

DECLUTTERING



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Decluttering experts come to your home to ruthlessly rifle through your stuff, don't they? Not these days, it's all done online. How? With three kids, several pets and a messy husband **Heidi Scrimgeour** was keen to find out

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Yet there's no denying that I've been fighting a losing battle against household clutter for some time. With three children aged between two and 10 years old, a messier-than-average husband, and a

home-based freelance career, my home – a four-bedroom detached house which we've lived in for the past eight years – is less a welcoming sanctuary and more a place I relish the opportunity to escape from. Forget home being where the heart is, mine usually sinks whenever I set foot over the threshold.

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1. Establish what clutter is: one man's trash is another man's treasure. As a rule, everything you own should serve you, making you feel happy and inspired.
2. Uncover your decluttering blocks. Like any aspect of life that you want to change, getting to the root of what's holding you back from enjoying long-term, positive transformation is key.
3. Believe you can become clutter-free and organised. You may not be that way naturally but – like driving a car – you can learn the skills.
4. Make decluttering a family habit. It works best when everyone's on board, and can be a fun exercise for children as they learn to create a healthy and balanced relationship with their physical environment.
5. Distribute unwanted items in the most meaningful way, as soon as possible. Lessen any guilt around money spent by donating items to charity so someone else can enjoy them.
6. Don't expect to be clutter-free overnight. Adopt a simple, step-by-step approach that's realistic for your time, energy and lifestyle.

paperwork, newspapers, Lego figures and discarded toddler snacks. So, despite my misgivings about where it might lead, I called in declutter therapist Breda Stack (decluttertherapy.com).

Founder of National Declutter Day and author of Declutter Therapy, Breda offers decluttering consultations in-person as well as online, including an intensive six-month virtual Declutter Your Life course.

On hearing of my predicament, she prescribed a personal decluttering therapy session via Skype. I was sceptical about what could be achieved without Breda actually clapping eyes on the messy reality, but not having to open my home up to the scrutiny of a stranger made the process of seeking help much more bearable. After all, she could hardly start chucking out my stuff mercilessly if I didn't have to let her into my home.

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approached. I worried that Breda might judge my appearance as some kind of blemish of the true sloppiness of my life and when she appeared on screen – pretty, poised and professional – I instantly regretted wearing my scruffiest sweatshirt. But somehow she put me at ease without seeming to try.

Breda began by highlighting the difference between clutter and disorganisation, as she felt I might be confusing them – a common mistake, she assured me.

"Many people talk about clutter and disorganisation as one and the same, but in my experience they are very different issues, requiring different skills," she explains. "I've worked with clients who are very organised but unable to declutter, and vice versa. I define disorganisation or untidiness as relating to items you like or need and wish to keep but which are in the wrong place – usually due to a lack of appropriate systems or storage solutions – whereas clutter is generally an item that doesn't make you feel good, which

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serves no useful purpose, and which you'll ultimately benefit from parting with."

Discovering that Breda had no interest in persuading me to part with anything against my will was a relief, and her distinctions helped me recognise that much of our domestic chaos stems from having created systems without first determining whether we actually need or like the items which we're constantly trying to impose some order on.

Take the shoe basket in our under-stairs cupboard, for example. Years ago, in a bid to minimise the number of times I tripped

over discarded shoes, I insisted that my husband and the kids place their shoes in this basket instead of abandoning them all around the house.

It worked, and cut down on the number of stressful lost shoe incidents too, but as the months pass and the seasons change that basket becomes less a maintainable system and more a mountain of outdoor or unusable footwear. Breda's distinctions helped me see that no organisational system is going to work indefinitely, and that decluttering – passing on items that outlive their usefulness – is essential for keeping systems functional.

Next, Breda worked through my answers to the questionnaire which she'd asked me to complete before our session. From this, she deduced that my bedroom is the eye of the clutter storm that is my home, closely followed by my home office which

doubles as a playroom – the two rooms in which I spend the most time and which are therefore arguably the most important. The hallway – the site of so many of my family's abandoned possessions – is a major source of clutter-related stress, too.

Prompted to disclose how untidy and cluttered my wardrobe is, I confessed that it's virtually redundant, and mostly houses rarely-if-ever-worn items, while the clothes I actually wear are generally strewn over a chair in the corner of the room. It's not uncommon for me to bypass my drawers and wardrobe completely and get dressed entirely in items plucked straight from a pile of clean laundry.

Somewhat – I'm not sure precisely how she worked her virtual magic – Breda dug gently into my feelings about my clothing chaos until the deeper psychological issues that underlie it bubbled to the surface.

Cue a lightning moment: the chaos at the heart of my wardrobe, which erupts all over my bedroom, stems from never having come to terms with how my lifestyle and body have changed over the past decade. Consequently, my drawers are overflowing with a mismatched collection of items, most of which no longer serve a useful purpose but which I am apparently reluctant to part with. Ikea doesn't sell a storage solution which can solve that problem, hence the under-utilised wardrobe and the clothing clutter all around my room.

