

CLEARING THE CLUTTER

Up to this point, we've only talked about cleaning in theory—the motivation, the tools needed, and the plan for getting it done.

But now it is time to dig in and get our hands dirty....and our homes sparkling clean. You with me? Good!

We are going to start by clearing the clutter.

But first, a riddle: What do you get when you take one shopaholic-turned-coupon fanatic and one guy who hates to get rid of anything, then add 2 houses worth of stuff, a hurricane, 3 cross-country moves, 2 kids, a major remodel, the death of a semi-hoarding parent, and a daily schedule filled with school, crafts, and too many other activities to mention?

Yep, you guessed it: A mess.

Oh don't get me wrong, on a day-to-day basis our comfortable 3 bedroom, 2 bath house appears relatively neat and clean and clutter-free. Organized, even. The dishes are washed and the beds are made and the clutter is picked up and put, well, somewhere. But all that STUFF is lurking in the background, tucked away behind closed doors, in closets and cupboards and containers. And in the garage. Especially in the garage. Can anyone else relate?

And, if you're anything like me, you've probably spent a fair amount of time over the years trying to weed out the excess, a carload here, a few boxes there. It's often a painfully slow process. You see, my husband and I are pretty much polar opposites when it comes to the acquisition and loss of property. For me it has always been easy come, easy go. The shopaholic in me loves to bring it in, but the neat freak in me loves to see it go.

Chuck, on the other hand, hates to shop and buys nothing most of the time, not really because he is cheap, but because he would literally do almost anything rather than go to the mall or even to Home Depot. But once it is in our house, courtesy of me, he can't stand to see it tossed out. To him, it is wasteful. He's not wrong. But do you see our problem?

Once something is here, it never, ever leaves. And for us, that has historically meant a mess.

But I will say that we are doing better. You see, I think we have finally had some sort of coming together moment. It started when I [finally] stopped shopping, even for so-called bargains and got serious about stopping the flow of incoming STUFF. And I think once Chuck was able to stop worrying about me just buying one more thing, he stopped clinging to the things we already have but don't need.

And over the past few years, we've been clearing the clutter like a couple of crazy people. It feels so good!

BECOMING CLUTTER F.R.E.E.

The thing about clutter and too much stuff is that it is hard to clean around, and even harder to keep clean and organized. We spend copious amounts of time trying to get organized or to find a place for everything, when the reality is that most of it is stuff we don't want, don't use, and simply don't need.

There are times where it almost feels like we have become a slave to STUFF. Acquiring it, organizing it, working to pay for it, and feeling it weigh us down—clutter can literally smother our lives. And while logically most of us understand that more stuff won't make us happier—and in fact might just make our lives more complicated—for many of us, our addiction to stuff comes from an emotional attachment. We remember the joy a new pair of shoes or a new dress brought us, so we learn to associate shopping and purchasing with happiness. We continuously seek that high by bringing in more and more. Some of us go through the loss of a loved one, a divorce, or other traumatic event and then associate the things left behind with happier memories. We feel scared to let go of items because we don't want to feel the loss of those closest to us, or because we're trying to hold onto happier memories and times.

For others among us, we've developed an attachment to stuff because perhaps we grew up not having enough. We know the fear of scarcity, so we attach a false sense of value to items when we acquire them.

Whatever our reasons for holding onto items, it can often be difficult to realize it's time to let go. It means facing some internal, emotional and very tough stuff we may be avoiding. But the reality is that getting rid of clutter can help us feel freer. We no longer feel overwhelmed by the items in our home and buried by the insurmountable task of cleaning and organizing everything.

I will be the first to admit that it's not an easy process, and to be perfectly honest, I'm still working on it myself! It really requires a certain diligence and a commitment to the "unstuffing" mentality. But once you have it, it really does get easier. I promise! Here are the basic principles to remember, so you can begin to F.R.E.E. yourself from clutter and commit to an unstuffed life.

F FIGHT TO STOP THE FLOW

Stop clutter before it even makes it past the threshold of your home. When you're out, avoid stopping at extra stores, don't browse the back endcaps of aisles for "sale items," and stick to your list. Consider a month of zero spending to really get the mindset to stick.

