

CLUTTER 101

**The Definitive Guide To
De-cluttering Your Life**

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Chapter 1: Understanding Clutter

Introduction

This isn't yet another stereotypical book about de-cluttering your life. I'm not going to make bold, unrealistic statements about how you can turn your home into a streamlined, simplified and efficient haven and I certainly won't promise that you can achieve it all overnight. No, this book is about being realistic. It's about proposing a practical way of de-cluttering that is easy to get into, flexible enough to suit your lifestyle and – most importantly – sustainable.

I get regular emails about people struggling to get on top of their junk, and I witness on a daily basis people wasting energy, time and money because their homes aren't organized and streamlined. If you are a regular reader of my blog, [Organize IT](#), you will no doubt have read about some of the concepts detailed in this book before. In it I will take those concepts, expand on them and cover whole new topics as I resolve some of the questions and issues people have. Whether you are taking the first tentative steps in tackling your clutter or you have been struggling to deal with it for years and want to find a consistently effective approach, this book is for you.

Why is clutter bad?

Clutter isn't something you can avoid in your life. It's the consequence of living in an affluent society with so many things available to us and so much stuff flowing in and out of our lives. However, because we live such hectic and busy lifestyles, the level of clutter we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis can become problematic. We all know it's bad, it gets reported often enough in the media, on television shows and in newspaper articles. However, what rarely gets mentioned is why exactly clutter is so bad. It's a topic that hardly gets discussed except in the vaguest of terms (“It gets in the way, what more do you need to know?” was one such example I came across) but how can you really take control of your clutter if you don't know why it's so bad in the first place? Understanding the problem is the first big step to dealing with it effectively, so over the next several pages I will detail the key reasons as to why excessive clutter is such an issue nowadays. You may be able to relate to some points and you may have no connection with others, but do understand as you read them that they all play a part in our lives.

It's a distraction

Clutter distracts you. It's important to understand that a room full of clutter will pull at your mind as though it were a fish caught on a hook. Ultimately, we as humans crave some semblance of organization and whether you are aware of it or not, your mind will always exert a little of its energy on the disarray that is your home. Clutter represents something that is incomplete in your life and even if you don't think much of it at the time or even if you don't actively care about doing something about it, subconsciously your mind will still be thinking, “I need to do something with that...” It's because of that reason people go into denial about their clutter problem in an attempt to silence that inner voice. However, when you go down that road there is nothing to stop you from letting the clutter get out of control, making the whole problem harder to deal with.

It wastes time

We've all been there. Having to dig through drawers looking for the spare keys, upheaving boxes and piles of paper to find that letter you urgently need to reply to... it's so

frustrating and stressful. In some ways it might not make sense that you can save time by de-cluttering because what's quicker than throwing a bill into the nearest drawer or just tossing your clothes into a corner after a hard day at work? However, as I can vouch from my own personal experiences, in the long term (a lot of the reasons we clutter at all is due to short term thinking) the time-saving benefits of being de-cluttered are perhaps the most apparent of any other. To know exactly where everything is and being able to find it straight away is incredibly satisfying and a lot less stressful. Fortunately there are short-term solutions that facilitate good de-cluttering practise, which I will discuss in later chapters, that are just as time-saving as tossing stuff into piles but without any of the disadvantages.

It costs money

One of the misconceptions about throwing away all your clutter is that it can cost you money but if you find that that is really the case, you're not doing it right. De-cluttering is not about throwing out as much as possible or taking chances on whether you're going to need something or not. If you are de-cluttering properly and using this book as a guide, you will save a lot of money because you will start being more frugal and careful regarding what stuff you bring into your home. Why add to all your existing junk by buying more unnecessary stuff? Being cluttered is what will really cost you money, because you won't be able to find half the stuff you need and that's even assuming you actually know what items you possess. Then there is the whole storage issue. How many boxes, drawers and other storage devices do you have to buy to store all that clutter? What about the cost of renting out that garage to keep stuff in? How about having to buy a bigger house because you think you have no room. Think that sounds far fetched? Most people are surprised how much space they really have when they are smart with it and get organized.

It's bad for your health

Some of you might think I am stretching it a bit here. How can clutter that on the surface is little more than a nuisance really affect your health? Well you'd be surprised. For one you can cut out all those potential trip hazards by getting stuff off the floor. Then there is the fact a de-cluttered home goes hand-in-hand with a clean home, which means less dust and germs. Also, try cooking and preparing healthy food in the kitchen when all your ingredients are stuffed in cupboards and your fridge is overflowing with out of date goods. It ends up becoming easier to just throw burgers and chips in the oven or even just order a takeaway. Many psychologists also argue - as I touched on previously - that a messy, cluttered life can create excessive stress and that having little organization in your life is a drain on your energy and peace of mind.

Why do we keep clutter?

So you should now have a good idea of why having lots of clutter in your life is bad. You can hopefully see those disadvantages in your life and how they are affecting you. That should give you some extra motivation to bring it all down to acceptable levels. But that still doesn't explain why so many people actually keep clutter despite all of those negative qualities? What thoughts go through our head that make us fill our lives with junk? How do we justify keeping clutter rather than getting rid of it? People often have the wrong expectations of what de-cluttering actually involves and much of this book attempts to dispel those ideas. Most of the time people think it involves a complete clear-out of anything that doesn't serve a purpose in their life. That's a *lot* of stuff that you'd need to get rid of it... if that was really the case. It's not so much the amount of stuff you get rid

of, but how you organize what you have. Over the next several pages I will discuss exactly what excuses we use and how invalid they are. As before, some of these points you will relate to more than others but remember that you will have used all these excuses at some point to justify keeping stuff.

It's expensive or it cost me a lot of money

Something doesn't sound right when you have a costly item all mixed up with the rest of your junk and clutter but it happens all too often. The cost doesn't bother people that much when they decide to shove it away in the closet so why should it be such a problem when they are trying to get rid of it? I had an old laptop stored away in various places for years. Because it had been so expensive to buy I struggled to come to terms with getting rid of it even though it was practically worthless now. What if I could still somehow make use of it? What if I could repair it? Of course it's painful that something you invested so much money into ends up becoming useless clutter, but look on the bright side; you can probably sell it on and get some money back if it is really worth as much as you envisage. Thanks to the joys of the internet, there are plenty of options for selling on your old clutter. Speaking of selling stuff on...

