

Acting on Clutter

A large, messy pile of various clothing items and accessories. At the top, two black mannequin legs are sticking out, one holding a black high-heeled shoe and the other holding a brown and white striped high-heeled shoe. The pile includes a red and white striped shirt, a blue and white floral patterned shirt, a red jacket, a black sweater, a blue belt, a yellow plaid belt, a black hat, and various other fabrics and shoes.

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Chapter One

Downsizing as a Way of Life

Linda, a school teacher, loved to lead the simple life. She found great joy in the little things in life. She was a goal-setter who cleaned as she went. She had small closets so when she purchased something new she discarded another item.

Linda's classroom was neat and well organized. She taught her students that before you go home each day, you clean out your desk and discard what you do not need. In the summer she loved to travel and she took wonderful trips to Europe, among other places. She traveled light with only carry-on luggage and took a small additional empty bag that she could fold up to use for any souvenirs she purchased for others.

One summer a fellow teacher, Analise, invited her to go to Hong Kong for two weeks with her. Linda readily agreed and knew Analise was very congenial. The two talked about packing and Linda explained she was going to travel light.

The morning they were to catch their flight they met at the airport. Imagine Linda's surprise when Analise showed up with a carry-on bag plus two large bags to check, in addition to a large empty fold-up bag to bring home all of her purchases. Analise had packed two changes of clothes for each day, five pairs of shoes, and numerous cosmetic items.

Linda had accepted the simple life and was very organized and only got what she needed. Analise, on the other hand, was consumed by material items and had to have many choices of clothing and jewelry. She cluttered the room with the stuff she brought on the trip and then kept buying more items. Linda quickly figured out that she would not be traveling again with Analise.

We probably all know people who lead the simple life and do not have a lot of objects. Moving is easy for them, traveling is easier for them, and as we look at them we think that they live the easy good life. We know those individuals who are very well organized and everything they have is in its place. We wonder how they do it and we are envious that their life and surroundings are simple. They make it look easy.

It is not always easy, especially if we love things and love to accumulate things. We do not want to throw anything away because we may need it in the future. It can only become easy for us to purge if we adopt the philosophy that we will set a goal to make downsizing a way of life. We can take basic steps to make downsizing a habit one day at a time. We must adopt the adage; an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. We have to talk ourselves through those frequent crises we face where we tell ourselves we just have to have that one item. We have to set small goals each day. Lastly, we have to elicit the help of others in meeting our goals and we have to learn from those individuals.

One Day at a Time

After watching the summer Olympics in 2016 we are in awe about how Michael Phelps can swim so extraordinarily, or how Simone Biles can jump so exquisitely. They

practiced daily even on the days they did not feel like practicing because they knew that the more they did it, the better they would get at it.

If you want to simplify your life from clutter, it takes practice every day. We have to try to do at least a little bit. We cannot make excuses. When you do even a small amount each day it is more likely that cleaning will become a way of life for you. Doing a little bit each day provides practice and makes it easier each time you do it.

We may find ourselves guilty of procrastination. We look for excuses for why we cannot clean that drawer out or do not want to even go up into our attic. The world is full of procrastinators, and although they may be very talented individuals they may never accomplish their goals because they consistently find other things to do. It is all a matter of priorities. Those who accomplish a great deal are persistent. They take one day at a time and keep their eye on the goal and work toward it by persevering and not making excuses.

Catch Yourself When You Are Making Excuses

Successful individuals do not make excuses; they keep going. We live in a society today where everyone has excuses and others must be to blame. Unfortunate things happen to us and often it is out of our control, but we can control our response to those bad things. When someone asks us, is the glass half empty or half full? It is all about how we perceive things and what our attitude is. If we are positive that we can turn things around and live a clutter free life, then we can do it. If we believe that we will always live in a messy house and just have too many things and cannot throw anything away, then that is exactly what will happen to us.

Have you ever caught yourself making these excuses about why you have too much stuff?

- My husband is so messy; I just cannot clean up after him.
- I am involved in too many projects; there is no way I can keep everything organized.
- I have a small house; I just do not have any place to put things.
- I have three kids; there is no way I can possibly have a neat house.
- I just do not have the time to clean out anything.

When you catch yourself making an excuse, stop and reflect on what you are doing. You are standing in your own way of success in decluttering. If you want to take control of your life, identify the excuses, and do not allow them to make your decision. Take control.

An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

We work to prevent heart disease by taking better care of ourselves. We work to keep our car in good working order by taking it in for routine maintenance. These are preventive strategies. If we perform certain actions as we go, we can prevent something going wrong or at least reduce the likelihood of something going wrong.

In the case of clutter, we can prevent having a mess if we never start what will later be a mess. We must throw the junk mail away as soon as we get it, take one item out of

our closet to donate each time we get something new, and go through our email files every day and decide what to discard. We must adopt the attitude that we never put off until tomorrow what we can do today. We have to look for short segments of time to clean out a drawer or go through a pile of papers.