When a birthday or special occasion is coming up, ask your guests and friends to consider giving a donation in your name to a favorite charity. Ask for experiences rather than gifts. Tell friends you'd love to schedule time to simply sit down one-on-one with some good coffee, or ask if they'd like to take a class with you. When it comes to your children, encourage relatives and friends to engage in an activity with your child, rather than giving a gift.

When my daughters were younger, I remember looking around their room, and just feeling completely overwhelmed. It was strewn with Legos, doll clothes, Littlest Pet Shop animals, and all the accessories and "stuff" to go with them. Whenever we went to the store, my girls would tease and whine for more things to add to their collections—there was no joy or value in their belongings. Everything they had was simply "stuff" to be acquired, briefly played with, and then forgotten.

As much as I would like to believe it was just a kid thing, I too was guilty of acquiring and accumulating stuff simply to have it. The things we had were no longer needed or loved. They were just "there" because we wanted them in the moment.

Once we scaled back and cleaned out, we underwent an amazing transformation as a family. When we went to the store, we made it through entire trips with NO WHINING! My girls didn't ask for a new toy to take home, but instead took joy in the moment. My husband and I were quickly on board as well. It's important to get your entire family on your side, so everyone is fighting the flow of stuff together. To avoid excess spending on items you and your family really don't need, talk about the difference between needs and wants. Explain how, for most of us, our needs are already being met, every day, and explain the importance of gratitude and thankfulness.

Think of new activities and experiences your family can engage in, rather than buying items. You can build a lot more memories together with a day at the amusement park or fair, by going out to a kid-friendly dinner, or by heading out to a movie as a group.

R REDUCE BY RUTHLESSLY PURGING

Go through your home and clear the clutter. Set up a weekend or a few days to dedicate yourself to the process. Go through every drawer, cupboard and closet, and be brutally honest with yourself about your needs. For each and every item in your house, ask yourself:

Do I really use this? Does it work? Do I really like it and want it? If you haven't used the item in a year, if it doesn't bring you joy, or if it's not useful, don't keep it.

Remember: our memories are not tangible. We hold onto items because we attach feelings or meaning to them, when really the meaning is in our hearts and minds. If there's something you don't love, but you're keeping it out of guilt or fear of letting go, think of a way to preserve the memory instead. This may mean taking a photo or writing down the memory.

Then, give those items new life by donating or selling them to someone else who can enjoy them more fully. Items can be donated to charity, sold to earn some extra cash, or given to friends and neighbors who might be able to give them a new home. Hold a garage sale or list items on neighborhood swap boards to find people who can put your stuff to use.

E ESTABLISH STRICT LIMITS

We live in a world where everything is bigger, better, faster and MORE. In reality, many of us have as much as we need (if not more). Set up strict limits based on your needs. Most of us don't need more than three sets of sheets per bed, a set or two of dishes, and so on.

When it comes to clothing, set limits on what you have space for. Every time an item goes in, make a commitment that another item goes out. This mentality will keep you from purchasing items you don't need (to store in space you don't really have)!

Base your limits on what you need and use, and also on what items you really love. For example, if you have a set of special Christmas dishes, but they bring you great joy and you really use them over the holidays, it's reasonable to keep them. However, having a set of dishes for every holiday (requiring storage, cleaning and constant rotation) is likely more effort than it's worth. Whatever the items, set your limits and be realistic and reasonable.

Just like our children, we can get into the "collect all twelve" mentality, purchasing a nail polish in every shade, a blouse in several colors, or candles in

different scents (especially if they're on sale). If you don't need it, just enjoy the single item on your list. I know this is something very hard for me personally. When I make an online purchase, a single item in my cart looks so empty—I start to think I should throw a few things in there to save on shipping. In reality, it's just more things to add to the clutter. Buy only what you need!

E EMPHASIZE QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

In our parents' and grandparents' days, handcrafted items were high quality. They were built to last and withstand the test of time. Clothing was made carefully, using quality stitching and attention to detail. Items often cost a greater percentage of their income (even though by today's standards, they might seem much less expensive). When grandma bought a new coat or blouse, she expected it to last for several seasons. Nowadays, clothing has become much cheaper and much more disposable. Not only is the human cost greater on these imports (with less-than-optimal working conditions for factory workers), but the environmental impact and waste is felt around the globe. We live in a culture where low-quality shirts can be purchased for under \$10 each, worn one or two times, then disposed of without another thought.