I don't have time to sort through it all

Yet you have time for everything else? This is a common excuse for a lot of people because who really cares about a little clutter, right? It can't make much difference to my life surely? The great benefit of de-cluttering is that by regularly putting a little bit of focus into it you can actually save so much time in the long run. No more wasting time digging through boxes trying to find your shoes, looking to find space for your latest toy in a bulging wardrobe, wading through a big pile of paperwork to find that forgotten about bill... you get the point? Once you are on top of the clutter in your home it's almost a natural (and quick) process to stick with it. And it's not as hard work as you might imagine, especially if you follow the suggestions in this book. If you try to find the motivation and time to do one big de-cluttering splurge (as many sources will suggest you do) rather than taking small, regular steps (as I propose you do) you are of course likely to fail. Who wants to waste their weekend or holiday time spending hours sorting junk out?

I might be able to sell it on someday

What makes you think you can or will sell it on in the future? What's stopping you from selling it on now and making some space in your life? Don't overestimate the true worth of your junk, you might have some antiques or potential collector's items in there but everything else will likely be worth next to nothing. Second hand goods are rarely worth much, especially as so many stores and companies are now branching into cheap, value products. If you honestly feel your collection of Beano and Dandy annuals or that candle holder your grandmother gave you will bring you a decent amount of money in the future (and you've actually done the research to validate that belief) at least store them away properly and securely, and not have them stuffed away under everything else in the corner of the garage where they will get damaged and *definitely* lose their value.

If I do it I'll never get it spotless

That's most likely true if you were aiming to make it perfect. However, permanently tidy, organized homes are only ever seen in glossy fashion magazines, showroom brochures or in homes that rarely get lived in in the first place. For whatever reason many people think this perfect state is the ultimate goal when de-cluttering. Aiming for

perfectionism in anything is going to be stressful and though de-cluttering is a valuable exercise it's still only a small part of a bigger picture. The trick is to maintain a healthy level of clutter and have as much organization as your life requires. Doing any more is counter-productive. That way you are free to focus your energies on the bigger picture issues such as your work and family.

I would feel guilty getting rid of so much stuff

Recycle it then. Sell it on, give it away to your friends or to charity shops... there are so many options nowadays. Just because you have no use for your junk doesn't mean someone else can't do something with it. And if you really can't get rid of it all using guilt-free measures you will just have to come to terms with it. I wish I could provide something more enlightening and cheerful but one way or another all your stuff will get disposed of eventually (nice, morbid thought for you there) so you're best off doing it now when your life can benefit from it and you won't end up burdening somebody else.

It was a gift/present or it has nostalgic value

We receive gifts and presents on a regular basis, whether it be for our birthdays, an anniversary or even due to a good performance at work or school. If the gift is useful that's great. It serves a purpose and as a result improves your life in some way. However, most gifts and presents are gimmicky and something you wouldn't typically buy for yourself, so they ultimately provide nothing of value to you beyond feelings of nostalgia. Sorry, but those joke socks with big baubles hanging off them that you bought for your friends at Christmas really won't change their lives in any meaningful way and probably never even got worn. Nice thought though.

The big problem is that you often feel obligated to keep gifts and presents, if for nothing more than because someone went to the trouble of buying them for you in the first place, and you'd feel guilty for getting rid of them. Let's face it though, how many presents can you actually remember buying for people? Not many I bet. The worst case scenario is that you might need to put that tacky vase your aunt Mary bought you out on display for a few weeks to keep her sweet when she visits, but she will quickly forget all about it. For my 21st birthday people unsurprisingly bought me lots of 21st birthday themed gifts (basically photo-frames and mugs with a big "21" emblazoned on them). Thanks guys, but those presents really have a limited lifespan (try a week after my birthday) and I don't think anyone noticed that I had lost them by the time my next birthday came around.

My life will lose meaning

We as a society are becoming increasingly superficial and obsessed with aesthetics. As a result we often view our worth in terms of the possessions we have, how we compare to others and what everyone thinks of us. I know people who keep some snazzy piece of technology out on display just to impress their friends even though they never actually use it and it takes up so much space. Likewise, people will have shelves full of books so as to look clever and intellectual despite the fact they might have read the books once (or not even read them at all) and then forgotten all about them. However, would you prefer to look good on a superficial level in front of people or have long term peace of mind that comes from living a de-cluttered and frugal lifestyle?

It's better to be safe than sorry

It would be awful if you had thrown that old letter out and then suddenly found that you actually needed it, right? Wouldn't it be terrible if you ran out of conditioner and you'd got

rid of that two year old spare bottle? How bad would it be if you had given away an old DVD and then suddenly had the urge to watch it again? Well, no actually, it wouldn't be that bad. These are examples of worst-case situations that run through people's heads when they contemplate de-cluttering. In reality if you run out of conditioner it's because you didn't bother to buy any more when the bottle was running low and if you throw an important letter out it's because you didn't file it away safely in the first place. As for that DVD you're missing just rent it if you really want to satisfy that urge. De-cluttering is a gradual process. You never really clear your life 100% of clutter and if you're not sure whether you really need something or not, you *don't* have to get rid of it. However, when you do try to get rid of something don't be stifled by the fear of any consequences your head will imagine up.

The types of clutter

You should now understand why excessive clutter is bad and the flawed logic we use to justify keeping all that stuff in our lives. But there is more to clutter, it's not just simply junk and rubbish. Clutter can be broken down into different types, which in turn can be treated and processed differently. For instance, reference material can be filed and broken items can either be fixed or thrown out. However, don't let this confuse or distract you. While it's not practical to focus heavily on categorizing your clutter when you are working through it, it's useful to be aware of the different types. It's really all about common sense.

Trash

The most simple form of clutter. As the name implies, it's basically just rubbish so put it straight into your bin or recycle it accordingly. It's funny how trash can work its way into your home because at least when you dump something in a drawer or box you still feel it might serve a purpose in some way at some point in the future. Trash is just... trash right? You'd be surprised at how many old receipts, scraps of paper, sweet wrappers and old flyers can find their way into your home, further exasperating the whole problem of keeping your home organized and tidy. Keep it simple, keep it easy and just dispose of it.

