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## Mess with success

Our culture is obsessed with being neat and tidy. But is being hyper-organized sucking the joy out of our lives?

By: Helen Spitzer



It was the week after we finally moved in together. I was standing in the kitchen with an incoherent box of odds and sods, exhausted from trying to make sense of them, when my long-time sweetheart emerged from the basement with yet another item that required a home. “Where does this go?” he asked innocently. And it hit me with inescapable certainty, a long, slow sinking feeling: By this point in my life, I’m supposed to know where things go. And I don’t.

I’ve never been organized, although I’ve had my moments. I scrub enthusiastically when it’s required and I’m even good at getting rid of things. But when my house is at its tidiest, my productivity in other spheres plummets. Even though I long for the gorgeously spare homes featured in glossy magazines, I find the execution taxing. Being neat requires an investment of time and emotional energy — time I’d rather spend doing the very things that being organized is supposed to allow me to do.

So when David Freedman and Eric Abrahamson’s book on the usefulness of disorder, *A Perfect Mess*, appeared in 2007, I found it immediately appealing, right down to its sprawling subtitle: *The Hidden Benefits of Disorder — How Crammed Closets, Cluttered Offices, and On-the-Fly Planning Make the World a Better Place*. No one else seemed to be asking whether or not neatness actually made people function better. I decided to call Freedman.

“People assume their lives are out of control because they’ve been told their entire lives that things will go poorly if they’re disorganized,” he tells me in his languid Boston accent. He’s used to being a voice in the wilderness in our clutter-phobic society. The bad news? Most of us will never be highly organized, even if we aspire to be. Professional organizers make repeat visits because, as Freedman explains, most people just don’t find that being organized comes naturally.

### Oh, the shame

Although Freedman’s research showed that both men and women worry about messiness, women responding to his survey had stronger feelings of guilt and shame about their shortcomings. A recent issue of *Real Simple*, the bible of organizational obsessives everywhere, urges its readers to address visual clutter — even as one of the women profiled worries her decluttering habit will make her too cranky to enjoy life. She might be surprised by Freedman’s discovery that being organized doesn’t improve efficiency. “If you look at the evidence, there isn’t a strong correlation between being neat and being effective,” he tells me cheerfully.

Talk to professional organizers, however, and you’ll get a different story. Vancouver-based Rowena List has been a professional organizer for five years. She believes strongly in the transformative powers of space clearing. Like the American motivational speakers she admires — Suze Orman, Tony Robbins — her pitch is well-oiled. “We’re running on that treadmill of life,” says List “and not really asking ourselves, ‘Wait, what do  
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well oiled. “We’re running on that treadmill of life,” says List, “and not really asking ourselves, ‘Wait, what do I want? What are my aspirations and intentions?’” She says we get emotionally attached to our possessions, which become stand-ins for our dreams and desires. When we clear our junk, we make room to actualize that potential. “It’s like putting on a really great outfit,” List says. “I work with my clients on their outside because I know it will help them feel good on the inside.”

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After 10 minutes with List, I’m convinced that my messy basement is holding me back. But there’s a nagging voice in my head. Isn’t clearing my house to improve my self-esteem like dieting my way to happiness? Not unlike being pressured to achieve physical perfection, women are bombarded by messages to get organized, precisely at the stage of life when they’ve made peace with their bodies. Decluttering is a multi-billion dollar industry, marketed primarily to women — and driven by shame. “You hear it from your boss and your colleagues,” says Freedman, “and you can’t turn off the TV without hearing it from Oprah: ‘If you aren’t straightening yourself out all the time, what kind of failure are you?’”

Until we finally shackled up, my man and I had functioned — separately — as joyfully cluttered individuals, holed up at our desks with our respective teetering piles, and blithely indifferent to the chaos, interrupting our work with random short bursts of housekeeping. I cooked full meals only on alternate weeks when my daughter was with me. Life was chaotic — but also full and productive.

Now we were merging households, forging a new domestic entity with my daughter who, on the cusp of 13, was a vigorous jumble of lip balm, books and hair accessories. We would have to be organized. We would have to be tidy. I bought Cheryl Mendelson’s book *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House* and made detailed lists of chores: daily, weekly and monthly. I mopped, I took up ironing, I nagged — and fell into bed exhausted. My daughter was confused by the new regime after years of good-natured, laissez-faire homemaking. My partner was irritated. In retrospect, I made us miserable.

