

Ten Signs That Your Life Is Cluttered

By Ramona Creel

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How do you know if you need to clean out? Here's a sure-fire ten-step way to spot (and deal with!) clutter in your life.

YOU HAVE TO MOVE A PILE OFF A CHAIR SO SOMEONE CAN SIT DOWN

Having a junk closet where you hide it all away is one thing (not good, but certainly a bit more tolerable). But when your "junk" starts spilling out into your active living and working spaces, it's time to re-evaluate the situation. I have seen clients who couldn't turn on the stove because it was piled up with paper -- or couldn't sleep in bed because it was covered with "stuff." If you are unable to use portions of your home or office because of clutter, it's time for the hard hat and shovel!

YOU KNOW YOU OWN A PAIR OF SCISSORS, BUT CAN NEVER FIND IT

Not being able to find things when you need them is a sign -- you don't have a set assigned place for your belongings. And not just any old place, but a LOGICAL spot nearest the point where you use the item -- a little cubby or section of a drawer that is dedicated only to the scissors and nothing else. Where would you look for those scissors when you needed them? That's where they should be stored. And if you need scissors in several different places around your home or office, buy 3 or 4 pairs.

IT TAKES YOU THREE TRIES TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE IN THE MORNING

Let me guess -- you walk out the door without your briefcase. Then you walk out again sans keys. Finally, you head out the door and realize your lunch is sitting on the counter. This is nothing more than poor planning. Take a minute the night before to gather up everything that you need to take with you in the morning. Put it in a designated holding area near the door so you won't forget it. And you can even put a sticky note on the door to remind yourself to get your lunch from the fridge!

YOU PAY AT LEAST ONE LATE FEE OR INTEREST CHARGE EACH MONTH

If you had a standard way of dealing with bills each month, you wouldn't get behind. Set up a small filing rack where you put all of your bills, as they arrive, in the order in which they are due -- and write the DUE DATE on the envelope. Then, schedule in time twice a month to pay the bills that are due in the next two weeks. Treat your bill-paying time like an appointment -- block it off on your calendar and don't let anything get in the way of completing that chore. And if you find that your bills are late because you don't have enough money to pay them, then it's time to re-evaluate your

spending patterns and plug those money leaks.

YOU REGULARLY REQUEST AN EXTENSION ON YOUR TAX RETURNS

For some people, tax day isn't April 15th -- it's August 15th! Most folks who file extensions do so because they can't get all of their paperwork together on time. So set up a filing box just for tax receipts. Break your receipts down into basic categories -- office supplies, charitable donations, medical expenses, travel -- and file any new receipts as soon as you get them. Then, you can hand the entire box over to your CPA. Better yet, set yourself up on a computerized accounting program (like Quicken or Quickbooks) and enter your expenses each month.

YOU'VE NEVER SEEN THE BOTTOM OF YOUR IN-BOX

If you have a hard time staying on top of "TO-DO'S," I would first ask if you are setting aside time each week to take care of any incoming paper. You should sort through all the new stuff -- mail, faxes, memos, etc. -- EVERY DAY. How on earth will you know what you need to do if you don't at least open the envelopes? When you pick up a piece of paper, make a decision about what action you need to take (put a sticky note on it to remind you, if you need). Then, schedule that action into your calendar. You should set aside regular time each week for making phone calls, writing letters, filing, data entry -- whatever you typically do with your paper.

YOUR TYPICAL WORKDAY ENDS THREE HOURS AFTER EVERYONE ELSE'S

Workaholism has become a serious problem in our society -- but not everyone who works late does it out of a compulsion. Some people have to put in longer hours to make up for the fact that they are less productive during the regular work day. Do you get a lot done while other people are around -- or are you constantly being interrupted and distracted? Make a list of all the things that draw your attention away from work during the day -- drop-in visitors, clutter in your office, all the other things you have to do -- and start tackling these "time wasters" one-by-one.

YOU LOOK AROUND YOUR DESK AND SEE STACKS AND PILES OF PAPER

People who pile instead of file tend to do so because they have never set up a really useful filing system. Look at your files -- do the categories make sense? Are they logically grouped into meaningful clusters of information (all of your insurance paperwork together and everything related to running your computer in one place)? Do you have more than one file with the same information in it (a "car" file and a "Toyota" file and a "vehicle" file)? Are your files overstuffed with ancient paperwork that you really don't need? It might be time to re-vamp, re-organize, and clean out!

YOU ARE ALWAYS RUNNING SOMEONE ELSE'S ERRANDS

Have you learned how to say "no" yet? I have never understood why people think that "no" is such a bad word -- like they are being disrespectful to the other person by turning them down. What you are actually doing when you say "no" is being respectful of yourself -- understanding and accepting the limits of what you can reasonably accomplish in a day. You aren't doing anyone a favor by overcrowding your day with responsibilities. In fact, you are doing others a disservice by rushing from one activity to the next without giving any of them your full attention. And you are certainly causing yourself a lot of unnecessary stress.

YOUR LIFE FEELS OUT OF CONTROL

Many signs of clutter are tangible -- you can see and feel them. But that sense of overwhelm can be ten times more damaging than a stack of unopened mail or a pile of junk in your closet. Do you ever

feel that you are overlooking something important -- forgetting to do something vital -- and that you will certainly pay for it in the end? Or that you will never get caught up, no matter how hard you try? Or that you are losing your mind because you can't deal with the mess anymore? The first step to curbing these anxieties is to take that FIRST STEP -- tackle a cluttered drawer or a today's mail or a small pile of filing. Just putting a dent in your mess will take a great weight off your shoulders -- and often give you the motivation you need to dig in deeper. Just realize that "de-cluttering" is a process, and it will take you many small baby steps to reach your goal -- and savor the satisfaction at completing each step.

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Ramona Creel is a Professional Organizer and the founder of [OnlineOrganizing.com](http://www.onlineorganizing.com) -- a web-based one-stop shop offering everything that you need to get organized at home or at work. At [OnlineOrganizing.com](http://www.onlineorganizing.com), you may get a referral to an organizer near you, shop for the latest organizing products, get tons of free tips, and even learn how to become a professional organizer or build your existing organizing business. And if you would like to read more articles about organizing your life or building your business, get a free subscription to the "Get Organized" and "Organized For A Living" newsletters. Please visit <http://www.onlineorganizing.com> or contact Ramona directly at <mailto:ramona@onlineorganizing.com> for more information.

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