Reference

Sometimes you are obligated to keep something, typically paperwork. It's usually an old bill, some tax documents, a manual or a letter containing important information. They most likely won't actually end up being of any use or you will never end up referring to them. However, typically for legal reasons, it's good practise to keep them, especially if you are a business. It's one of the quirks of life that the one time you need such a file, it's the one file you've dumped somewhere or lost and simply can't find. Luckily a lot of this stuff has a limited lifespan so you're not expected to find storage space for papers that are years old. Bills, for instance, can typically be disposed of after two years so create an effective filing system and store all your paperwork there.

Broken or out of date

You'd think we would do something with an item when it breaks but take a look through your clutter. You will probably find at least one broken item that you didn't want to throw away. You will no doubt have thought about repairing it but you have never actually got round to doing so. If you've not fixed it already you almost certainly never will. If you really missed it or needed it you'd surely have done something about it. Or alternatively you might have bought an updated item or replacement and kept the original for whatever

reason. By out of date stuff I don't necessarily mean food (though it's probably worth going through your fridge and kitchen drawer to check dates, especially on dry and tinned foods). What I am referring to is, for instance, when you buy a DVD player, but rather than getting rid of or selling on your VHS player you store it away. You never know when you might get a VHS that you need to watch right? Well, I've had my DVD player for a few years now and haven't had the need to watch a VHS in all that time.

Collectables/antiques

Collections like antique plates and old comic books are potentially worth a lot of money, so it's crazy that so many people just dump these investments away under piles of junk and clutter, left to get damaged and broken. Of course, it's quite easy and common for people to over-evaluate the worth of their possessions but the truth is most stuff simply doesn't hold any real value, especially with sites like eBay allowing easier access to second hand goods. If you have any doubts or honestly believe these items might be worth something, consider taking them in for a valuation to get a clear picture. If they have value sell them on or store them safely and securely. If not, they belong in a different category altogether.

Nostalgia

With this sort of clutter you need to decide your own acceptable level for clearing out nostalgic items because it can be more personal to some than others, and that overrides your normal decisions regarding processing your clutter. However, it's important that you think rationally when processing items in this category. If you refuse to part with old letters from a past boyfriend who screwed you over then there are deeper issues to deal with. I know people who refuse to even throw away birthday cards from years ago, while others get rid of any gifts that have not been used within six months. While it might be comforting to have all those cards, do you honestly ever look at them? Nostalgic items are great if you actually refer back to them every so often, but if they are forgotten about in the back of a cupboard they aren't really providing the nostalgic value you want.

Recyclable/saleable

If you are getting rid of your clutter and it is not trash, it may sometimes be easier to recycle the items or sell them on if there is any value to it. For instance, once I have read a book or listened to a music CD I will usually either sell it on if it has maintained its value, or give it away to friends and family. Clothes are often a good bet to give away too. That way none of it goes to waste and you can even occasionally get a little money out of it. Nowadays being environmentally conscious is increasingly important and is likely to become one of the more significant day-to-day actions in our lives over the next few decades so it is a good habit to develop now. Sometimes what seems like a piece of clutter or junk to you can be adopted or altered to give it a new lease of life in the hands of an appropriate person.

Undecided

With all the best intentions in the world to de-clutter our homes, sometimes we just can't decide whether to get rid of something or not. We might have doubts about whether we will really need it or not, whether it has any worth or simply whether it means enough to us. How we deal with items in this category tends to influence the overall success of otherwise of your de-cluttering. The general consensus is that you keep something or get rid of it, there is no middle ground. Because of that people often end up throwing away the wrong items and regretting their decisions. In actuality it's rarely so black and white.

There will be plenty of times when you simply can't decide what to do with an item. The trick is to box away all these undecided items and revisit them a few months down the line to see if you've missed them or not. There is no need to pressurise yourself into making decisions, and it's certainly not necessary to process all your possessions in one go.

Essentials

For the sake of completeness I have included this as a category. This is what should make up most of your possessions as you progress with your de-cluttering. As the name suggests, this is the stuff we need and use on a regular basis and it should be organized and stored appropriately. Trimming *all* your possessions down to purely the essentials is a nice goal to aim for but not practical when we consider the amount of stuff we have to process in our lives. However, when people talk about de-cluttering this is what they mistakenly think the ultimate goal is. Be realistic about what you are aiming for. You want to have a maintainable level of possessions so that with a little regular effort you can keep on top of everything without it taking up too much time. You should have better things to be doing with your time.

The benefits of de-cluttering

At this point you should have some idea of the negatives of having a cluttered life and what clutter actually represents. If you really need any more persuasion as to why de-cluttering is good for you firstly consider your peace of mind, that point in your life where you are no longer constantly unsettled and restless. For some people dealing with the regular hurdles of a cluttered life might not be high on their list of priorities, but as many others who have achieved peace of mind can no doubt attest to, you will greatly benefit from it. It is not something you necessarily notice until you actually start making changes to your life but you will be grateful when you feel the difference and can actually focus your energies on the bigger picture rather than the minutiae of your home. An unorganized environment will prey on your mind. Do you *really* want to worry about where you dumped your passport when you are packing for an holiday? Do you *really* want the hassle of digging through your wardrobe every time you want to go out? Get on top of situations like these and it's one less strain on your head.

Speaking of which, it's great being able to go straight to what you need without any fuss. Digging through piles of boxes and drawers to get to what you want is a chore. Also, next time you go shopping you will have a much clearer idea of what products you actually own and what you really need. Treasured and nostalgic items are not the enemy of the de-clutterer (as some people like to think). In fact rather than having all those old photos and ornaments hidden in a cupboard you can actually have them organized and easily accessible. And let's face it, we have enough to do nowadays without worrying about the state of our home. Think of all the time, money and hassle you will save!

So, still have reservations about de-cluttering?

Chapter 2: Starting To De-Clutter

Introduction

You should now have all the knowledge and theory as to why you clutter. The next step is to understand the techniques and attitudes that will allow you to actually de-clutter with minimal stress and effort, and also develop the motivation to stick with it. Unfortunately there is no magical approach to de-cluttering, it will require *some* effort and dedication on your part. However if you follow the practical advice given the whole process can be made much more simple and streamlined.

It's one thing to have the knowledge, it's entirely another to put it into practise. Thus, the first step you should take is simply to pull a box out from underneath your bed or from a cupboard (whatever has a bit of clutter) and have a little play around. Don't take it too seriously to start with, this is more an excuse to put some of what you've learnt into practise. If you end up throwing some stuff away, great, but don't analyse your entire clutter-free future based on this one moment. Take an item out and see why you kept it. Was it nostalgic or did you think it would come in useful? If the latter, when did you actually last use it? Can you see why keeping hold of it was bad? What sort of clutter type is it? If in doubt refer back to the first chapter and refresh your memory. Remember, this book can be used for reference too.

