

How To Declutter Your Home

A Workshop and Presentation by Chris Palmer

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Welcome everyone! Like most people, I've suffered from clutter all my life and know how hard it is to declutter.

Clutter makes me feel overwhelmed and stressed. The more clutter I have, the less happy I tend to be.

As you all know, decluttering means sifting through stuff and tossing out what's no longer needed. It's the process of getting rid of junk and excess possessions. Only useful and meaningful things are left.

You might be here today for any number of reasons:

1. Perhaps you're downsizing
2. Perhaps you know it's time to simplify your life
3. Perhaps the stress from your clutter is making you physically sick
4. Perhaps the clutter is causing friction in your relationships.
5. Perhaps your home is uncomfortably crowded
6. Perhaps you don't want to burden your survivors with a big mess when you die.
7. Or maybe guests are coming to stay, and you're embarrassed by the cluttered state of your home.

Whatever prompted you to be here today, I hope you'll find one or two things in my talk that will resonate and help you get started.

I encourage you to have paper and pencil handy to note anything you don't want to forget.

Decluttering aims to create a home filled with purpose, comfort, and relaxation, giving us more time to spend on what matters to us: projects and relationships that give our lives meaning.

Tolerance for clutter is on a spectrum, and we all fall into different places on that spectrum. What strikes one person as intolerable clutter might seem acceptable to another. We're all different and must be patient and respectful with each other.

Eliminating clutter puts us in control, brings better focus back to our lives, and makes it easier to be organized. Everything we own should have a "home" in our house or apartment where we can always find it.

This means that if we are looking for a TV remote, a memo, a wallet, a grocery list, a vacuum, a screwdriver, or a letter from a friend, we know where it is and can find it with little effort.

Death cleaning is another word for decluttering. It means that after our death, our loved ones don't have to spend weeks or months being angry and irritated at us for leaving a mess.

Decluttering is an act of kindness and generosity to those we leave behind when we die. It's a loving gift to die with our attic, garage, basement, bookshelves, closets, and so on, organized or cleared out.

The brutal truth is that our children or nieces or nephews probably won't want our furniture, antique paintings, or fancy china. If you're holding on to items to pass to the next generation, ask your heirs if they want them. Be prepared for them to say no, and be gracious if they do. They will likely want small things that carry emotional value, such as select pieces of jewelry or poignant hand-written letters.

I have much more to say, but let me pause to see if anyone has a question.

Questions?

The number one obstacle to decluttering is procrastination. Just thinking about your closets, attic, laundry room, garage, or office and the amount of stuff in them can trigger intense feelings of overwhelm and stress that result in procrastination.

So, how do you declutter when you don't feel like doing it? Here are three ideas:

1. *Visualize the result:* Close your eyes, visualize your home without the clutter and junk, and feel viscerally how pleasant and joyful you find it.
2. *Remember the why.* As Viktor Frankl wrote in his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*, we can endure almost anything if we have a why.
3. *Declutter in increments:* Break the task into small, manageable segments.

The first two—visualize the result and remember the why—are pretty obvious, so let's focus on the third: declutter in increments and break the task into small, manageable segments.

You don't have to declutter all at once. You can accomplish it bit by bit over some months or even years. Perhaps start with the garage, then tackle clothes, followed by books, and so on. In this way, you can slowly but steadily declutter your home.

Decluttering can be done in spurts several times a week—five minutes here, 15 minutes there, and an occasional hour now and then.

Declutter one drawer, shelf, or cabinet at a time to avoid being overwhelmed. And make it a fun and pleasant experience. Put on music and enjoy the memories. And celebrate small victories as you go along. When you declutter that first drawer, make yourself a coffee, call a friend, or go for a walk.

So, declutter in stages by breaking the task into small, manageable segments. You can start with relatively easy stuff like clothes and end with harder stuff like sentimental items and photos.

Another way to beat procrastination is to put decluttering on your calendar—just like an exercise class or a doctor’s appointment. If you set aside time by making an appointment with yourself and setting a phone alarm reminder, you’re more likely to follow through. Also, get a buddy. Have a friend (or spouse) help for an hour or two.

