



# HOUSE

**THE CURE FOR  
CLUTTER ISN'T  
JUST DEVISING  
A NEW STORAGE  
SYSTEM. IT'S  
FIGURING OUT  
WHY YOU'RE  
HOLDING ON TO  
THE STUFF IN  
THE FIRST PLACE.**

**BY MEREDITH JANSON**

# CALL

I used to think a neat house was the sign of just one thing: a lot of missed fun. But truthfully the mountain of unsorted mail on my coffee table, the tchotchkes on every surface and the jammed basement weren't exactly making my life a joyride. Then I heard how all that stuff was putting a big dent in my overall health. "If the first thing you see when you walk in the door is miles of piles, it sends your stress hormones soaring," says Pamela Peeke, M.D., author of *Fit to Live* (Rodale). Worse, she says, "If the mess is so bad you can't bear to let anyone see it, you lose out on life-enhancing social connections." Practically speaking too, if you're already not in the mood to exercise, spending an additional 20 minutes searching for your sneakers isn't exactly going to help.

## QUICK WAYS TO RECYCLE OR DONATE

### CELL PHONES

911cellphonebank.org

### LAPTOP COMPUTERS

recycleforbreastcancer.org

### PROFESSIONAL CLOTHES

dressforsuccess.org

### COATS

onewarmcoat.org

### SNEAKERS

nikereuseashoe.com

### WASTE DISPOSAL

(batteries, expired medication, paint, plastic bags and more)  
earth911.com

### ANYTHING NEIGHBORS MIGHT WANT

freecycle.org

So should you stock up on bins and research organizing methods? Not yet, because where to put the stuff is only part of the solution. "If you focus on the physical clutter alone, you'll never get organized," says Peter Walsh, author of *Enough Already!* (Free Press). "You also have to look inside yourself and confront your relationships with your things."

Okay, I thought, I'll take back my home. And after several trips to

**"Less clutter means you won't have so much housework, which means more time for family."**

Goodwill, a dozen trash bags to the curb and a gazillion recycling runs, I have seen the light. Digging out not only gave me a big home makeover, it also helped me think more clearly and feel more relaxed. And the process was surprisingly simple once I understood why I was holding on to things. Whether you're swimming in stuff or just need to empty a few closets and drawers, it is possible to sweep clutter out of your life for good.



### HOARDING HANG-UP Guilt

When you have no use for Grandma's afghans or Dad's old records, but they're still hogging shelf space, you're probably confusing belongings with the relationships, experiences and emotions they represent. "Part of you is afraid that if you let go of the item, you're throwing away the memories and connections themselves,"

says Lorie Marrero, creator of clutterdiet.com. "You can hold on to the love without clinging to the stuff." If you can't display or use something, let it go. It may sting a little at first, but you'll soon recover and move on.

#### SPACE-SAVING SOLUTIONS

**Release the stuff but retain the memories.** Write a few lines about what the object means to you. "If you have time, you could even photograph the item and frame the image and your writing side by side," says Tamah Vega, a professional organizer in Newark, California. Faced with a large collection, keep just one item. "One of my clients custom-framed a single piece of her grandmother's china to hang in her kitchen and gave away the

## BILL OF HEALTH

What makes your home look better also boosts how you feel physically.

**1. Increased immunity.** Having so much stuff around makes it tough to get in there and really scrub surfaces. "The mess encourages dust, germs, and even mold, which can exacerbate allergies and increase your family's chances of feeling sick," says Pamela Peeke, M.D.

**2. Brain boost.** Need extra incentive to clear out the home office? According to a survey by the British company Analysts with Open Ergonomics, 40% of office workers say that clutter hinders their productivity and causes stress.

**3. Energy surge.** Research from Princeton University found that clutter drains mental energy and can lead to fatigue. "When many things compete for our visual attention, it takes that much more cognitive effort to stay on-task and solve problems," says Sabine Kastner, M.D., Ph.D., professor of psychology at Princeton.

**4. More fun.** With less to clean around, says Dr. Peeke, you don't have so much housework. And that creates extra time for family. Taking part in leisure time activities can help you live longer.

rest,” says Vega. “That display did more for her spirit than a full set hidden away in her garage could ever do.”