De-cluttering is one big cycle. To start off, you won't get rid of much, but as the days and weeks go by and you revisit areas of clutter, your confidence and tolerance levels will increase. You will quickly realize that those things you throw away aren't suddenly going to come back to bite you. You will quickly realize that your friend won't question you about that furry pen she bought you six months ago that you've now binned. You will quickly realise the benefits of being able to find your wallet straight away without digging through piles of laundry. I could go on but I imagine you've got the idea.

Getting a system in place

Experimenting is a nice, easy way of introducing yourself to the whole process but you can't keep dipping in and out of messy areas and achieve any real success without getting some sort of system set up. You need to get the right mindset and expectations in place otherwise the all encompassing project that is de-cluttering your home will just end up overwhelming you. Over the following sections I will introduce a number of systems and tools that you can implement to handle what is ahead of you by breaking it all down into manageable chunks. Take them on one step at a time and move onto the next only when you are comfortable.

Place for everything, everything in its place

The biggest benefit off an organized home that will quickly become apparent as you proceed with your de-clutter project is being able to go straight to what you want. It's a great feeling. It saves you from the stress of trying to find stuff, which in turn saves you so much extra time. But how do you get into this blissful mental state? Group stuff together into their own storage areas or pre-defined spaces. It's really as simple as that. All your cutlery goes into one drawer and cupboard, all your socks and underwear have their own space in your cupboard, all your paperwork goes into a filing cabinet, incoming letters go into your in-tray, your toolbox goes onto the first shelf in your garage. Remember that de-cluttering is a slow process with your home evolving every time you work on it. You won't get all your stuff neatly packaged into respective sections in one go

because your space will be unorganized and maybe even overflowing with junk. The first few times you work through all your clutter it will no doubt remain spread out between a number of locations, but as you create more space around the home you can really start to bring it all together. Think of it like a jigsaw. To start with you have a collection of disparate pieces but as you keep working on it, everything starts to come together to form a clear picture.

De-cluttering isn't just about getting rid of stuff, it crucially involves optimising storage and I will be giving suggestions for smart storage in the next chapter. We always fill up the space we have which is why once we start letting stuff fill our home it becomes a vicious cycle. We go and buy more storage to put everything in and totally fill it up in the process. Then we have to go out and buy yet more or keep stuffing up the storage we already have. By organizing our possessions and being smart about how and where it gets stored this cycle can be broken and reversed.

Map it out

You wouldn't go travelling into the wilderness without a map right? So, you don't want to start the grand project of de-cluttering without being clear on what areas actually need work. Take a piece of paper and start walking around your home. List each room and for each of them write down all the storage areas and spaces where clutter builds up. Check out figure 1 below for an example of such a map.

Why is this approach so important? What does it achieve? It boils down to basic project management principles and it's so much easier to work on something when it has clear, defined lines to it. Without this list you will find yourself going into a room wondering where to start, or even worse picking on bits to do here and there without making much of a dent. Thinking about your de-cluttering in terms of entire rooms, rather than in just in terms of a storage box in your bedroom and the pile of papers on your desk in the office is so much more overwhelming and will almost certainly lead to you putting off the whole process. Try walking into a room without a plan and then immediately determine where to start. There are so many distractions, so many facets to the room that need attention... your head will struggle to process what's in front of you.

Fig 1: Example clutter map

<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Bedroom<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Space under bed□ Wardrobe□ Chest of drawers□ Make-up box■ Living room<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ TV stand□ Shelves□ Dining table□ Music rack□ Sofa□ Window shelf	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Bathroom<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Toiletries□ Sink□ Bath□ Toilet□ Floor■ Kitchen<ul style="list-style-type: none">□ Cupboards by cooker□ Cupboards by fridge□ Under sink□ Fridge freezer□ Dry food storage
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Next actions

Let's take breaking down your work to another level by thinking in terms of next actions. Here is a bold statement for you. Viewing everything as a next action is the key to getting

anything done. If you have ever procrastinated on tidying your home then this piece of advice will solve all that. If you have ever been overwhelmed by all that has to be done this is the answer to dealing with that problem.

A next action is exactly what it sounds like. It's the next physical action you need to take to move something forward. Tidying your bedroom is not a next action because that task encompasses so many facets. Just try doing it now and you will see how difficult it is to work on something without knowing what actual steps to take. Where will you start, what will you do? To move the bedroom organizing project forward you need to work on one next action at a time. For instance, you could Hoover the carpet, then put laundry away into your wardrobe and then make the bed. This step strongly ties into the previous tip of mapping out what needs to be done. That stage broke down your home into distinct, manageable projects. This stage then defines what physical steps you have to take to move each of those projects forward.

How to work out what the next action is

A next action might sound self-explanatory but until you've been defining them for a while it can be a little confusing. To make it clearer there are four basic rules that can help you define what a next action is:

1. Begin with a verb to emphasise what action is actually involved.
2. Clearly and precisely describe what it is you need to achieve
3. Specify what the end result should be so you know when it is completed.
4. Include times, dates and any deadlines as appropriate.

Begin with a verb

Verbs typically express action, whether it to read a paper, write a review or phone a friend. With it, there is no doubt what physical action you need to take. If you need to empty a cupboard, it should be pretty apparent that you need to get your hands dirty. Without a verb attached to your action you just end up with something ambiguous like “do office carpet” which doesn't give a clear picture of what you actually want to do. What do you need to do with this carpet? Do you need to Hoover it? Does it need washing, perhaps? Or are you wanting to replace the carpet? Below are a few more examples of suitable verbs that will help to give you some ideas.

Fig 2: Examples of verbs

■ Call	■ Empty	■ Organize
■ Email	■ Clean	■ Fill out
■ Draft	■ Wash	■ Buy
■ Meet	■ Bin	■ Load
■ Gather	■ Find	■ Print
■ Post	■ Repair	■ Review

Be clear and precise

A next action is exactly as its name implies. There is no room for lack of clarity or fuzzy thinking otherwise it loses all its meaning. The next action needs to be clear and precise so that when you read it you know what is expected. For example, “clean under the bed”

is not specific enough (though note that it does begin with a verb so it's half right). What are you actually planning on doing when you go into that room and look under the bed? Are you just going to randomly start picking up junk here and there and hope it all comes together? Even something as small as cleaning under the bed can be broken down further. "Pull all the boxes out from under the bed" is much more specific and good first step to take. Then you could have next actions focusing on each box, for instance.