### What a tidy life looks like

I wondered what life might be like if being tidy was second nature. So I asked Jo-Anna Ash, a 50-year-old Edmontonian with a warm laugh and a daily routine that verges on compulsive: She won’t leave a dish dirty, vacuums daily, and matches the Kleenex box to the bedding. When they were in elementary school, her kids had colour-coded file trays by the kitchen door. Highly organized since she was a child, it’s only in the past five years that she has, as Ash puts it, become “obsessed with decluttering.” While her teenage sons joke that the house looks as though no one lives there, Ash says she feels pressure to constantly get rid of things. “I’d feel bombarded if I didn’t keep up with it. When I go to someone’s house with stuff in it, I feel claustrophobic.”

Hellen Buttigieg, also the mother of two teenagers, is a 45-year-old professional organizer and life coach in Oakville, Ont., and host of the HGTV show *Neat*. I ask if it’s possible to be too organized. “Yeah, it’s called OCD,” she laughs, adding no one comes to her saying they’re *too* organized. But then she’s suddenly serious. “What you’re talking about is perfectionism, which is something I struggled with for years. There is a point of diminishing returns.” Buttigieg happily admits her house is far from magazine-perfect. “I’m always up front about that. Once you have kids, you relax a little.”

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I’m fairly certain our versions of “relaxed” differ. On a daily basis I sift through paper: in the kitchen, on my desk, on the windowsill, piled on the floor by my bed. Yet when I sort the piles I can’t find anything again. This was an enduring mystery until a friend sent me Malcolm Gladwell’s 2002 *New Yorker* article about paper. “Piles are living, breathing archives,” he writes. We are constantly problem solving and making new associations; the spatial arrangement of our paper mirrors the way we think. Freedman’s book takes this further, arguing that neatness impedes creativity. “Just as there are benefits to being organized,” he tells me, “I’ve never found a profession that couldn’t benefit from a certain amount of messiness and randomness.”

When I arrive at the Toronto home of Maryann Kerr, a 47-year-old professional fundraiser, she’s helping her two daughters get out the door. Her husband, who stays home with the girls, sings rockabilly songs as he packs lunches. One daughter shouts that she needs her agenda signed. The family dog drops to the floor with [more.ca/work-and-money/.../print](http://more.ca/work-and-money/.../print)

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packs lunches. One daughter shouts that she needs her agenda signed. The family dog drops to the floor with a satisfied grunt and gnaws a biscuit. Kerr emanates amused calm and hands me a cup of tea. "Welcome to chaos."

If there is beauty in the randomness and improvisation Freedman describes, it is here. Crafts, collections and detritus of child rearing line every room. The books and precious objects speak to a family with many interests: This is the house where her husband grew up, an unspoiled 1963 artifact with vintage wallpaper and a bona fide bomb shelter.

### Clutter creeps back, but everyone's happier

Kerr tells me their routine used to be more structured, but they've let go a little. "What I remember growing up is that having a clean house was one of my mother's priorities," she says, "and she worked and had five kids. She spent every spare minute scrubbing, and you know what? She was always in a bad mood."

"When you walk into someone else's house and see stuff around, it says something about who they are," says Freedman when I describe Kerr's home to him the next day. "It's a form of communication. If you walk into a house with very little stuff in it, what do you know about them? You know one thing: They're neat."

I imagine the imperfect stories our own home tells: the pencilled notes my daughter leaves for me; the Quebec scene painted by my partner's grandmother; the lamp we rescued from the curbside; the Boggle score pads between couch cushions. Part of the idea being sold in the magazines piled on our coffee table is that successful people don't clutter, that minimal equals beautiful. But now, when I really look at them, these rooms seem *too* empty to me. We fail to see the loveliness of the stories our homes tell — the same way we fail to see the beauty of our bodies, zeroing in instead on our perceived flaws. And although I still long to be tidy, I prefer, always, to see evidence of a life joyfully lived.

**Can't live with your clutter? [Get easy, baby steps to a cleaner home from the FlyLady!](http://www.more.ca/work-and-money/reinvention/the-flylady-s-following/a/1960) ( <http://www.more.ca/work-and-money/reinvention/the-flylady-s-following/a/1960> )**

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## Transcontinental Media contact information



Médias Transcontinental ( <http://www.medias-transcontinental.com> )

Street Address

1100 Boulevard René-Lévesque Ouest

Extended Address

24eme étage

Locality

Montréal

Region

QC

Country

CA

Postal Code

H3B 4X9

Work

+1 514 392 9000

Fax

+1 514 392 1489

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