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# 6 ways to clear physical and mental clutter

It stresses you out and takes up real estate in your home and mind.



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Don't you just breathe easier when looking at a neat, clean, uncluttered space? (Photo: Photographee.eu/Shutterstock)

Even the most organized people can begin the slow slide into clutter when they start a family. In the early days, it's baby clothes and toys. Later, it's too many school papers. Then it's the kids' activities that fragment family dinnertime. Screen time that creates daily distraction. Not to mention the mental clutter of trying to keep it all together.

In their book, "Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century: 32 Families Open Their Doors," a team of archaeologists, anthropologists and other social scientists affiliated with UCLA's Center on the Everyday Lives of Families offer a visual montage of the four years they spent documenting the lives of middle-class Los Angeles families and their homes. The team wanted to learn more about the American predilection for stuff and whether we're **burdened by our material possessions**. The answer is clearly yes.

Among **their findings**, the researchers learned that mothers experienced elevated stress hormones from managing too many possessions; the rise of big box stores contributed to stockpiles of food; backyards were rarely used in favor of indoor entertainment; spacious master suites were the least used rooms in the house; and 75 percent of the garages couldn't hold cars because they were so full of things. (It's worth noting that Americans have 3.1 percent of the world's children but we buy 40 percent of the toys sold worldwide.) The researchers also discovered a correlation between cluttered fridge doors (magnets, photos, etc.) and general household clutter.

Clutter causes stress for a number of reasons. It's a visual reminder of all the things we need to do, it creates shame and embarrassment, it distracts us from what we want to do and, on a practical level, it prevents us from finding what we need. Too much stuff also causes financial stress. **OfferUp**, a mobile-only marketplace founded in 2011 by two new fathers in Bellevue, Washington, **commissioned a 2016 survey** that found 84 percent of Americans report having financial concerns and 39 percent worry about paying for kids' upcoming expenses like new clothes for school. While 47 percent of parents say buying new isn't important to them, only 9 percent shop for kids' back-to-school needs from resale marketplaces. Our homes are full of potential to help with the cost of living.

Carolyn Koehnline, a **clutter coach** and licensed mental health counselor, says she sees an epidemic of stuff for all kinds of reasons: too many presents at holidays and birthdays, not weeding out the outgrown toys, our overscheduled family lives and the marketing of consumer culture to children.

## Clutter isn't just physical



The mental clutter that comes with keeping track of a busy family schedule can be a big source of stress. (Photo: hidesy/Shutterstock)

Koehnline (pronounced Kenlin) says clutter is about much more than physical possessions, and often people aren't ready for quick decisions on clearing it. Clutter can be our emotional ties to a person or to a time gone by. When she works with people to sort their home, she includes an "emotional" box as a place for them to put things that they can't decide on yet — a child's bib or baby toy, for example. "It can be helpful to do a little goodbye with those items to acknowledge sadness about a child not being 3 anymore," she says.

Clutter can also be the result of keeping up with the Joneses (OfferUp's survey found that 45 percent of parents care what other parents think of them) or not having enough time with your kids.

Koehnline believes families need to create spaciousness for themselves, both physical and mental. "When we don't, our decisions get blurry. We are operating out of overwhelm all the time and the decisions we make aren't coming from a place of inner wisdom; nobody is steering the family ship."

## How to clear the clutter

For families feeling the need to create more space — mental, physical, emotional — Koehnline has a few suggestions.



While they're young, get kids in the habit of picking up toys and putting them away in designated places. (Photo: Warut Chinsai/Shutterstock)

- 1. Develop a family rhythm of putting things away every day.** Put on a piece of music and have everyone dedicate 10 minutes to tidying up together and putting things away in their designated places. Developing this rhythm when your kids are younger is preferable, but it's never too late to start.
- 2. Tackle weeding out as a family.** Kids need to see us model getting rid of things we don't need, either by donating, giving to someone else or selling. Help them go through their outgrown toys or enlist their help for a closet. Start small — even just a drawer or countertop (or perhaps that fridge door).
- 3. Dream of better space uses.** Often we set up rooms for show, says Koehnline, but perhaps we never use that formal dining room. Get kids involved in transforming a room or basement corner for a purpose more aligned with your family's aspirations — how about a craft studio? — and engage them in asking what to keep and what to let go.
- 4. Hold a garage sale.** The kids help and earn the money from the things sold. My own kids loved selling their outgrown toys — Barbies and transformers were hot items.
- 5. Slow down the family schedule.** If you're operating on overwhelm, consider ways to stop filling up every inch of the schedule (and not filling open space with screen time). Hold a family meeting to find out what matters to everyone about the home they live in and the time they have together.
- 6. Try journaling.** This tip is for the adults, as Koehnline advocates writing for clarity. "It's a way to stop and ask yourself a single question, such as, 'Is this a good use of our family time?' rather than have a barrage of unanswered questions in your head," she says.

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