Specify the end result

Quantify the next action so you know exactly when you have achieved it. Providing you have followed the previous two rules this should be much easier to define. If it doesn't have a clear end result how will you know when to stop? By now you should be realizing that being clear about what you are doing is key to this whole approach. Using the bedroom example again, the goal for removing all the boxes from underneath the bed should be obvious. If you only take half of them out and then move onto something else you are leaving the job half-finished. It's critically important that when you start one of these next actions you aim to complete them. Unfinished tasks achieve nothing. However because you are dealing with bite-size chunks of work it will be comparatively simple to get them done before boredom and tedium kick in. It's much easier to do and complete a five minute task compared to doing and sticking with a job that might take an hour.

Add times, dates and deadlines

While it's not always possible to stress that action A be done at this time and action B be done at that time, where practical it is important to have a picture of when you will be doing something and the sort of time-scales you will be dealing with. Having some form of deadline gives you an extra incentive to get it done and can even serve as the target you need to declare the action complete. Taking the bed example once more, it could be altered to state that you will process clutter from all the boxes under the bed for thirty minutes. At the end of that time you tick it off as complete and move on. You can also state that you will do it on or before a particular day too.

Little steps, big results

The one problem with any big project, especially something like de-cluttering, is that it can seem daunting and many people are loath to even start it because they feel they will never finish. Next actions go some way to resolving this, but it can sometimes feel like you are only tip-toeing around your work and not really moving forward. I've struggled with this on many occasions. I'd clean under my bed then look at the rest of the room and have to resist the urge to just dive in and do the rest of the room, usually with no clear plan in mind. However, to counter this hold onto the thought that little steps create the biggest results. It might not seem obvious during the first few days of your work but what makes this approach effective is that it's so much easier to consistently focus on it. If you want to put a lot of work into something regularly you will fall apart at some point as the demands on your time and energy put their demands on you. Doing the occasional large bout of work is not as effective as taking regular, small steps, especially if you want to be consistent. Try not to focus on the results of your efforts for a couple of weeks and then look back at what you've achieved. You will be surprised by how much you've got done.

Catch everything that comes into your home

Ok, time for a reality check. You can't ever stop stuff coming into your home. No matter how much clutter you process, there will always be some more coming in. Whether it be

the unwanted mail that comes through your letterbox or the packaging from a new toy, just think of all the stuff that you have flowing in and where it all comes from. The only way to counter this flow is to process it all as it comes in. But of course this isn't always practical. After all, you can't stand by the letterbox all day waiting to snatch the mail from the postman.

When you have a leaky roof you strategically place buckets to catch the water. Before those buckets overflow you empty them out. The same idea should be applied to stuff that comes into your home so that you can process it in a manageable way and know where exactly it is all kept. Most of the time we leave stuff lying around randomly and then wonder why we are disorganized and lose things. For letters and paperwork you can have an in-tray. For shopping bags you can have hooks or a specially defined place in the hallway. For magazines you can have a rack in the living room. By having these buckets in place you can keep track of what is coming into your home and how much of it there is. Then you can process at your own pace. Go round your home now and see where you can add buckets to collate stuff.

Storage

Storage is a huge issue when it comes to de-cluttering. Getting rid of unnecessary junk is only half the battle. If you want the results to be long lasting you want to be smart about how you store what you have, rather than stuffing it randomly in whatever space you have. We all have way more storage than we think we do, it's just not organized. Drawers and cupboards can typically store twice as much as they tend to do, for instance, and there is always somewhere in your home that can be converted into storage. In my boiler room I built extra shelving to store towels and bed sheets. The challenge is seeing past gimmicky items and getting to the basics. Below I've detailed top examples of this.

Boxes

Boxes are the most effective storage tool out there. Unless weight and strength is a problem always get cardboard ones. They are cheaper and won't have any awkward joints and angles that plastic boxes tend to have, which take up extra room. If you can get lids too then you can even stack them up, though avoid doing this if you are going to be getting stuff out of them on a regular basis as it will become a chore. Be sure to label them so you know what is in each of your boxes to avoid confusion.

Shelves

Shelves are simple and reliable. In fact, they are so versatile they can be used in any room. If you want an attractive glass shelf in the living room to hold your photo frames or a basic, heavy duty version for the storage cupboard to hold your tools, there are plenty of options for you. The big advantage of shelving is they turn wall space into something useful. We tend to focus so much on the horizontal that vertical space gets ignored.

Doors

Whether it be the actual doors themselves or the space behind them there are plenty of options. I have a cork board on one door for keeping notes and reminders on, and hooks in my bathroom door for hanging towels and dressing gowns.

The Pareto Principle

The Pareto principle, otherwise known as the 80/20 rule (or the principle of factor sparsity

if you are that way inclined) is very important. It basically means that 80% of effect comes from 20% of causes. While it is traditionally applied to business and economics, it can have very useful applications in your day-to-day life. For instance, 80% of the mess in our homes happens to take place in 20% of our rooms (usually the kitchen and living room because of the amount of activity that takes place in them). Also, you could say that 80% of our reading time is spent on 20% of our books (we all have our favourites that we like to revisit every so often, after all). Knowing that, what do you do with the 80% of books you hardly look at?

It's worth noting that the Pareto principle is not an actual mathematical formula and it isn't scientifically accurate so there is no need to get your calculator out and start doing your sums. You probably won't have *exactly* 20% of your clutter taking up *exactly* 80% of your space, sometimes it might be a 90/10 split, 73/27 split or even 79/21 split (one common statistic used is how 1% of films produce 80% of yearly profits). It's not so much the numbers but what they imply. There are many natural occurrences where clumping together of factors seems to occur on a very regular basis (whether it be simply the amount of clutter compared to space or on a larger scale the total earnings spread over a population). In terms of clutter you will typically have a situation where a small group of distinct items (such as old televisions, bags or boxes of memorabilia) take up the largest bulk of your space in a room and also take up the longest time to process.