Another way to get started is to use stickers to mark the items in a room. Red stickers [HOLD UP] mean to toss, green means to keep, and yellow means to donate. Put all the things with red stickers in a box and set them aside for six months to see if you missed them. If not, consider discarding them.

Yet another way to get started is to set a timer for 15 minutes and check all the items in your bathroom and kitchen, including makeup, toiletries, pantry items, and your medicine cabinet, that are expired, and dump them. Medications, of course, need to be discarded responsibly.

If all those ways to overcome procrastination don’t work, reach out for help. Many services have emerged to declutter houses, from Clutter Busters to professional organizers like Potomac Concierge, to firms affiliated with real estate companies that help people downsize from homes to condos or assisted living.

I have much more to say, but let me pause here for any questions.

Questions?

How do we declutter a home? Here is my 8-part process:

1. Start by removing trash.
2. Choose one small area to organize — like a drawer.
3. Create three piles: keep, donate, and toss. With each item you’re considering, decide which pile it goes in. Meaningful things stay, useful items no longer wanted are donated, and useless stuff goes in the trash.
4. Find a specific “home” for everything you intend to keep — for example, a small drawer for your keys and wallet.
5. Group similar items together so you always know where to find them. For example, store all cans of soup together. Organize your belongings so that all like objects live together —not most of them but all of them. That means keeping all tools in a toolbox and not leaving a stray screwdriver in a junk drawer.
6. If you buy something new, try to eliminate something else to limit items coming into your home.
7. If you’re tempted to overlook a particular box or corner of a room, think how relieved you will feel when that box or stack of paper is processed, reduced, or even eliminated instead of claiming precious space in your life.
8. Use clear containers and drawer dividers [HOLD UP] to keep small things organized and available when needed.

Let me pause for questions.

Questions?

I now want to focus on specific areas and topics, including clothes, kitchens, mail, photos, sentimental possessions, papers, and creating a map for particular areas. I also want to talk about stopping our children or heirs from quarreling over our estate when we die, and how to maintain a clutter-free home.

LET’S START WITH DECLUTTERING CLOTHES: First, pick out those clothes that don’t fit, are uncomfortable, or that you haven’t worn for several years. Give them away or trash them.

Then, collect all your clothes from every corner of your home, including your closets, drawers, and storage bins, and put them in a pile. This will give you a complete view of the clothes you own. You will probably be astonished by how big the pile is.

Pick up each one in turn, and consider using the KonMari method popularized by Marie Kondo. Ask yourself, “Does this spark joy?” If the answer is no, it may be time to let it go.

Sort your clothing into tops, bottoms, dresses, suits, outerwear, shoes, and accessories. This will make it easier to assess your collection and identify redundancies. Be willing to part with items that no longer serve a purpose or are not being used. Items in good condition that you no longer want can be donated to local charities or sold online through platforms like Poshmark, eBay, or Depop.

Consider rotating your wardrobe seasonally. Store out-of-season clothes in clear bins or vacuum-sealed bags to free up space in your closet.

Also, flip your hangers to see what you wear. Start by arranging your hangers, so they all face the same direction. Each time you wear something, flip the hanger when you put it away. Anything you haven’t flipped over after six months or a year could be given away or tossed.

Remember that decluttering your clothes is not a one-time task but an ongoing process.

Questions?

DECLUTTERING KITCHENS: Decluttering your kitchen can help create a more functional and organized space. Here are some tips:

1. **Set Clear Goals:** Are you looking to create more counter space, improve accessibility, or reduce visual clutter? Knowing your goals will help you stay focused.
2. **Empty Everything Out:** Start by emptying your kitchen cabinets, drawers, and pantry. This lets you see everything you have and makes it easier to sort through items.
3. **Sort and Categorize:** Group similar items together, such as pots and pans, utensils, dishes, and food items. This will help you see what you have and what you need to keep.