As in Linda's case, she taught her students to go through their desk every day in order to be ready for the next day. At the same time, she was getting them in the habit of throwing away in preparation for the next day. We have to form the habit of prevention.

We all can be a role model for our family members and our friends. We can do this by showing others we have it together by never letting things get out of control in the first place.

Talking Ourselves Through the “I must have it or else!” Crisis

We may spend lots of money on storage closets. We have our counters full of junk. We can never find anything on our desk because we have too much paper. We find our lives bulging at the seams because we love to shop, whether physically in the store or while shopping online. Merchandisers know what they are doing. They run ads on television, they run special sales and there are television shows that stress that you cannot live without an item. Perhaps the store tells customers there are only 50 new computers, so hurry to get one of those. It appears we have been brainwashed or tricked into believing that we must have an item. The point is we need to learn to live without those items and need to exercise control.

We need to recognize how advertising works. We are being pressured to buy more items, so many of which we do not need and never did need. We purchase kitchen gadgets we have bought and have never used. Think about how many times things were purchased on sale and when we got it home, we really did not like it and only bought it because it was a bargain. It is not a bargain if we do not enjoy it in our home, or leave clothes in our closet we do not like.

Consider a young woman who bought a new home, and then discarded everything she owned from her previous home because she wanted everything to be new. Buying can make you feel good, but it is also addictive as the natural chemical dopamine is released into our bodies and makes us goal-oriented (Sinek, 2014).

When you are facing the temptation of a purchase, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I already have something similar? If so, do I need another one?
- How many times a week will I use this appliance?
- Is there a specific event for which I need this new dress?
- Do I have a place to put this item?
- Do I really need to buy this book or can I get it in the library?
- Am I willing to throw an item away that I already have so I can have this new item?

Yes, we do need to exercise control and sometimes that is difficult but if we can ask ourselves these questions before we buy an item, we can make a lifestyle change.

Setting Small Goals

Imagine you have decided to clean your attic. It is a mess and you cannot walk in it to get what you need. You and your spouse decide that your goal is to have the attic cleaned by the end of the summer. You both are proud of yourselves because you have set a goal. What happens when you have set a big goal and then decide you cannot clean for a few weeks because the attic is too hot? Another excuse might be is that you cannot clean it out because you are going on vacation. You have set a goal but you did not break the goal down into small steps. A large goal is commendable but unless you break it down into small steps, you are not likely to meet it because you will engage in avoidance behaviors.

In education, when children are having difficulty completing tasks, we break the tasks down into small steps. When a child succeeds in one of the steps, they feel good, the teacher and parent reinforces him, and the child is encouraged to take the next step. The child becomes confident because he achieved one of the steps.

We have to adopt this educational practice with ourselves. We have to take baby steps to get to the big picture goal. We are not going to see miracles overnight. If the attic is a mess it did not get that way overnight, and it will not be cleaned overnight.

How do we take those baby steps? We have to start with small achievable goals and we have to write those down. For the attic issue this could involve sitting down the night before to write the steps that will be taken.. We make sure that what we write down is something we know we can do. We might write down that we will each spend five minutes cleaning the attic. That is achievable for us. That day, we might even set a timer to know when the five minutes is up. As a result we achieve our baby step goal. We are pleased. That night we set a goal to clean for another five minutes the next day. What may happen is that we will start and spend more than five minutes cleaning. It is important to set small achievable goals that set you up for success.

Getting Assistance from Others and Learning from Them

You may want to ask your spouse or your children to assist you in a cleaning clutter project. It may be more fun to do a project with someone else. Critical to the process also is that you may have to have their assistance because some items you would like to toss may not be items they want to part with.

In the example of the attic project, if the husband and wife both have items that belong to each of them, they have to work together. If a wife decided to do something alone and threw away some of her husband's items, she might find herself with an upset spouse. Before the wife throws anything away that belongs to her husband, she needs to tell him that she is going quickly through his things, which might possibly result in a willingness to help with the cleaning project, especially if it is a very short project. Most people are willing to give five minutes of their time for sorting and pitching.

We know some individuals who have accumulated lots of rough draft papers or thesis papers and have wanted to throw them out so they have held bonfire parties where everyone brings a box of papers or files they want to sort through, and they burn up what they do not want. Soft drinks or a little wine may make purging stuff easier to do. Make

throwing things away a social and fun event.

Learn from others as well. When I was in graduate school, I had a friend who was the most organized and clutter free individual I have ever seen. I watched her to figure out what her key to success was. Essentially she planned everything for the next day the evening before. She even set her table for breakfast the next morning the night before. She cleaned up everything the night before she went to bed. I also noticed that at the end of her work day as a school social worker, she spent 10 minutes throwing things away she did not need and filing methodically what she would need. She always knew where everything was because she was so well organized. She did not put off until tomorrow what could be done today.

Once you accept Decluttering as a way of life and take the above steps, you will find yourself with a sense of freedom and accomplishment because you have made decluttering a habit.

Reference:

Sinek, S. (2014). *Leaders eat last*. New York: Penguin Group.

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