



# the cult of clean

From clean-desk policies to *Instagram snaps of freshly tidied sock drawers*, clutter is suddenly public enemy number one. But could purging possessions *cleanse your mind of emotional baggage*? Gemma Askham examines tidying as therapy

A fight is about to break out in the bookstore. There's only one copy of the *New York Times*-bestselling book-of-the-moment, and the next shipment isn't due for another three to four weeks – minimum. Just as I'm scared one of the women is willing to shed blood for a paperback, the less committed of the two bows out to try her luck on eBay, where copies are being auctioned off. The book in question isn't a long-awaited celebrity autobiography or a new sci-fi offering from George RR Martin, but a read about... cleaning.

*The Life-Changing Magic Of Tidying Up* is the work of Japan's Marie Kondo, the 30-year-old "Queen of Clean", whose mind-bogglingly popular method of home organisation – called KonMari – earned her a spot on *Time* magazine's 2015 list of the 100 most influential people in the world (sitting comfortably alongside Kanye West and Barack Obama). She originally wrote the book for clients at the wrong end of the three-month waiting list for her tidying services, but it's sold more than two million copies in less than eight months – and Kondo's appointment book is so full that she's not taking on any new clients, instead focusing on training up "mini Maries" to export the program internationally. Her name is now a Twitter verb ("I just Kondoed a pair of old shoes"), her fans – the Konverts – have tagged #konmari more than 6,000 times on Instagram and among her (once messy) clients, she's never had a repeat offender.

While it's not the first cleaning book to hit the market, it's easily the most successful. The logical reason for Kondo's success is that our belongings-to-space ratio no longer adds up. "We have bedrooms so full of stuff that we can't relax in them," she says. But there's something in her method that's struck a bigger chord. An emotional one. It replaces objective algorithms (two years + no wear = bin) for one very personal question: does the item spark joy? If it makes you happy, it can stay. If it doesn't, discard it. "Joy is the keyword," she says. "When I started home organising at 19, many of my clients had a hard time deciding what to keep. I tried many different ways of questioning. When I asked one client if these possessions brought her joy, she was able to let go of them smoothly. Since then, I've put it like this."

It's this energy, this idea of discarding things without guilt, that's helped Kondo transition from Japan to the wider world. "My method is about a way of thinking and a relationship with things. The basic stance is the same," she says.

Futurist James Wallman, author of *Stuffocation: Living More With Less*, agrees minimalism is becoming a way of life. "The decluttering movement isn't a 'here today, gone tomorrow' trend," he says. "We've passed the tipping point of too much stuff in our lives and homes. There are twice as many things in a woman's wardrobe today as there was in 1980. It's common for people to buy a new item of clothing every four or five days."

The solution to a house full of stuff used to be upsizing storage; now we're downsizing possessions. And it isn't motivated by the fear of assembling another IKEA flat pack, nor is it for monetary reasons – despite Gumtree reporting our goods have an average second-hand retail value of around \$4,000.

Rather, it's a purely emotional decision. A study of 1,000 people by think tank The Australia Institute found that almost half the women surveyed felt anxious or depressed about their home's clutter. And research published in *Psychological Science* last year confirmed that spending money on experiences brings more happiness than buying objects. Experiences make us content even before they've happened (compare pre-holiday excitement with the frustration of waiting for a Net-A-Porter delivery to arrive) and reduce FOMO as we're less likely to measure the value of experiences by comparing them to others. Ironically, the buzz of an experience – even a short one – lasts longer than a new purchase.

Due to a process called hedonic adaptation, we stop appreciating things we're constantly exposed to. So smart phones, computers and clothes all just blur.

Corporate whiz-kids Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua Fields Millburn gave up 80 per cent of such possessions to live more simply, free from the anxiety of material life. ⇨

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The fact that four million people read their blog, *The Minimalists*, is proof of our growing interest in our inner world. The self-help category is now the fastest-growing area of all adult print sales – up 15 per cent last year, according to Nielsen BookScan data.

“I don’t think it’s coincidental that our culture is more interested in the inner world than it has been for a very long time,” says clinical psychologist Dr Anna-Marie Taylor. “Because if you don’t have a good connection to your inner being – to your emotions, to your mind (which you feel is in order and not chaotic) – it doesn’t matter how many things you have around you, there will be no joy. If you’re shopping to feel better, you will still have to buy 100 more dresses because there’ll be a momentary hit followed by nothing.”

A big part of Kondo’s success is her attempt to cure that nothingness. “Tidying is just a tool, not the final destination,” she says. “When your room is clean and uncluttered, you have no choice but to examine your inner state.”

For the first time, objects are associated with limiting our potential instead of adding to it, and Kondo’s clients have genuinely transformed their lives. After getting rid of all her books that didn’t spark joy, one female IT worker realised that the titles she had kept were about social welfare, not computers – inspiring her to start a childcare company. Another found that the process of evaluating her belongings enhanced her decision-making skills so much that she finally felt self-confident. One woman even divorced her husband (possibly taking clutter removal a little *too far*).

With these tales of improved productivity and assertiveness, it’s no wonder workplaces are buying into the clean movement, too. If a competitor’s sales team can work with just a computer, the iCloud and a pen, why do you need a pot plant, three photographs of your dog and a half-eaten cacao bar? “Kate’s team has a clean-desk policy, you know,” a former editor told me one morning, eyes skimming over the inhospitable geography of my workspace: papers, files, coffee cups, chargers. “If you worked for her, you’d only be allowed a pen on your desk – one pen.”

