

When Mess Causes Stress

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Do you have trouble keeping your kitchen tidy? Do you find it difficult to keep your living space clean? Do you have trouble even *seeing* your living space beneath all the clutter that's accumulated on every surface? (*Is that just cat fur over there in the corner, or is that the actual cat? Or is it just a blanket I threw in the corner two weeks ago?*)

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you're not alone. (And we hope your cat is okay.) The spectacular success of tidiness maven Marie Kondo's books and Netflix series should be proof enough that getting clutter under control is a hot topic. Her admonition to only keep items that “spark joy” has clearly struck a chord, and for good reason. How organized (or not) our surroundings are can have a demonstrable impact on our well-being. It turns out that clutter can take a toll on our health, causing physical, mental, and emotional stress.

Physical Stress

- **Allergies:** Are you allergic to dust, pet dander, or other allergens commonly found indoors? Clutter can make it difficult to clean—or even access—your surroundings adequately.
- **Fall Hazards:** An accumulation of clutter on the floor can increase the odds of a tumble for even the most nimble. For those who are elderly or otherwise prone to falls, the danger—and the consequences—can be more severe.
- **Food Safety:** Foodborne illness is no joke. According to CDC estimates, 128,000 people are hospitalized annually from food poisoning. The kitchen can be a breeding ground for mold and a bevy of unsavory bacteria and failing to keep it clean and properly sanitized can increase the odds of an illness that could range from unpleasant to deadly.

Mental Stress

It's not just our physical health that's affected. Clutter can also take a heavy toll on our mental well-being.

- A study by researchers at Princeton University found that clutter can serve as a stumbling block to focusing on a particular task. In short, objects not related to said task can “overload” the visual cortex, making efficient, focused work more difficult.
- Another study found that the way women describe their homes can be a predictor of their levels of the stress hormone cortisol, as well as the level of “depressed mood” they experienced throughout the day.

Emotional Stress

Is the clutter in your living space causing tension at home? If you share that space with someone who has different expectations of the amount of clutter that's acceptable, there's a decent chance the answer is “yes.”

What Can You Do?

If you're feeling overwhelmed by clutter—and by even the thought of what it would take to *declutter*—take heart. It doesn't have to *be* a monumental task. Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was that precariously perched pile of laundry in the corner.

It's important to have realistic expectations when it comes to dealing with clutter. Divide the work into manageable chunks. Whether that means taking it a room at a time, a category at a time (clothes, books, etc.), or devoting 15 minutes (or even less if that's all you have the bandwidth for) to general decluttering. The important thing is that you find a method that works for you. Stick with it, and you may just organize and clean your way to a healthier you.

Sources:

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