The Pareto principle is very useful to keep in mind as you de-clutter and cut back on stuff like your clothes, magazines and other products. For instance, knowing that you only use 20% of your make-up 80% of the time means you can be a bit less picky about what items you choose to keep and how much you throw away. No longer do all those lipsticks seem indispensable. Likewise, knowing which rooms take the most effort to clean means you can juggle the amount of time you spend on them and manage your time and energy better. The bathroom and kitchen can get twice as much of your attention because they are the rooms that are used the most, whereas the hallway can be a secondary concern. There is no point focusing on it when the gains are minimal in comparison. I will be discussing more practical implementations of this principle when I look at individual rooms in the next chapter.

Conclusion

At this point all the building blocks should be in place to de-clutter your life in an effective, sustainable way. The first chapter covered why we clutter, and in this chapter I revealed several techniques and attitudes you can adopt for effective de-cluttering. Being clear about what you are working on by breaking your home down into projects and next action is the critical first step. Then, implementing buckets to capture incoming stuff means you can de-clutter rooms without worrying about them becoming a mess again as well as keep track of what's coming in and out of your home in an organized fashion. Then, keeping the Pareto principle in mind whenever you decide what to keep or throw away allows you to make smarter decisions and makes sure you focus your energies and time in the right places. Finally, as you start to de-clutter focus on how you will store and organize what is left so you can make the most of your space.

With all this in place it's time to put it to practise. In the next chapter I will look at individual rooms, describe how you can apply what you've learned and cover any problems or hurdles you might face on the way.

Chapter 3: Putting It Into Practise

Bedroom

The bedroom is where we go to rest and sleep and as a result should be a relaxing environment. Clutter in this room ruins all of that. How can you truly wind down with a good book or lounge in bed with your partner when there are piles of clothes and other junk littering the floor? Remember that junk represents something incomplete that your brain will focus on. Think of all that mental energy being sapped away when you should actually be taking it easy and recharging.

The bed

What better area to start off with in the bedroom than the bed itself? Firstly, what sort of bed do you actually have? My bed is open underneath, for instance, which can be a double edged sword. It's great if you have a system in place because it's very much like a blank canvas. However, that can also mean that it can become the worst type of dumping ground; a large area that is difficult to get to when full of stuff (under the stairs is similar) if not looked after. Just remember all the rules you read in the previous chapter. Assuming your bed doesn't have its own built in storage you need to carefully choose your own. Storage boxes with wheels are the ideal solution as you can easily pull them out. You don't want to be uncomfortably crouched down under a bed digging around for stuff.

The wardrobe

The other significant area of a bedroom tends to be the wardrobe. Yes folks, it's time to de-clutter your clothes collection! Some of you may question (or be in denial) why clothes should be included in this but if you have so many clothes that they are overflowing from the wardrobe or you are constantly discarding and throwing clothes into the corners of your bedroom, it makes sense that your clutter storage should require some work. Clothes can be grouped into three distinct categories:

- Clothes you haven't worn in a long time/never worn. You ever buy clothes and never wear them? Perhaps you have a pair of trousers you last wore six months ago, or maybe you have a shirt that is painfully out of fashion. Our tastes in clothes constantly evolve so what you religiously wore all the time a year ago, you may not even look at twice any more. Get rid of them! Give them to a friend or a charity shop but get them permanently out of your wardrobe. As hard as it might be to resist buying that trendy, new pair of jeans Kate Moss was photographed in, remember they will probably be cool for about a month, then all that appeal will be gone. They might even end up being a bit embarrassing to have. While fashion has an habit of going full circle is it worth keeping those clothes for five years before it's cool again to wear them again?
- Clothes that might – just might – be useful. The key word is 'useful' there. There are always particular types of clothes that, though you might not wear them regularly, should still always be a mainstay in any wardrobe. Even if you don't have an office job, it's still essential have a suit or at the very least a smart shirt and tie combination. You never know when a friend is going to get married or you have to go to an important interview. A lot of it can be influenced by what your situation is and what climate you live in. For instance, I keep a big black jumper in case the

weather ever turns really nasty, but that's not necessary in a hot, warm climate.

- Clothes you wear regularly. Remember the 80/20 rule here. We typically wear 20% of our clothes 80% of the time. If you are honest with yourself you will probably find that you will have a small selection of clothes that you wear on a very regular basis. The rest are maybe worn less often or for special occasions (as discussed above). Put aside those 20% of clothes you regularly wear for a moment and really look at what's left over. See how they fit into the previous two categories and then make a decision on what to purge. Remember, clothes are always popular with charity shops and you can also try giving them to your friends or exchanging them.

There is one last area to discuss about the wardrobe. Look at that dark area at the bottom. What have you got there? Either nothing at all or an unorganized mess. We spend so much time focusing on where our clothes are hanging but what about the rest of our wardrobe? When space is at a premium the bottom of the wardrobe – like under the bed – is invaluable and is a prime example of thinking outside the box when it comes to managing the space you have. Just as under the bed, buy boxes or other easily accessible storage devices (you don't want to hurt your back when putting things in and out). I personally have a canvas wardrobe so I bought some matching canvas boxes and use them for storing extra clothes and underwear. The alternative was to buy an extra wardrobe or sets of drawers. Think of all the extra space that would have cost me.

Laundry

If you have a problem with leaving your laundry all over the bedroom, buy a laundry basket for it or put aside some storage space at the bottom of your wardrobe. Rather than using the floor as a dumping ground you now have somewhere specific to put it all (essentially create a bucket to capture clothes, as discussed in the previous chapter). Just make sure you regularly process the contents so it doesn't overflow. If you regularly let the basket spill out you have bigger problems than clutter.

Bathroom

The bathroom is similar to the bedroom in terms of the peace and relaxation it can provide you. It provides the chance to lock yourself away from the world or have long, soothing baths. However, it can also be a highly active room, especially for big families. The rush in the morning to get prepared for work and make sure your children are scrubbed up and ready for school is no doubt a common theme in any household. Due to the dampness levels in this room it's also doubly important to keep on top of it to avoid any damage or accidents.