4. **Declutter Ruthlessly:** Go through each category and decide what to keep, donate, or toss. Be ruthless about items you haven't used in the past year or those that are broken or expired.
5. **Organize Efficiently:** Invest in storage solutions like drawer dividers, shelves, and clear containers to maximize space and keep things organized. Use vertical space with hooks or shelves to store pots, pans, and utensils.
6. **Label Everything:** Use labels for containers, jars, and baskets to make it easy to identify the contents. This also helps family members maintain the organization.
7. **Tackle the Fridge and Freezer:** Clear out expired and forgotten items from your refrigerator and freezer. Organize food items by type and date to reduce waste.
8. **Limit Small Appliances:** Consider which small appliances you use regularly. Store the ones you use daily on your countertop, and stow away the rest to free up space.
9. **Regular Maintenance:** Make decluttering a routine. Set aside time every few months to reassess and declutter your kitchen to prevent clutter from accumulating again.
10. **Donate or Sell Unwanted Items:** Items in good condition that you no longer need can be donated or sold. This not only reduces clutter but can also benefit others.
11. **Mindful Shopping:** In the future, be more selective when purchasing kitchen items. Only buy things that you know you'll use regularly and have a designated space for.
12. **Daily Habits:** Encourage everyone in your household to clean up after themselves and put things back in their designated places. This will help maintain your organized kitchen.

Remember that decluttering is a process that may take some time, so be patient with yourself. The result will be a more organized and efficient kitchen that can make meal preparation and daily life more enjoyable.

Questions?

DECLUTTERING MAIL: Decluttering mail can be a simple yet effective way to reduce clutter and maintain an organized living space. Here are some tips on how to declutter your mail:

1. **Designate a Mail Station:** Set up a dedicated area in your home for handling incoming mail. This could be a desk or a small table.
2. **Sort Mail Immediately:** As soon as you receive the mail, go through it immediately. Don't let it pile up. This will prevent unnecessary clutter from accumulating.
3. **Use a Trash Bin:** Keep a trash bin or recycling container near your mail station. Trash or recycle junk mail.
4. **Create Categories:** Sort your mail into categories as you go through it. Common categories include bills, personal correspondence, important documents, and magazines/catalogs.
5. **Designate a "To-Do" Area:** Have a specific spot for items that require action, such as bills to pay, forms to fill out, or invitations to RSVP to.
6. **Go Paperless:** Whenever possible, opt for electronic bills and statements. This reduces the amount of physical mail you receive and helps the environment.

7. **Set Up a Filing System:** Create a filing system for important documents like tax records, insurance policies, and legal papers. Use labeled folders or a filing cabinet to keep everything organized.
8. **Regularly Purge Old Mail:** Schedule a regular time to review your mail and discard items you no longer need. For example, once a week or at the end of each month.
9. **Use Technology:** Consider scanning apps to digitize important documents and store them securely on your computer or in the cloud. This reduces the need to keep physical copies.
10. **Unsubscribe from Unwanted Subscriptions:** If you receive catalogs, magazines, or newsletters you no longer read or need, unsubscribe to reduce future mail clutter.
11. **Shred Sensitive Documents:** Invest in a shredder to dispose of documents containing personal or sensitive information.

Remember, decluttering mail is not just about organizing paper. It's also about managing your time and reducing stress. By developing good habits, you can keep your mail under control and maintain a clutter-free living space.

Questions?

DECLUTTERING PHOTOS. Decluttering and organizing photos can be a rewarding and liberating experience, helping you preserve your most cherished memories more effectively.

This is how I dealt with this challenge myself. I had a huge box containing thousands of unorganized photos. I was worried that after I died, some big, tough guy would throw this box of photos into a large trash bag, and my family would lose those memories.

So I spread all the photos (over a thousand) out on our dining room table, put them in chronological order, and tossed out those that were mediocre, blurry, or duplicative.

I also put them in groups, like my ancestors, my parents, my childhood, my time in the Royal Navy, Gail and me, my daughters, filmmaking, and so on. Your groups would be whatever makes sense for you. They might include family events, vacations, or special occasions.

Then, I hired a company called Photographic Memories to digitize my photos and make an album. We used Forever.com to help us do this. That album was a gift to my daughters and their families this past Christmas.

Questions?

