

Controlling Clutter Part 1: Simplify, Reduce, Arrange

The word “clutter” can evoke a variety of images from knick knacks to general messiness to hoarding. How you define this word can vary depending on your personality and lifestyle. For the purposes of this article let’s say “clutter” is anything that unnecessarily takes up space in your home - it may be a little space or a lot of space or even emotional space in the form of stress or guilt. We want to remove clutter to free up that space for better uses. Following are some tips to help you remove the clutter from your home - simplify your space by determining which items are “clutter”, reduce the amount of items you will keep in your home and arrange those items in an effective way.

1. **Know what you want from your space.** The best motivator for removing clutter is to want that space for something better. Maybe you want to add an art/sewing room, a play room, an extra bedroom, a home office. Maybe you want to be able to open your linen closet without needing a helmet and face shield. Or maybe you just want to reduce the number of items you have to clean. Whatever you want from your space, know what it is and remind yourself often.
2. **Recognize poor excuses and ignore them.** Common excuses to keeping clutter are “It was expensive.” “I might need it someday.” “It was a gift.” To all of these I say BOLOGNA! If you don’t use it or love it, it doesn’t deserve space in your home. So you were a bit over-zealous about exercising a few years back and now that treadmill just sits in the corner mocking you every time you walk by. Sure you paid a lot of money for it but if it isn’t doing you any good...sell it. Same with gifts - if you’re sentimental about the person that gave it to you, take a picture of the item and save it in a special place. Then get rid of the horrendous thing that’s taking up space in your closet. A great way to overcome these excuses is to think about your items being given/sold to someone who may really need them or who will actually use them. An old bridesmaid dress might be a great prom dress. Baby items that might ruin in storage could be used by a friend’s baby instead.
3. **Good questions to ask yourself:** When was the last time I used this? Can I specifically determine a time when I’ll need this again? Why would I ever need this again? Is this something I think is beautiful? Is this something my family uses or loves? What’s the worst that would happen if I give this away?
4. **Sort items into Keep, Sell/Donate, Trash.** When working through a space it’s helpful to quickly sort items into piles (it’s ok to have a “don’t know” pile if there are items that need more thought). Your KEEP pile should contain only items you use or love. SELL/DONATE anything that is still useable by someone but doesn’t belong in your home. (I’ll talk about what to do with your Sell/Donate items in Controlling Clutter Part 2.) The TRASH pile - if it’s broken or un-useable by others throw it away. If you have a few items in a “don’t know” pile, give them a second look. If you’re stuck on “maybe I’ll need this someday” just box up the items, write the date on the outside and put the box in the garage or attic (somewhere you won’t notice it). In 6 months or a year if you haven’t opened the box it’s safe to sell/donate those items. Chances are you won’t even remember what’s in there.
5. **Simplify your clothing.** Clothing often gives us a whole new set of excuses to deal with: “I’m going to lose weight and wear this again.” “I paid a lot for this dress, I hate to get rid of it.” “That was my favorite shirt in high school.” My answer to these excuses is the same...BOLOGNA!! Clothing that doesn’t fit or doesn’t make you feel good should not take up space in your closet. Once you reduce your wardrobe to only items that you use and love, follow the One In One Out principle for maintaining order. Each time you buy something new, donate a like item from your closet (i.e. a shirt for a shirt). Keep a donation box or basket in your closet so that you can easily remove items you no longer wear.
6. **Don’t bring something into your home just because it’s free.** This might be a tough one for fellow couponers. You have to remember that your space has value attached to it just like your money does. Just because an item doesn’t cost money doesn’t mean it gets a free pass to use your space. If you don’t love it or won’t use it don’t bring it home.
7. **Don’t keep things just because you feel guilty.** You have a magazine subscription but haven’t had time to look through the last three issues. Gifts that people have given you. Books that you thought you’d read. Keeping something out of guilt not only takes up physical space in your home but it takes up emotional space in your head. Allow yourself to let go of these items. Give the magazines and books to a friend who would enjoy them. Donate unwanted gifts to someone who could benefit from them. Not only will you free up space you’ll free yourself from those feelings of guilt.
8. **Touch your mail only once.** As soon as you bring mail into your house decide what needs to be done with each piece. Throw junk mail away immediately. Put bills in the place where you will pay them (toss the extra papers and envelopes). Put magazines or catalogs where you will read them. Do not lay all of your mail in a pile to sort later, sort it all right away. You’ll save yourself tons of time in the long run.
9. **Give every item a home.** Store like items together, store items near the point where they are used, store frequently used items in easy to reach places, store seldom used items in less convenient places. Do you have three remotes for your entertainment system? Store them all together in a “remote drawer” or “remote tray” or “pretty remote cup”. Have a place to hang bags/keys when you walk in the door. Designate a spot where every item lives - homeless items tend to accumulate in unfortunate places and often invite unwanted clutter.
10. **Maintain your clutter free home.** Be conscious of unwanted clutter and remove it right away. Don’t allow it to accumulate. Follow the One In One Out principle every time you walk through the door. Buy a new pizza cutter, trash or donate the old one. Buy a new picture frame, sell a less loved one.

Having less clutter means more space for things you use and love. Keep in mind that the things we store in our homes may be useful and helpful but they are still just things. Less time spent on cleaning and maintaining our possessions means you will have more time to spend with family and friends. Enjoy your clutter-free space.