**Know your limits.** What about items you don't want to show off, like your husband's letters from when you were dating? Pick a container and cap keepsakes at what fits inside. “Just be sure to buy one big enough, and when you start, leave room for future things,” says Marrero. Protect paper, textiles and photos by first putting them in acid-free archival boxes, available at containerstore.com or lightimpressionsdirect.com. Keep them away from extreme temperatures, humidity, excessive light and pests.

## HOARDING HANG-UP Indecision

Sorry, but putting all those papers into stacks is not the same as organizing—it's just a way to avoid choosing what to toss and what to keep. “You don't want to expend the brainpower required to sort through everything, so you procrastinate,” says David Allen, author of *Making It All Work* (Viking). “It feels like you're cutting yourself a break, but you're actually setting yourself up to waste energy hunting for stuff lost in the chaos.”

### SPACE-SAVING SOLUTIONS

**Make a plan.** Grab a few minutes to develop a system. “It could be as simple as one ‘in’ basket for new items, an ‘in-process’ basket for documents in various stages of completion and a desk drawer devoted to unpaid bills as they arrive,” says Julie Morgenstern, author of *Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life* (Fireside).

**Dump the junk.** The minute you pick up the mail, toss what you don't need. “It should earn the right to come into your home,” says Marla Cilley, founder of FlyLady.net, which offers free decluttering advice. Visit the Direct Mail Marketing Association (dmachoice.org) to have your name removed from lists. And beat e-mail overload by spending a little time each day deleting what you won't need again and archiving anything you will. Your inbox should hold only the things that still require action, says Morgenstern.

## HOARDING HANG-UP Neglected responsibilities

When backpacks clog the entryway, driving directions and soccer cleats litter the car and stacks of video games fill the den coffee table, it's “lazy clutter,” says Walsh, “because it accumulates out of negligence.” The answer? Commit to minimal maintenance rather than crisis intervention.

### SPACE-SAVING SOLUTIONS

**Target high-traffic areas.** Zero in on surfaces where the family dumps things. Cilley says tackle these spots twice a day with a two-minute cleanup. Make a habit of clearing out car trash every time you buy gas.

**Draft the family.** Write up a chore list for everyone, otherwise they'll all wait for somebody else to do the work and you'll have chaos, says Vega. “Make tasks as specific as possible, such as ‘clear the living room floor’ or ‘recycle newspapers.’” And back off about the kids' rooms. They may do more when they feel a sense of ownership over the space. And if they run out of clean clothes because their entire wardrobe is scattered under the bed, they'll get the message, says Marrero. (The obvious exception to the rule is anything to do with food, which invites bugs.)

## HOARDING HANG-UP Unrealistic expectations

Does your closet overflow with things that haven't fit in years? “Keeping old clothes and accessories comes back to self-esteem and to the aspirations we have for ourselves,” says Walsh. “Many people have a lot of what I call ‘wish clothes’ reminding them that they want to lose weight.” Those too-small garments are probably also nagging you about last night's fries and all the times you failed to drop the pounds. Women who've reached a healthy weight may be sabotaging their success by holding on to their “big” clothes. Who needs that? Why tempt fate by keeping them?

### SPACE-SAVING SOLUTIONS

**Dress for the body you have now.** Keep only clothing and accessories that make you say “Yes!” when you look in the mirror. “If you haven't fit into your

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Cooking with California Raisins is one of the wisest (and easiest) ways to add extra flavor and nutrition to just about

healthy and delicious treat.

## New Orleans Sweet Potato- Raisin Pie

1 can (15-ounce) sweet potato purée\*  
1/2 cup granulated sugar  
3 eggs, beaten  
6 tablespoons (3/4 stick) butter, softened  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1 1/4 teaspoons ground cinnamon  
1 teaspoon ground nutmeg  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
1 cup California Raisins  
1 prepared pie shell (10-inch)

Preheat oven to 350°F. Turn purée (2 cups) into large bowl. Add sugar, eggs, butter, seasonings and vanilla and beat until well mixed. Fold in raisins. Pour mixture into pie shell and bake at 350° F for 45 minutes or until set.