DECLUTTERING SENTIMENTAL POSSESSIONS: Decluttering sentimental possessions can be challenging because they hold emotional value, making it difficult to part with them. The idea of trashing them triggers sadness, nostalgia, and guilt.

However, with the right approach, you can declutter and organize these belongings while preserving the memories they represent. Here are some tips:

Sort your sentimental possessions into categories such as letters, gifts, and keepsakes. This helps you assess the volume of items you have and makes the process more manageable. Ask yourself which items hold the most significant sentimental value. Focus on keeping those that truly matter to you, and consider letting go of duplicates or things with less emotional attachment.

Consider creating a memory box for items you decide to keep but don't need to display or access regularly. This box can hold things like letters and small trinkets, keeping them safe and organized.

Scan or digitize old letters and documents to reduce physical clutter while preserving the memories.

If you have sentimental items that may bring joy to others, consider gifting or donating them. Knowing someone else will appreciate your things can make parting with them easier.

Remember that memories reside in your mind, not in physical possessions. Periodically revisit your sentimental items to ensure they still hold meaning for you. As your life evolves, your attachment to particular items may change.

When you have a possession you feel emotional about, one option is to take a photo of it to remember it. Then, it's easier to let the item go.

My wife Gail and I have been using the app Artifacts and highly recommend it. It allows you to photograph the item and then record its story. In effect, you have the opportunity to write a mini-memoir. In this way, your children can know the story of things you cherish. The website is artifacts.com.

Questions?

DECLUTTERING PAPERS: Decluttering piles of paper can be daunting, but with a systematic approach and helpful tips, you can regain control of your paper clutter. Here's how:

1. **Gather All Paperwork:** Start by collecting all your paper documents from various locations around your home or office. This includes mail, bills, receipts, magazines, newspapers, old documents, and any other paper items.
2. **Designate Sorting Areas:** Set up designated sorting areas with categories like "Keep," "Shred/Dispose," and "Action Required." Having separate piles for these categories will help you stay organized.
3. **Sort Quickly:** Begin sorting through the paperwork one pile at a time. Be ruthless in your decision-making. Ask yourself these questions for each item:
 - Is it necessary to keep this document for legal or financial reasons?
 - Can I find this information elsewhere, such as online?
 - Have I used or referred to this document in the past year?
4. **Digitalization:** Consider scanning important documents and saving them digitally. This reduces physical clutter and allows for easier access and backup. Make sure to organize digital files into well-labeled folders.

5. **Dispose of Unnecessary Papers:**
 - Shred or securely dispose of documents with sensitive personal information, such as bank statements, tax records, and medical records.
 - Recycle or shred outdated reference materials like old magazines, newspapers, and expired coupons.
6. **File and Organize:** Create a filing system for the papers you must keep. Use clearly labeled folders, binders, or filing cabinets. Consider categories such as “Financial,” “Health,” “Personal,” and “Household.”
7. **Implement a Mail System:** As discussed earlier, deal with incoming mail immediately. Open it, discard or recycle junk mail, and designate a specific location for bills and important correspondence. Consider going paperless for bills and statements whenever possible.
8. **Regular Maintenance:** Make decluttering a habit. Set aside a few minutes each week to review incoming papers and clear out what you no longer need.
9. **Digitize Manuals and Reference Materials:** Search online for digital copies of product manuals and reference materials. Many manufacturers provide manuals on their websites. This reduces the need to keep physical copies.
10. **Go Paperless Whenever Possible:** Sign up for electronic statements, invoices, and receipts to reduce the amount of paper coming into your home or office.
11. **Create a Command Center:** Designate a central area in your home or workspace for important documents and calendars. This will help you stay organized and ensure key papers aren’t lost.

Regularly reviewing and maintaining your paper files will help prevent future piles from accumulating.

Questions?

CREATE A MAP OF POSSESSIONS FOR SPECIAL AREAS: This is not something many of you will feel a need to do, but I found myself needing a map of my study because I had so many projects—nonprofit boards, books, speeches, and so on—that my files and paperwork were overwhelming me. So, after decluttering, I created a map that showed the exact location of every item in my study.