Part of fighting the flow means purchasing quality items made to last—and not just when it comes to clothing and furniture. Toys, office supplies, kitchen items and décor are often imported and made cheaply and unsustainably. When you purchase a new item for your home, give careful attention to the quality. Consider the usefulness of the item and examine it to see if it seems well crafted. It can also mean getting those great shoes resoled or tailoring a pair of pants rather than letting them get all ripped up on the bottom. We've become accustomed to a "use it up and throw it away" mentality. Consider instead the long-term value in having a quality item repaired or adjusted so you can continue to use it. Reupholster a piece of furniture that has great "bones," or add a fresh coat of paint to a frame or a planter needing some sprucing up. When the items you purchase are made from quality materials and built to last, they can have a much longer life.

As you begin to free yourself from clutter, you'll learn to become more discerning with all your purchases and to make do with what you have whenever you can. You'll be amazed and surprised at the areas of your life you can declutter, leaving you more appreciative and freer to enjoy the things that really matter.

HOW TO CLEAR THE CLUTTER DO AN INITIAL SWEEP

Grab a box and a large garbage bag and starting at one end, do a walk-through of your entire house. Scan each room, quickly grabbing anything you see that you know is either garbage or no longer needed. Place items in either the donation box or the garbage bag. Keep going until you've made your way through

the entire house. See how easy and painless that was? Even if you don't make it through the rest of the steps, you've already made a ton of progress!

CLEAR OUT ONE AREA AT A TIME

After your initial surface purge it is time to dig a little deeper. At this point it is not a good idea to start randomly delving in to more than one area at a time; you will quickly become overwhelmed. Instead, start with one manageable area—a room, a corner, a closet, a cabinet, or a dresser—armed with a box for goodwill, a laundry basket for things that need to be returned to their proper place, and a garbage bag for the trash. Then get to work and don't leave your area until the job is done!

RUTHLESSLY PURGE

Give yourself permission to only keep the things that are currently useful, despite who gave them to you or how much they cost. This can be really hard, especially at first. That's where the ruthless part comes in.

As you sort through your things, ask yourself these questions:

- Do we use it, wear it, or play with it? If it is clothes, does it still fit?
- Is it in good working condition?
- Does it enrich our lives in some way?
- Does it have sentimental value?
- Could someone else use it more?

It can be helpful to make 4 categories:

1. Things to keep in this area.
2. Things to donate
3. Things to throw away
4. Things to put elsewhere (keepsake box, seasonal items, or things that belong in a different room). Once you've cleared an area and put away all the items that belong elsewhere, move on to the next area.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

GET IT OUT OF YOUR HOUSE

Once you've determined something needs to go, get rid of it as quickly as possible. Don't let those boxes of donation items sit in your garage or basement for months on end; inevitably someone in your family will start digging through it and the clutter will be right back where it started. As soon as you've filled a box, put it in your car so that you can drop it off at the nearest donation center the next time you're running errands.

I am not a huge fan of hosting garage sales—to me they are too much work for

too little payout—but if you do want to have one, do it right away. I do usually sell bigger items on Craigslist, and occasionally we will also just take a picture of multiple small (but) nice items, list all the items, and sell it all for one flat price. Those type of listings always go really quickly!

WORK TOGETHER

It really helps if you and your spouse are both on the same page when it comes to clearing the clutter, especially if you can tackle it together or divide and conquer different areas. Our kids are still a little young to pitch in this year, but if your kids are older, get them involved and excited about the process. (Try letting them keep the money from the stuff you sell!) It is so motivating to have a partner or team to cheer you on!

STOP BRINGING IN MORE

For us bargain shoppers especially, this is the step that can be SO hard. But if you want to have a house that is truly clutter free, you must STOP BUYING MORE STUFF. During this spring cleaning, I challenge you to take a break from buying anything beyond the basic necessities of life. Once you've purged and purged and purged some more, simply allow yourself to bask in the glow of less for a while.