) to deliver on time **or** communicate clearly what you can be counted on to do. (A big part of the anxiety of overwhelm is the result of either not having a plan, or not communicating that plan to the people concerned.)

Step 6. Validate! When you complete an action, highlight it on your list, so that your accomplishment is clear. Focus your attention on your overall accomplishment, rather than on what you have yet to accomplish. Use your satisfaction and fulfillment to

motivate you to take the next action, and the next and the next.

NEW HABITS TO KEEP MENTAL CLUTTER OUT OF YOUR SPACE FOREVER!

We've all had the experience of getting organized. It's staying that way that is a challenge!

Once you have followed the steps for clearing away mental clutter outlined in Part 2 of this article, you will know the peace and clarity of a few moments of uncluttered existence. In short order, however, that space will be filled with a new influx of (potential) mental clutter. Life goes on: the phone rings, the mail is delivered, projects go forward (and new ones are invented). Unless you have in place practices for managing the “stuff” of life with ease, your sense of accomplishment and satisfaction will be short-lived. Indeed, most of us know how to get organized: What remains to be mastered is how to manage new clutter — effortlessly — on an ongoing basis. When you have mastered that, you have access to living a clutter-free life — a life in which your vision can be realized with clarity, creativity and accomplishment.

“Staying” organized may mean inventing new habits.

For some of us, the concept of choosing a new habit and putting it in place may seem odd. While we all have habits, we may be conditioned to regard “habits” in general as “bad.” (The litany of “bad habits” runs from drug abuse to nail biting to overeating.) A “habit,” however, is defined as “a constant, often unconscious inclination to perform some act, acquired through its frequent repetition.” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1981). Good habits, habits that support us in producing what we are committed to having in life, are

formed in the same manner as bad ones — i.e., through frequent repetition. In time, they become automatic and therefore easy.

When developing any new habit, it is important to observe the following guidelines:

1. Be clear what you are out to accomplish and why you want it. For example, it is easier to take up regular exercise as a habit if the practice is based in a vision of energy, vitality, health and well-being.
2. Remember that, before it takes hold and becomes automatic, a new habit is fragile. Until it becomes natural and unconscious (through frequent repetition), it will need reminders and discipline. Generally, 28 or 30 repetitions are required to form a new habit completely. During this early phase, additional support and discipline may be required. Take heart, knowing that it will grow easier with time.
3. Be patient and compassionate with yourself and forgive any slips. You are not incorrigible or hopeless; you are merely on the road to inventing a new habit. And remember that, with every repetition, the habit will grow stronger until, ultimately, it will belong to you. “Habits are cobwebs at first, cables at last” (Author Unknown).

Select habits that make a difference to you and that are calculated to produce the results you want.

The key is to identify and adopt practices that will leave your mind “clutter-free” on a daily basis. The habits you choose will be designed to address the issues and circumstances in your life — not other people’s “good ideas.” To keep things out of your head, consider including one or more of the

following practices:

1. Make it a habit to distinguish what you really intend to do from what would be a “good idea.” Keep a separate register of good ideas and adopt them if and when you are ready. In the meantime, tell the truth (to yourself and others) about the actions and the projects you will really do.
2. Don’t do anything because you “should.” You will resist it and, even if you get it done, it will rarely provide a level of satisfaction and accomplishment that makes it worth doing. If you find yourself thinking that you “should” do something, look again. And find a better (and more inspiring) reason to do it, if you do it at all.
3. Keep the actions you intend to take somewhere other than “in your head.” We strongly recommend that you maintain one list of actions to take, together with the date when you will do them. Refer to this list often, and manage your choices of actions from it.
4. Look for ways to stay consistently in action and design your environment to support yourself, given what you know about yourself and how you work. For example, if you work better with another person’s support, set targets with a buddy or a coach (or your manager at work) as an added incentive to get into action. If you find your filing system too daunting to tackle all at once, adopt a habit of weeding or setting up one file a day.
Find the practices or structures that support YOU in doing what you know to do to have what you want in life.
5. Don’t step over things. If you notice a recurring annoyance or troublesome issue, look to see what you need to do to deal with it. (Examples: Schedule a conversation to mend a relationship, or call someone to come and replace that leaky faucet or loose doorknob.)
6. Most importantly, take time to plan. In the final analysis, your plan is what you know about how it will all get handled. It is what allows you to put things to rest until you are ready to deal with them. It is the key to peace of mind, clarity of purpose and the space to concentrate on matters at hand. It gives you freedom from “mental clutter.”

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