I drew a detailed map of my study, including all the shelves, cabinets, and closet space. I gave every location or space (on average about 6 to 12 inches) a number. In my study, I have more than 70 such “spaces.” I thought strategically about where things should go, which projects I wanted near me, and which ones could be further away and not so easily reachable.

Then, I listed what’s in each numbered space, so if I’m searching for something, I can bring up the “map” document on my laptop and search for it. For example, when I gave a speech once on wildlife filmmaking and was searching for humor, I went to my map and searched for “humor.” Up came six locations in my study where I could find jokes and stories.

Questions?

STOPPING OUR LOVED ONES FROM QUARRELING OVER OUR ESTATE. We need to identify what things we want certain family members to have and tell the whole family while we're alive so our children don't quarrel about them after we die. That is a nightmare we want to prevent.

We are responsible for doing everything possible to stop our loved ones from fighting over our estate after our death. Assigning objects in advance to family members will make conflicts less likely.

Questions?

Let me end by talking about how to maintain a clutter-free home. Maintaining a clutter-free home is not just about tidying up occasionally; it's a continuous process that involves changing your mindset and developing good habits. Here are some points to keep in mind:

1. **Start with a Decluttering Session:** Before you can maintain a clutter-free home, you need to declutter your space. Go through every room in your house and assess what you need and use. Be ruthless in eliminating items you haven't used in the past year or no longer serve a purpose.
2. **One In, One Out Rule:** Whenever you bring a new item into your home, make it a rule to remove an old one. This will help prevent new clutter from accumulating.
3. **Designate a Place or "Home" for Everything:** Every item should have a designated "home." This makes it easier to put things away and reduces the likelihood of items ending up in random places.
4. **Do a Nightly Tidy-Up:** Take 10 minutes each evening to return items to their proper place. This small habit can make a big difference in maintaining a clutter-free space.
5. **Regular Maintenance:** Set aside a specific time each day or week for quick decluttering sessions. Spend 10-15 minutes tidying up and returning things to their designated "homes."
6. **Use Storage Solutions:** Invest in storage solutions that help you keep things organized. This could include shelves, cabinets, bins, and drawer dividers. Make sure these solutions fit your space and are easy to use.
7. **Digitize Paperwork:** Minimize paper clutter by digitizing important documents. Scan receipts, bills, and paperwork and store them digitally. This reduces physical clutter and makes it easier to find what you need.
8. **Practice the "One-Touch" Rule:** When you pick up an item, make a decision about it right away. Either put it back where it belongs or decide to discard it. Avoid the "I'll deal with it later" mentality.
9. **Start a "Donation Station":** Designate a spot in your home for items that are to be donated. If you find something you no longer need or want, add it to the station and regularly visit your local charity.
10. **Be Mindful of Sentimental Items:** As we discussed, sentimental items can be challenging to declutter. Instead of keeping everything, select a few items with the most meaning and display them prominently. Consider taking photos of sentimental items before letting them go.

11. **Involve the Whole Family:** If you share your home with others, involve them in decluttering. Encourage family members to adopt the same decluttering habits and keep common areas clutter-free.
12. **Regularly Purge Your Wardrobe:** As we discussed, keep your wardrobe in check by periodically going through your clothes. If you haven't worn an item in the past year, consider donating or selling it.
13. **Seek Professional Help if Needed:** If you struggle with decluttering or have a hoarding tendency, consider seeking the help of a professional organizer or a therapist to address the underlying issues.

Remember that maintaining a clutter-free home is an ongoing process. By implementing these strategies and making them a part of your daily routine, you can create and sustain a clutter-free living space that promotes a sense of calm and well-being.

A final chance for questions.

I'll send you my talk so you have it for reference. It contains much more than I had time to cover today, so please look at it. I'll also send you two handouts on decluttering, one from the eminent organizer Penny Bryant Catterall.

Let me end by saying that the goal of decluttering is to discover what you have that is of real and enduring value. It isn't to create a spotless or perfect home but one filled with purpose, meaning, and peace.

Thank you.

Send everyone three documents: my prepared remarks (this document) and two handouts on decluttering.