



Clutter Control

By Martha Beck



I'm one of those people who gradually accumulate possessions until their living spaces begin to feel stuffed up. Folks like me sustain an ongoing attempt to spring clean, but something in us always protests. It makes us cling to possessions we don't need, hesitate before discarding things, and set discouragingly ambitious rules about how de-cluttering should happen. If you're one of us, perhaps you should consult a doctor. Happily, I'm sort of a doctor (I have a PhD), and through extensive experimentation (cleaning my own house), I've arrived at a simple, effective clutter cure I call "Walk-Out Therapy." It will help you make your home a peaceful space where you can thrive.

Diagnosis: Domestic Stuffiness

The tendency to overstuff our homes is an inherited condition that evolved when living circumstances were harsh. One of my great-grandfathers supported 13 children on a wooden shoemaker's income; a great-grandmother on my father's side of the family survived by gleaning wool left on thorn trees by passing sheep and knitting it into socks for cowboys. My point is not that I come from people obsessed with footwear but that just a few generations back, most folks had almost nothing. We're programmed to be pack rats—to hoard, not jettison—our possessions. Add to that the unprecedented wealth of modern society, and you get an epidemic of clogged living spaces.

The obvious de-cluttering solution is to throw out things the moment you no longer need them. Easy, right? Wrong. Your inner pack rat won't stand for it. "But I can still wear that!" it squeals as you consider discarding a 20-year-old jacket with shoulder pads. You feel an intensely visceral clutching anxiety that won't abate until you hang the unsightly garment back in your overstuffed closet.

So, the first step to a clutter cure is to write down your favorite pack-rat phrases. My clients' top three are: "I have to go through those," "Someone could use that," and "But I need it!" Unless you use the object in question at least once a year, such righteous exclamations are actually symptoms of dysfunction. Obeying these protests will keep you overstuffed and off balance forever.

Instead, use your powers of analysis to outwit the primitive logic of these phrases. When I ask clients what they long for, the most common responses are "peace," "space," and "freedom." Clutter keeps us from achieving these goals, and we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars buying larger homes. Empty space is more valuable—psychologically and physically—than almost any object.

With this in mind, walk into any room of your home and focus on 10 random objects. As you consider each, ask yourself (1) Do I truly need it? (2) Do I truly adore it? (3) Would I trade inner peace for this? The answers can help curb your pack-rat impulses, allowing you to clear out and move on.

Treatment: Walk Away Clutter

Many of my clients have grandiose delusions about how to dispose of their excess stuff. "I'm trying to get bags ready for Goodwill," they'll say, "but I get distracted." Or, "I need to hold a garage sale but can't find the energy." Believing you must donate or sell your clutter is another relic of the days when people

suffered from scarcity. The poor aren't a junkyard substitute. I've tried to donate broken or ugly castoffs, only to have Goodwill—quite rightly—reject them. Give away items only if they are in good condition. Hold garage sales only if you love them. And stop waiting for that unscheduled weekend to de-clutter your home—it ain't coming. Instead, proceed straight to the cure.

A walk-out can begin the minute you realize that certain possessions aren't worth your space, money, or inner peace. After your 10-item evaluation, put two unnecessary objects near your door each day. Every time you leave your home, pick up one item, preferably two. Drop them into the first *public* trash can you pass (if you're driving, find a waste receptacle at your destination). The idea is to get items out of your house irrevocably, preventing "trasher's remorse." Do not wait to de-clutter in one big fell swoop. Do not ponder or pause. Evaluate, grab, walk out, discard, and repeat. (Although you should avoid walking out someone's personal possessions without asking first.)

This month, commit to walking out at least two items a day. At first, your inner pack rat will resist. Start with objects that will cause you the least objection (your cat's disintegrating catnip mouse, the nearly dead houseplant), then move on to more challenging items: the unreadable book, the never-used salad spinner, and, finally, the expensive but atrocious jacket.

Very soon, like any good medicine, the walk-out will make you feel better. It eventually becomes quite intoxicating. I love the slightly naughty thrill that comes from tossing an object, followed by the delicious sensation of my space—and my life—opening up. Walking out your junk is habit-forming. It never loses its power to please, which is more than you can say for most physical possessions.

The final benefit of Walk-Out Therapy is its low level of side effects. The pack-rat part of you will tolerate gradual de-cluttering much better than major surgery. Your loved ones, too, will let go of excess stuff more easily when the removal is slow and steady; they'll notice your home's increasing spaciousness without missing the chipped mug or the ancient bowling trophy. So reclaim your home. Walk out your clutter, pushing through resistance and inviting the rush. Then sit back, feel the openness, and breathe, breathe, breathe.

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