The team she was referring to was Kate Reardon’s *Tatler*, a UK society magazine known to the outside for pictures of upper-class parties and, to the inside, for a strict no-mess policy that incorporates Tidy Fridays – where the best

clearer-outer can win a spa trip – and a total ban on “hoarding devices” such as pen holders and in-trays. While piles of stuff were once justified as “readily accessible”, my desk-shaming experience proved that an orderly workspace is now as non-negotiable as arriving on time.

But physical mess is only part of the clutter we battle in our careers. Management consultancy firm Bain & Company estimates we now receive 30,000 external communications – largely emails – a year, while Harvard Business School found that a day cluttered with meetings reduced people’s ability to think creatively compared to when they weren’t interrupted.

“There is now an increased need for tools to help workers focus and concentrate,” says Dr Justine Humphry, lecturer of cultural and social analysis at the University of Western Sydney. “Mechanisms and strategies that performed these roles in the past, such as the nine-to-five workday, are being eroded.”

Technology has duly responded, first with productivity software that cuts down distractions: the Freedom app blocks internet access and can only be overturned by restarting; StayFocusd censors specific websites; and SelfControl blocks access to email when that little red number over your inbox feels like a child sticking its tongue out at you. But the latest invention is ZenWare: clean-interface software that is like feng shui for your screen. Examples include the writing programs WriteRoom and OmmWriter, which present relatively blank screens that do away with the distractions of editing tools, like fonts.

“Distractions are the enemy of flow. We will continue to see cleaner versions of software, and programs that clean up our own personal digital environment, such as apps that stop your phone ringing when you’re busy,” says Wallman.

But before you download more icons to an already straining homepage, Humphry urges caution in potentially adding to your “stuff”. “This software releases time for some activities, but you’re left with

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PHOTOGRAPHY: VICTORIA LING; PAPER CRAFT: HENRIETTA SWIFT

a backlog of calls and tasks – and it’s up to the individual worker to prioritise and make sense of these. It’s basically another thing you have to do,” she says.

And it’s this word, backlog, which seems key to conquering clutter in the long-term. One of Marie Kondo’s main principles is to tidy everything in one go (she believes it’s tackling the problem half-heartedly that causes people to rebound into mess). When Australian tidying expert Peter Walsh was called in to declutter the offices of Oprah Winfrey’s *O* magazine, he had one rule for her staff: it doesn’t matter what you keep or chuck, but deal with it now.

Taylor makes an interesting link between an inability to get started and how our minds behave when we’re depressed. “With depression, the brain’s frontal lobes are compromised in terms of organising and concentration and we find it immensely difficult to clean,” she explains. “One of the first things people do when they feel better is to tidy up. The thing about mess is that every time you clean, things seem quieter. Mess has a noise – and at the moment we’re right in the thick of a huge amount of noise.”

But the noise Taylor is referring to isn’t in your closet or wilting in a pot on your desk; the sound is coming from inside you. It’s the nagging pressures in your head, the endless social media feeds, the connectivity, the keeping going. Once upon a time, we’d go to bed and mentally evaluate our day: clearing our mental clutter by solving problems, planning tomorrow, feeling grateful. Now we fall asleep when our brain can no longer cope with watching Netflix on our computers while playing Words With Friends on our phones.

“We’re so addicted to this agitated, switched-on state, which constantly generates a low-level chemical response of adrenaline, that people actually start to fear being in a quiet place. Because it’s only when our mind is disengaged that the issues really bothering us start to come up,” Taylor says.

If the therapy of tidying has taught us one thing, it’s that facing up to issues is the first step, then you have to minimise their weight. Whether that’s swapping objects for experiences, items you feel “meh” about for items you love or cluttered social media feeds for reflective quiet time, the message is the same – and it comes from Kondo herself. “Letting go is more important than adding.” □

## KONMARI YOUR CLUTTER

### MARIE KONDO’S TIPS FOR MAKING UNDER YOUR BELONGINGS



#### 1. VISUALISE YOUR DREAM LIFESTYLE

Saying “I want less clutter” is too broad. The more concrete your vision, the easier it is to identify the belongings that will make it a reality. So, what would the atmosphere be like (feminine, minimal)? Look at interiors pages for a photo that inspires you. What about your pre-bed routine (a bath, yoga, TV)?

#### 2. THINK IN CATEGORIES, NOT ROOMS

That means “shoes” not “bedroom”. Collect every item within that category, lay everything in one spot, pick up each object and ask yourself, “Does this spark joy?” Remember, something like a spare toothbrush might not obviously spark happiness, but its job is to help you, so it does make you happy. Just not scream-from-the-rooftops happy.

#### 3. TIDY IN ORDER OF DIFFICULTY

Start with your clothes: they’re the easiest to cull as they’re so replaceable. Then look at books, paperwork, miscellaneous objects, and end with any personal mementos, such as letters and photographs.

#### 4. LEARN TO LET GO

Beat the “I might need it later” cycle by (honestly) assessing its role in your life. Do you really treasure something buried so deeply in a drawer you forgot it existed? If you bought a dress because it looked cool in the shop, it has fulfilled the function of giving you a thrill when you bought it. Say “Thank you for giving me joy”, then let someone else benefit from it.

#### 5. EVALUATE THE USEFULNESS OF GIFTS

Instead of seeing the gift as a physical object, consider it as the means for conveying someone’s feelings. Receiving it is what counts. The sender wouldn’t want you to hang onto it through obligation; when you donate it to someone who can use it, you do so for the sake of the giver, too.

#### 6. KEEP EVERYTHING OUT UNTIL THE DISCARDING IS DONE

Then, when packing everything away, store all items of the same type in one place and don’t scatter storage space. Clutter has only two causes: too much effort is required to put things away or it’s unclear where things belong. Job done.



Adapted from *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo (\$29.99, Ten Speed Press)