Serve warm, topped with whipped cream or butter pecan ice cream.  
Serves 8

Note: If canned purée is unavailable, peel and cut 1 pound sweet potatoes (about 4 medium) into 1-inch cubes. Combine with 4 cups of water in 4-quart saucepan. Cover and cook over medium heat for 20 minutes or until very soft; drain. Turn into blender or food processor and process until smooth.

For more delicious recipes visit:

LoveYourRaisins.com



skinny jeans since 2003, now is the time to end their reign of mockery,” says Walsh. Intimidated by the thought of accepting yourself in your present state? Invite a tough but kind friend over to hold your hand and help you keep it real.

**Commit to less.** You wear 20% of your clothes 80% of the time, according to Walsh. Start by weeding out everything you know you haven’t worn in a year. For the things you’re not sure about, organize your closet by category and color. Identify what to ditch from that group, Walsh says, by turning all the hangers back to front. When you wear an item, put it back the correct way. After six months, donate everything still hanging backwards. If shoes overrun your space, arrange them in categories, such as sneakers or flats. “After discarding anything that’s outdated or worn, get rid of unnecessary duplicates, such as more than one pair of black flip-flops,” says Walsh. Still have too many? “Toss one pair for every five pairs you keep. Then respect the limits of your closet. If it can hold only seven pairs of jeans, when another pair comes in, one has to go out.”

### HOARDING HANG-UP “What if” thinking

Maybe in an alternate universe you’ll finally go camping with the tent in the basement, whip up a scrapbook with your stash of 10-year-old craft supplies and reread every book on the overstocked shelf. But what about right here, right now? “Holding on to things ‘just in case’ provides comfort and a sense of security, especially when so many have lost so much in these uncertain economic times,” says Vega. “But think about what

you’re sacrificing—kitchen counter space, room in the garage for the car, a ready-for-company living room. You’re swapping your quality of life for some imagined future.” Instead of worrying that you might miss an item, think how relaxed you and your family will be amid all the free space and order that you’re creating in your home.

### SPACE-SAVING SOLUTIONS

**Cash in.** Sure, it seems wasteful to part with perfectly good objects, even if we never use them. But keeping those things isn’t going to bring back what you’ve already spent on them. So focus instead on how you can make money, score something that you really do need or help someone, says Gail Blanke, author of *Throw Out Fifty Things* (Springboard Press). Sell good-quality clothes or home decor items through a consignment store or on eBay; donate art supplies to local senior centers or to schools. Barter books on BookMooch.com and CDs, DVDs and video games on BarterBee.com. “It can be easier to part with your belongings,” says Blanke, “if you know people are going to get use out of them. Imagine someone else benefiting from what you don’t need.”

**Use it or lose it.** The kitchen is a major source of “might need it someday” clutter, according to Walsh. He recommends stowing small gadgets (garlic press, melon baller, nutcracker) in a cardboard box. If you need to retrieve an item, return it to its spot in the kitchen. After a month, donate whatever hasn’t made the cut to a thrift shop. Whenever you use a small appliance or cookbook, attach a Post-it flag, and eliminate what you don’t use within the next six months. “You’ll be amazed at how much more welcoming your kitchen will become,” says Walsh, “once you clear away the excess.” ●

# PAPER CHASE

Mary Kay Foss and John Levy, certified public accountants in Danville and Walnut Creek, California, offer this rundown on document shelf life:



**ATM, DEBIT AND CREDIT CARD RECEIPTS** Check against your monthly statements, then, unless needed for a tax write-off, shred after one month.

**MONTHLY CREDIT CARD AND BANKING STATEMENTS** Save records of

tax-deductible items for seven years; shred the rest when the new statement arrives. Exception: proof of major purchases. Retain for at least four years (most states’ statute of limitations for disputing a transaction).

**PAID BILLS** Keep any related to a home office tax deduction for seven years, those from home improvement until you sell. Shred everything else

when the next bill arrives.

**PAY STUBS** Shred when your W-2 arrives (once a year).

**CAR OR REAL ESTATE PAPERWORK** Hold records from buying any asset for seven years after it’s sold.

**IRS DOCUMENTS** Retain annual returns forever. Discard supporting papers like W-2 forms and receipts after seven years.