

How to Stop Attracting Clutter and Start
Magnetizing the Life You Want

make
space
for
Happiness



tracy mccubbin

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INTRODUCTION

GLOBALLY, 2020 WAS A CRUCIBLE FOR MANY people—and for many reasons. For those of us who were fortunate enough to keep our health, we still faced enormous upheaval as we moved our lives indoors and hunkered down. A home that had served as little more than a changing room before the pandemic suddenly became a person's entire world. In my role as a professional organizer and declutterer, I saw my clients in Los Angeles and across the country have a reckoning with their home environments unlike anything we have ever experienced in our lifetime.

My assessment: we are in crisis. A stuff crisis.

Whenever I had the occasion to get in my car and quickly zip across Los Angeles during lockdown, I couldn't

help but notice that most of the vehicles on the street were UPS, DHL, FedEx, and Amazon. So many Amazon trucks. So many, in fact, that I started to notice that unmarked vans had slapped on Amazon magnets and drivers in orange vests were popping out of them with armloads of packages. Then I started to notice the piles of packages on doorsteps. Piles. Every front stoop looked like a Leaning Tower of Packages. Blue recycle bins were barfing out empty cardboard boxes. When I finally started to work in clients' homes again, I was shocked at the amount of shopping they had done. It looked as if they had rebought everything they had decluttered before—and then some.

For many people, having to be stuck at home confronting their disorder, disarray, and excess, was a rough awakening. Previously, they could hunt down their keys, or their “good” blouse, or the “right” travel mug, and eventually get out the door. They could promise themselves once again that they would deal with their clutter “soon.” But during the pandemic, they had nothing to do but accept that their homes had become unmanageable. Just like overeating or drinking too much, overshopping is fun in the moment but there is always a heavy price to pay later.

I thought business for dClutterfly¹ would be slow as lockdown restrictions lifted. Instead, I ended up hiring more employees to help me get my clients' clutter under control so

that bedrooms, garages, and kitchen counters could become offices, so that children could go to school from home, and so that families who used to sit down for a meal once a week could now eat three meals a day together and work alongside one another with minimal friction. And that's not to mention helping all the people moving. Aging parents moving in with their adult children to stay safe and help with the grandkids. Grown adults moving back in with their parents due to the economic downturn. People deciding it was time to get out of the city and move somewhere quieter. Everyone trying to make big shifts happen quickly was confronted with how much stuff they had and how little they needed.

What did "helping" mean?

In some instances, we emptied garages of broken lawn mowers and unused furniture. There was gently used baby gear to pass along. We helped consolidate closets so that one could be converted to an office. We packed up china from credenzas and replaced it with school supplies.

But, primarily, what people called us for was to deal with the overwhelming *excess*. The hallway lined with boxes. The closet filled with untouched shopping bags. The kitchen drawers bursting with multiple unused gadgets. The den filled with dusty exercise equipment.

Look, we all need things. I own many, many things. I have things I cook with, things I bathe with, things I wear,

and things I work with. I even have things I just like to look at because they make me happy.

But when we have *excessive* amounts—more than our homes can hold, more than we can clean and care for, more than we can ever use—we need to reflect. After being home twenty-four hours a day for months on end, we have to ask ourselves how much do we really use? How much stuff do we really need?

Let's agree that if we weren't dusting off the treadmill during the pandemic, we are never going to.

Despite everything advertisers want us to believe, stuff does not make us healthy or better or more successful. It doesn't give us longevity, and it certainly doesn't help the planet. *Most* importantly, it is scientifically proven that stuff does not make us happy.

And your happiness is what I care about.

I grew up in California, the daughter of a wonderful man with an intractable hoarding problem, so I saw firsthand the tenacious pull that stuff can have on our psyches. As an adult in Los Angeles, I became a personal assistant known for being able to tackle any organizational challenge. As word spread, my business was born, and

dClutterfly is now Los Angeles's premier home organization company.

Over many years and after seeing thousands of homes, I started to recognize patterns. Clutter that people couldn't let go of stood directly between how they were living and how they *wanted* to be living. In my last book, *Making Space, Clutter Free*, I introduced people to the concept of Emotional Clutter Blocks. My seven Clutter Blocks are the mind traps we can easily get stuck in when we're unable to let go of possessions that we don't want, use, or love. Let me explain more.

Clutter Block #1: *My Stuff Keeps Me in the Past* runs us when we hold on tightly to things like old trophies, gifts from exes, and sympathy cards from past acquaintances. This is unhelpful because it signals that our best days are behind us.

Clutter Block #2: *My Stuff Tells Me Who I Am* tells us to hang on to clothes and accessories that we don't wear but keep because of the designer label. The clutter keeps us company, and we hold onto the labels and brands that give us false status.

Clutter Block #3: *The Stuff I'm Avoiding* is usually the administrative detritus that people allow to pile up rather than dispatch. Notices from the IRS, unsigned power of attorney forms, documents that just need a good shredder;

being a grown-up means facing the thing and dealing with it.

Clutter Block #4: *My Fantasy Stuff for My Fantasy Life* blocks against letting go of stuff we buy to magically think ourselves into the life we think we should be living. It could be anticipatory maternity clothes, suits for a job we haven't applied for, or the sport we are somehow going to take up.

Clutter Block #5: *I'm Not Worth My Good Stuff* stops us from using wedding presents, tag-laden evening wear, or the "good" candles and "nice" soaps that sit waiting for a special day that may never come.