Among the items stuffed into overflowing drawers is a beautiful sarong from Tanzania – a gift from my husband's travelling days before we got married 17 years ago, which I've never worn. It holds huge emotional significance for me, but takes up much-needed space along with dozens of other similarly redundant items of clothing. I'm reluctant to part with it, but the sight of it languishing in a bottom drawer makes me feel weirdly dismayed.

"Decluttering isn't always about getting rid of things, and it certainly doesn't mean letting go of the memories which certain items hold for us, but instead of stuffing items of sentimental value but limited use like that sarong in a drawer, why not frame a section of it and hang it where you'll see it every day, or have it made into a scarf or more practical item of clothing," Breda suggests.

The accumulation of clutter is also about guilt, I quickly learned. A discomfiting sense of failure washes over me when I open my drawers because a recently-lost stone has crept back on and my 'skinny' clothes – bought as a self-congratulatory gift for reaching my goal weight – no longer flatter me. They seem to taunt me every time I get dressed, but consigning them to the charity shop seems the very essence of frivolity, not to mention an exercise in defeat.

"Yet when I do get around to donating them to my local charity shop – replacing them in the drawer with my running clothes as a statement of my intention to drop that stone – I feel more motivated to get back into shape than I ever did when the skinny clothes languished in my drawers.

Breda's advice in the face of this epiphany was gentle but persuasive. "You should open your wardrobe and like every item hanging there," she says. "If something doesn't make you feel good when you look at it or put it on, then it's not worthy of being there. Decluttering your wardrobe is

about accepting yourself; it's the ability to process the past, to acknowledge the shape and size you are today, and ultimately, to let go of anything that doesn't make you feel how you want to feel."

We talked extensively about the other rooms in my house too, until our session ends with a visualisation exercise wherein I mentally picture myself walking through each room of my house after it has been decluttered and re-organised to my liking. Visualisation might not be everyone's cup of tea, Breda acknowledges, and I don't expect much from it but afterwards I struggle to convey its impact on me. It's as if I have fallen back in love with my home and having seen it as I'd like it to be, I feel equipped to make it so.

And I did. Within hours of my decluttering therapy experience I began decluttering my bedroom, depositing a bin bag at the charity shop that same day. A week later I had entirely decluttered and reorganised the office / playroom, right down the desktop on my computer. As a result, I no longer feel assaulted by disorder every time I flip it open.

I've deferred doing anything about our household clutter in the past because of the belief that the rest of the family

would quickly undo whatever progress I made, but it seems the decluttering bug is catching. The rest of my family were quick to add their own unwanted items to my pile of stuff to get rid of, and my husband responded to my efforts by moving the furniture to make the best use of our newly clutter-free space. I look forward to this evolving throughout the house.

Breda closes with a caution that clutter takes time to accumulate and that it's therefore unrealistic to expect to tackle it overnight, but I leave our session feeling like my mind has been decluttered, confident that the insights gained will help me win the war against physical clutter, too.

A follow-up session with Breda a week later helps consolidate what I've learned and adds a degree of accountability to the decluttering steps I've committed to take.

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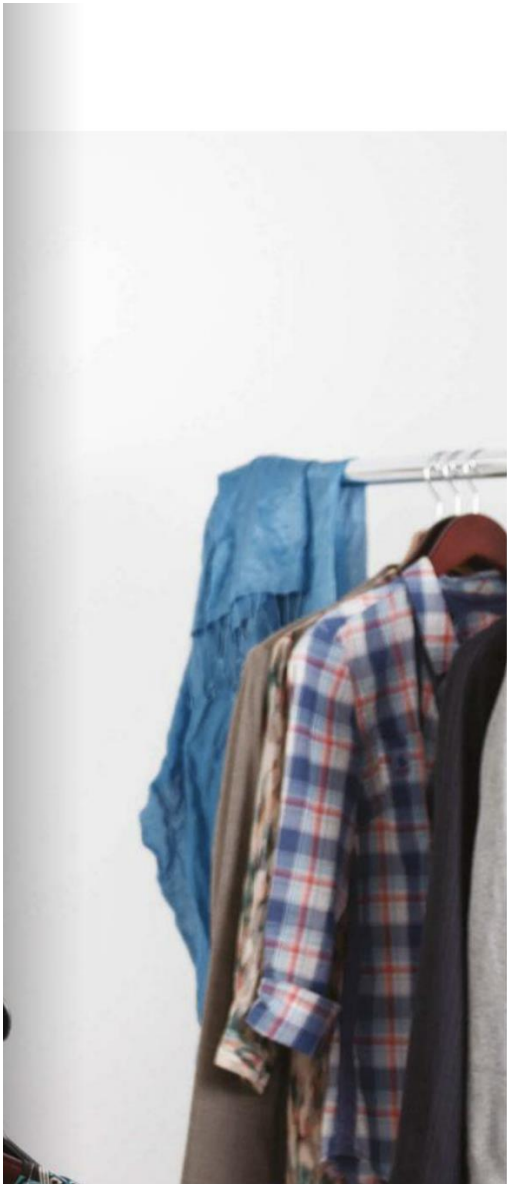
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