Toiletries

The main area of focus in the bathroom is your toiletries collection. Now I don't think it's unfair to say that typically women have more of a problem with this than men, however if you have bottles of unused shampoo scattered around your bath and spare toilet rolls piled up around your toilet you definitely need to do something about it. Rather like with your clothes collection in the bedroom, as discussed previously, your toiletries can be split up into different categories dependent on their use:

- Toiletries you use daily. We all have toiletries that we use on a daily or very regular basis including such things as your toothpaste, facewash, mouthwash and

shampoo (at least I hope you are using them on a regular basis). This collection shouldn't be large (unless you have an overly complicated daily routine) and as such you should ideally be placed in easy to reach locations, such as near the sink

- Specialist toiletries. These are toiletries you use for special occasions – maybe weekly or monthly. These may include specialist moisturisers and face masks or exfoliating packs. After all, we all need to treat ourselves from time to time. However, because of this they don't need to be out all the time taking up room.
- The rest. Everything else should be disposed of, recycled or given away. There is no middle ground with this. Once you have found a particular brand that you like and what works for you, it makes no sense to keep hold of everything else. While I certainly wouldn't discourage you from trying different products, if you don't like them don't keep them just because they've barely been touched.

Towels and clothes

As I've said originally, because the bathroom gets wet it's doubly important that you keep stuff off of the floor, unless you want wet clothes and dirty towels everywhere. If you don't have a towel rail get one now and if you have a problem with dumping your clothes around when you have a shower get a laundry basket. Get whatever accessories you need to keep stuff off the floor. If you need to put up a shelf for your toiletries, hooks for dressing gowns, an holder for the toilet rolls or a rail for the towels do so.

Kitchen

By its very nature the kitchen is typically the busiest room in the entire home, and the trickiest to keep clean and organized. All it can take is one meal that doesn't get cleaned up for the room to descend into chaos. The kitchen also tends to be where you will have lots of storage space due to all the cupboards, shelves and drawers, which can complicate matters further. Are you making the most of that space? How do you even use it effectively? Just because it's in the kitchen it doesn't mean it has to be reserved for plates and pans and food. In fact, given the amount of storage space the average kitchen has nowadays, if they are *all* taken up with those sorts of things, you may have a serious clutter problem.

Cutlery and utensils

Get what you need and no more. Don't buy gimmicky, new age utensils that only have very specific uses. They might look cool and clever but they are very rarely worth the effort or money. If you live on your own and you have twelve wooden spoons, or you have enough dishes to cover your family twofold, it's safe to assume you have too many. Unless you have exceptional circumstances cutlery should typically fit in one drawer, with an optional utensil jar (or similar) for storing larger items, like those aforementioned wooden spoons and spatulas. You don't want to waste time digging around for a knife and fork in a busy drawer (especially if you have sharp utensils in there too) so buy a cutlery tray to keep everything organized and compartmentalized.

Fridge/freezer

Fridges and freezers are particularly bad for food clutter. Leftovers and scraps all too commonly get left and forgotten about behind other, fresher food so it's integral you regularly review what you have in there and bin anything you won't touch. It gives you a

chance to recap what food you actually have, which can save you money, especially if you are doing regular food shopping. To help with keeping track of what food you have, as much as possible group different food products together and use the specialist storage areas that usually come with fridges, such as fruit, vegetable and meat trays and cheese boxes. That way you can quickly judge what you need and what you have enough of. If it becomes a chore to track your food supplies because your fridge is so full you simply won't do it.

Be sure to defrost your fridge and freezer regularly otherwise the ice builds up inside which will take up a lot of space that could otherwise be used for food. It will also mean that when you finally do defrost it, it will take twice as long to do. As I said before, as soon as it becomes difficult and time-consuming to do something it will become hard to find the motivation to do it.

Kitchen counter

Keep the counter as clear as possible. It is an area that needs regular cleaning and because it is your primary work/cooking space you don't want additional obstacles in your way. The more clutter you have on the counter the more awkward you will make things for yourself whenever you use the kitchen. If you are lacking in space on the counter consider getting wall attached storage like spice racks and pan hooks to help clear it. It may not be attractive but it is certainly more efficient than using the counter as storage.

Under the sink

This tends to be the home of cleaning products. These are the sorts of items that are almost always on special offer at supermarkets so it can be tempting to stock up or succumb to the need to grab a supposed bargain. But firstly, do you have the space? Do you really need three spare boxes of detergent on hand taking up all that room? Do you have to keep several types of washing up liquid? Don't worry about turning your back on a good deal, there's bound to be others when you actually need them.

As for storage, get a small basket and put all your scrubbing brushes and washing gloves in there. If you haven't organized your cleaning chemicals before, take them all out and group them together. You might find you will have used two or more bottles of the same brand. Pour them into the one bottle to save more room. As with toiletries and clothes you can put cleaning products through the same three stage process. Get rid of those you never use, bring the small number of products you use a regular basis to the front and keep the occasional use specialist products (such as sink unblocker) at the back.

Create activity areas

The kitchen is ideal for storing tactically. By that I mean putting stuff in places that will make life easier for you. For instance, put cutlery and utensils near to the areas you are most likely to be working. For instance I keep pans and tinned food in cupboards next to the oven and cutlery near to the counter space where I serve up food. Like having cleaning tools under the sink, you could also try and bring together utensils you use for specific tasks. If you bake a lot for example, you might want to keep flour, baking powder and a mixing bowl all in one place.

Get a bin

It might seem obvious but it is worth emphasizing. Most of the waste in your home will come from the kitchen so get as big a bin as you feel comfortable with that doesn't mess up the aesthetics of the room. Don't skimp on this, keep it close and easily assessable

and make sure it's easy to work with (when you have your hands full of food scraps you need a bin with a lid that opens easily). You don't want to have to be taking out rubbish all the time because your small bin can't hold all your waste, or even end up leaving rubbish on the floor because you haven't got the time to clear it out. The same principles apply in every other room too. If it creates a lot of waste (the office and children's bedroom are other hotspots) get a bin for it.

Hallway

The hallway, regardless of size, is the gateway to your home. Everything comes in and out through this room so it needs to be set up to best accommodate this flow. The main obstacle you will face with the hallway is that it's a prime dumping ground. If you come home from a productive shopping session, you are likely to dump your bags in the hallway before having a cup of tea and putting your feet up. After work you will probably dump your coat and shoes in the hallway too. This isn't necessarily a problem in the short term because we all need to wind down when we come home but sooner rather than later you have to process the stuff you leave lying around. You certainly don't want to trip up over bags that have been left on the floor for weeks. I know people who have bought new clothes, left the bags in the hallway and then completely forgotten they ever bought them. The best way to make this process as painless as possible is to have structures in place so that you can put away your shoes, coats and keys easily there and then.