Clutter Block #6: *Trapped with Other People's Stuff* sticks people with inherited clothes and furniture they don't like, never wanted, and cannot release because it feels disrespectful to those who have passed.

And last, Clutter Block #7: *The Stuff I Keep Paying For* keeps us from setting free a purchase mistake. We hold on to something we don't need, want, or use because we "paid a lot" for it. This leads to a compounded mistake of paying for storage or turning rooms in our home into storage depots. There is a reason why storage is a billion-dollar industry—and yet almost nothing in those units is worth the cost of storing them.

What we found was that when we focused on healing the underlying emotional need, my clients and my readers

were suddenly able to let go of stuff that had plagued them for years. Best of all, they were able to start living the way they had always wanted to before their stuff got in the way.

At the end of the day, it's how you live that I care the most about. Not rainbow-sorting your shoes or decanting all your beans. I want your keys where you can grab 'em, permission slips in an outbox, and your vegetable peeler visible when you open the drawer. I want your home to be a tool that enables you to *do* the things you want to do, like get ready for work, spend time with your family, or relax. I certainly don't want you to constantly confront piles of stuff that make you feel bad.

Making Space, Clutter Free came out in 2019, and soon after, my inbox and Instagram were flooded with pictures of once-cluttered homes transformed into decluttered, useful spaces that set people up to be living the lives they wanted.

But then...I noticed something new. Some of my clients and followers healed their blocks and released their excess stuff. And then, they kept buying.

I started to think back over my Mavens of Multiples, or clients and community members who acquire excess in one or two categories. For example, wellness products on recurring subscriptions. Or more pantry staples than anyone will ever need—even during a pandemic or a zombie apocalypse.

I realized that there were patterns there too. Patterns that revealed an underlying emotional need that made people keep things they didn't want but encouraged them to *buy things they didn't need*.

Our possessions fall into two categories: wants and needs. The needs are tools that make our lives simpler. A bed to sleep in, a frying pan to cook with, or a basic car to get us to work. And then, there are luxuries, which either elevate the tools or are things that we don't need but give us an emotional lift. Art on our walls, the tenth pair of black pants, or a fancier car to get us to work in style.

Where we get into trouble is when we find ourselves burdened by stuff, buying too much stuff, spending money we don't have on stuff, or thinking we have a right to stuff that is more than we truly need.

We are all vulnerable to these traps, for multiple reasons we will cover in depth. The goal of this book is to help you see if you are using your stuff to fill holes in your heart, head, or soul. Don't worry—I'm not going to tell you to give all your stuff away or stop shopping for the rest of the year, but I am going to help you become aware of why we shop. And with that awareness, how to change our behaviors and find fulfillment in healthier ways.

By getting to the root of this hidden scourge, we can redirect those emotional and financial resources

toward real goals like True Connection, Free Time, and Self-Confidence.

In this book, I am going to introduce you to what I call the Seven Emotional Clutter Magnets. These are the empty parts of us that desperately want to attract one of seven important feelings: purpose, love, connection, wisdom, confidence, self-respect, and ease. These are the feelings that make us excited to get out of bed in the morning, and when they're missing in our lives, we actively try to pull them in, or "magnetize" them, if you will.

But sometimes these internal magnets get flipped and start pulling in stuff instead. As though the stuff could be a replacement for those feelings. That may work for a few minutes or hours. Like on days when you get to work too early knowing you also have to stay late, you convince yourself that a candy bar is just the break you need instead of an actual day off. Or how we grab a glass of wine to feel momentarily more relaxed, but that one glass (or three) isn't the solution to chronic stress. In both these examples, we are magnetizing a thing (the candy bar or wine) to fill an emotional need instead of being honest with ourselves about the deeper issue.

We will see chapter by chapter how overbuying *never* solves a Clutter Magnet. The pull of an activated magnet is not a well that can be filled but an emotional void that needs positive emotion to counter it. I often imagine these

giant cartoon magnets in my clients' homes just sending out magnetic waves, drawing handbags and power tools and kitchen gizmos to them from across the universe. Forever. Until we turn the magnet off.

We are going to turn your Clutter Magnets off by first identifying the emotional holes that we are trying to fill and then, chapter by chapter, redirect that powerful pull toward stuff onto deeply and sustainably rewarding parts of life. You'll learn how to stop magnetizing "date night outfit" clutter and instead cultivate the love you really want to feel. Or stop magnetizing status symbols and learn to feel self-respect. All of which will cumulatively lead to a much happier emotional landscape. When we cultivate habits that nurture us and bring lasting joy, we can break these unhelpful patterns once and for all.

During the pandemic, we all peered into each other's homes like never before. Whether it was the boss Zooming in from her bedroom or the nation TikToking from their kitchen, we saw how other people are living—and it often wasn't pretty. But I have been here for the last fifteen years, intimately facing people's inability to maintain a functional relationship with their stuff.

Clutter is not a superficial problem. It's an emotional issue that requires an astute solution to help people attain life goals. Whether you want a greater sense of purpose, more social connection, or buckets of love, we are going to look at how you want to *feel* as you move through your day and why overbuying hasn't made you feel that way. Then, we'll figure out how to eliminate the clutter. Ultimately, these eight chapters aren't actually about personal organization—they're a road map to your personal fulfillment.

I'm so excited to go on this journey with you!