

What about the clutter in your mind?

As a professional organizer, I am very familiar with clutter. The website dictionary.com defines clutter as "a disorderly heap, a state or condition of confusion, confused noise, clutter." The most common type of clutter I help people with is physical clutter.

In the affected areas of the home, there is an abundance of disorganized items. It could be kitchen utensils, toys, clothes, tools, office supplies, stacks of papers, etc. There is often also digital clutter, such as thousands of emails, documents, digital photos, etc. Wherever clutter exists, it is difficult to find any sense of control and peace.

Another kind of clutter that we may not be aware of is mental clutter. Clutter in our minds is perhaps the most harmful clutter of all. When there are too many things swimming around in our minds, we can't think clearly. We lose sight of our goals, have no sense of priorities, and we waste time and effort on the unimportant while trivial matters take center stage.

It seems that my mind is constantly racing, and that if I don't figure out how to deal with these thoughts, I will likely forget some critical task. Also, if these extraneous thoughts happen to occur while I'm trying to work, I lose all hope of getting anything accomplished.

Can you relate? Here's a snapshot of my mental clutter. In the space of five minutes, I might be having all of these assorted thoughts and more:

— I've got to remember to send that email.

— I need to take that Target bag with the items I need to return when I go to Target later today.

— Why is my shower always dripping? I need to call the plumber about that today because it's driving me crazy.

— What are we having for dinner tonight?

— I really should exercise this week, but my schedule is really busy. Hmmm ... how will I fit that in?

— I should definitely orga-



Angie Hyche

nize my documents into folders. It takes me too long to find what I need.

— I better start working on that presentation that's coming up soon.

— Why can't Republicans and Democrats agree on a good solution to our country's health care problems?

And on and on and on it goes. Then, if I don't do anything about these thoughts, five minutes later, like Dory with a short-term memory problem, I'm on to more and more scattered thoughts. It's no wonder we constantly feel overwhelmed. We have so much on our minds, so many tasks we want to accomplish, so many worries, so many plates to keep spinning.

Even if we are at the top of our game intellectually, our brains can only hold so much information. And try as I might, I can't seem to selectively replace large unimportant chunks of information stored in my brain (like '80s song lyrics) with more important ones (like where I left my phone or why I came into a room in the first place). When our minds are cluttered, we are not able to focus on the task at hand for fear that all those other extraneous thoughts will be lost forever.

I have been thinking about this dilemma more than ever recently as I am reading a fascinating book called "Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity" by David Allen. Originally published in 2002 with a second edition in 2015, this book has gained international acclaim. In addition to the book, there are podcasts, coaching services, speaking events, a certification process, and more. The "Getting Things Done" system promises to transform the sense of overwhelm into a system of stress-free produc-



tivity. David Allen describes this dilemma well in the following quotes from GTD:

"Your mind is for having ideas, not for holding them."

"If you don't pay appropriate attention to what has your attention, it will take more of your attention than it deserves."

"You increase your productivity and creativity exponentially when you think about the right things at the right time and have the tools to capture your value-added thinking."

So how specifically does he suggest dealing with all of that mental clutter? David Allen stresses the importance of capturing those thoughts and putting them into trusted systems. Every time we have a "should, need to, ought to" type thought, that idea needs to be recorded in some way that can be retrieved later at the appropriate time. A "trusted system" can be anything from a piece of paper to a digital to-do list. It is any kind of tool that can reliably store that information for you. Most likely, it will involve using several tools.

I am making great progress in my attempts to deal with my own mind clutter. I have a few trusted systems to release a thought from my brain and put the idea into a format that will be remembered at the appropriate time. For example, if I find myself thinking, "I need to remember to send that email," I am likely to either send it right away to clear it from my mind or to set a reminder on my iPhone to send it when I arrive at home.

When I come across a good idea for a future blog entry or newspaper article, I enter this into a list on my Trello board



Metro Creative

How should you deal with mental clutter? Capture those thoughts and put them into a trusted system, which can be anything from a piece of paper to a digital to-do list.

(A digital list making tool). If I need to remember to take something with me, I will either set it by my purse at the door or go ahead and put it in my car. If I am trying to focus on something and have a thought that interrupts me, I quickly write that on a piece of paper to deal with later so that I can resume my focus. Whether it's a digital list or a physical piece of paper, I love the feeling of crossing things off my list.

The exact system of clearing the clutter from your mind isn't as important as just having a reliable system for it and using and reviewing that system

regularly. It can be incredibly freeing to know that an extraneous thought is effectively captured, and I don't have to try to keep remembering it anymore. I can't wait to read more so that I can deal more effectively with my own mental clutter and so that I have more useful information to share!

What about you? Can you relate to the concept of mental clutter? Do you have any tips and tricks that you would like to share? I would love to hear your ideas.

Angie Hyche is a professional organizer and owner of Shipshape Solutions in Kingsport. Email her at shipshape@gmail.com.

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