Coats and jackets

Coats can be particularly problematic because without any clear place to put them they tend to get left on chairs, the sofa, the bed or even just on the floor. Get something to hang your coats on, such as hooks on the wall/door or a sturdy coat hanger, depending on the actual space of your hallway. You can even hang other items on the hooks such as bags, umbrellas and scarfs (however don't forget what the real purpose of the hooks is). Just be sure to process what you hang up on a regular basis. There is no point having a Winter coat hung up when it's the middle of Summer. It creates unnecessary visual clutter and will leave less room for other coats.

Shoes

The same principle applies to shoes, but due to their size they are usually a lot less obtrusive. I personally tuck my shoes into a corner of the hallway because I only ever have two or three pairs that I actively wear, but if you have more that you use on a regular basis, or there are a number of people who live in the house (particularly if you are a family with young kids), use a shoe basket or rack. As with coats, go through your shoes often and store away those you aren't likely to be wearing on a regular basis or for the foreseeable future. If your shoe rack starts to overflow it defeats the point of having it in the first place, and there is really no need to have your favourite sandals there if it's Winter and there is snow outside.

Keys

The one item you are guaranteed to lose when you are late for work and rushing around to get ready is your keys. Whether it's your car keys or your door keys, they just won't be anywhere in sight when you really need them. Because we use our keys on a regular basis it is so easy to leave them lying around somewhere and forget all about them. The answer to this problem is to have a box, hook or bowl in your hallway to store them in. As soon as you return home dump your keys there before you have a chance to absent mindedly leave them in some random place. When you leave the house they end up also

being the last thing you pick up so there is no chance of them being mislaid in a pocket or bag. I personally use a bowl and because I always carry my wallet and mobile with me too, I leave those in it as well when I get home.

Mail

The one common item that will likely come in through your hallway on a daily basis is mail, whether it be letters, packages or even magazine subscriptions. Get a rack, box or in-tray to capture it all in one place. Whenever mail comes through the letterbox collate it together in whatever storage tool you choose for processing. I use an in-tray as they typically come with two or more shelves, which allows me to organize my mail even further (you could, for example, have one shelf for personal mail, one for business and one for subscriptions). As ever, be especially careful how much mail you let pile up before acting on it. You don't want any unpaid bills getting forgotten about.

The landing strip

If you implement all of the above you will create in your hallway what I like to call the landing strip. All the basics and essentials are in easy reach when you leave home (take off) and can just as easily be put away when you return (or land). What's more, they are also all in your face so there is less chance of forgetting something. You wouldn't want a plane turning round mid-flight because it forgot to fuel. Likewise, you don't want to have to go back into your home because you forgot your wallet. Get into the habit of placing everything in its designated place as soon as you come home. It should only take a few moments to empty your pockets, put your shoes on the rack and hang up your coat, certainly no longer than dumping it wherever you feel like.

As effective as setting up a landing strip is, the one thing to bear in mind is security. While it's great to have your keys in easy reach when you leave your home, it can also potentially be very simple for a burglar to get hold of them if you are careless about keeping everything secure. Don't have anything valuable easily visible or too close to your letterbox. If you have any doubts test it yourself or get a friend involved. Peak through the letterbox (preferably without any neighbours wondering what you are doing) then come through the door and scan your surroundings to see if anything stands out. Are you immediately drawn to the key hook or does the bowl with your mobile phone look too obvious? While you don't have to make any military level security precautions a little common sense can go a long way.

Stairway

If you have a stairway in your hall (or anywhere in your house for that matter) be careful. It's very easy and tempting to leave stuff at the bottom of steps with the intention of taking them up later. After all, who wants to be lugging stuff up and down all day? It might only be some clothes, toys or books now but leave it a few days and it can become a big obstacle. That goes above and beyond de-cluttering and it becomes just plain dangerous. If you ever feel like leaving your laundry at the bottom of the stairs remind yourself of that fact. It's much easier in the long run to process stuff there and then, even if it does mean the occasional trip upstairs.

Living room

Whether you call it a living room, lounge or something else entirely, this particular room is the place where you primarily relax, rest and just generally spend quality time. It's also where visitors, guests, friends and family tend to congregate so clutter is the last thing

you want in this area. However, because it is such a busy room that gets a lot of activity and attention, it actually serves as an hotbed for clutter to build if neglected for too long. As a result it's one of the rooms that should get the bulk of your attention.

Reading material

As the living room is a place for relaxing and chilling out, a common activity that people tend to do is lounge on the sofa and read. Whether it be a newspaper or magazine there are two possible actions here to avoid them all cluttering up the room. Firstly, have a paper rack of some kind to store them in. This is especially useful if you take more than a day to read the paper or you share it with others who may not read it straight away. This is a much more organized approach than having magazines and papers scattered over tables, chairs and the floor.

The alternative option is to read the magazine or newspaper there and then and simply dispose or recycle it. This is much more efficient, especially if you live alone or don't share your reading material. Remember that a magazine is not like reading a book, which can take days to get through and you may even keep it afterwards. A newspaper is out of date less than twenty four hours after it's printed and most magazines don't fare much better either. If you happen to come across something interesting, rip it out and file it away in a reference folder. There is absolutely no reason to have month old magazines lying around. If you haven't read it by then you never will so process it and buy something more up to date to read.

Other media

People commonly have music, films and books kept in their living room so it makes sense to process them in a similar fashion to the way I described with clothes and toiletries. If you haven't watched a DVD in months you really have to ask whether you are ever going to watch it again. Or maybe you have an old cheesy CD from when you were younger that you actually now find a bit embarrassing. These sorts of products are very easy to sell on thanks to the popularity of sites like eBay and Amazon, and if that doesn't work just swap it with a friend. If you want to be cutting edge you can even go fully digital and make it a non-issue. You can now pretty much download all the music you will ever want (legally of course!) and films are following the same route. The only space you really need is somewhere to put your iPod. There is also the option to rent movies instead so you never have a case taking up space for more than a few weeks. As for music, you could try getting a CD bag or box, which can hold many more CDs without taking up anywhere near as much space as when they are kept in their cases.

Regardless of what route you choose, just be sure to get all your physical media off the floor. It's quite a common practise to keep DVDs and CDs piled up in a corner. However this is hardly attractive nor the safest way to store them. People can kick or knock them over, they can get battered by the Hoover, attacked by an over eager pet... If they are worth keeping they are worth looking after. Put them on shelves! Remember to put everything back in their cases too while you're at it. If you aren't willing to look after your music, book or film collection then do you really care about keeping them at all?