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The Psychology of Clutter

What Different Types of Crowded Closets Suggest About Their Owners



By

[Melinda Beck](#)

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Jennifer James and her husband don't have a lot of clutter—but they do



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"Every time I think about getting rid of it, I want to cry," says Ms. James, a 46-year-old public-relations consultant. She fears her children, ages 6, 8 and 16, will grow up and think she didn't love them if she doesn't save it all. "In keeping all this stuff, I think someday I'll be able to say to my children, 'See—I treasured your innocence. I treasured you!'"

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Many powerful emotions are lurking amid stuff we keep. Whether it's piles of unread newspapers, clothes that don't fit, outdated electronics, even empty margarine tubs, the things we accumulate

reflect some of our deepest thoughts and feelings.

Now there's growing recognition among professional organizers that to come to grips with their clutter, clients need to understand why they save what they save, or things will inevitably pile up again. In some

cases, therapists are working along with organizers to help clients confront their psychological demons.

"The work we do with clients goes so much beyond making their closets look pretty," says Collette Shine, president of the New York chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers. "It involves getting into their hearts and their heads."

For some people—especially those with big basements—hanging onto old and unused things doesn't present a problem. But many others say they're drowning in clutter.

"I have clients who say they are distressed at all the clutter they have, and distressed at the thought of getting rid of things," says Simon Rego, director of psychology training at Montefiore Medical Center in Bronx, N.Y., who makes house calls, in extreme cases, to help hoarders.

In some cases, chronic disorganization can be a symptom of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and dementia—all of which involve difficulty with planning, focusing and making decisions.

The extreme form, hoarding, is now a distinct psychiatric disorder, defined in the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5 as "persistent difficulty discarding possessions, regardless of their value" such that living areas cannot be used. Despite all the media attention, only 2% to 5% of people fit the criteria—although many more joke, or fear, they are headed that way.

Difficulty letting go of your stuff can also go hand in hand with separation anxiety, compulsive shopping, perfectionism, procrastination and body-image issues. And the reluctance to cope can create a vicious cycle of avoidance, anxiety and guilt.

In most cases, however, psychologists say that clutter can be traced to what they call cognitive errors—flawed thinking that drives dysfunctional behaviors that can get out of hand.

Among the most common clutter-generating bits of logic: "I might need these someday." "These might be valuable." "These might fit again if I lose (or gain) weight."

"We all have these dysfunctional thoughts. It's perfectly normal," Dr. Rego says. The trick, he says, is to recognize the irrational thought that makes you cling to an item and substitute one that helps you let go, such as, "Somebody else could use this, so I'll give it away."

He concedes he has saved "maybe 600" disposable Allen wrenches that came with IKEA furniture over the years.

The biggest sources of clutter and the hardest to discard are things that hold sentimental meaning. Dr. Rego says it's natural to want to hang onto objects that trigger memories, but some people confuse letting go of the object with letting go of the person.

THE EXCESS FILES | What different types of closets suggest about their owners



THE WAY THINGS WERE
Objects that evoke memories—of childhood, deceased pets, sports triumphs—frequently pile up and are painful to discard.



THREE SIZES AGO
Whether they've lost weight or gained it, some people never fully accept the change and think, 'These might fit again.'



BUY THEN, PAY LATER
A closet full of never-worn clothing is a sign of shopping to fill emotional needs, which purchases seldom satisfy.



ADHD STORAGE
Half-finished projects, multiple hobbies, difficulty staying focused and trouble making decisions can be symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.



I'VE GOT IT HERE SOMEWHERE
Feeling compelled to save things can indicate OCD. Hoarding was once seen as a form of OCD but is now a distinct disorder.



AN 8-TRACK MIND
Thoughts such as 'Somebody might need this' or 'This might be valuable someday' can make it hard to discard outmoded technology.

Illustrations by Jane Lurie

CONFRONTING YOUR CLOSET DEMONS

Professional organizers and therapists offer these tips to help clean out clutter and prevent it from accumulating:

Start small: If you don't have time or energy for a big job, tackle one drawer or corner a day. Or set a timer for 15 minutes and see how much you can get done. Dividing the task into small steps is particularly helpful for people with attention and focusing problems.

Give things away: Finding a second home for salvageable things can ease separation anxiety and relieve feelings of guilt over being wasteful.

Take pictures: Photos of old prom dresses, hats, team jerseys and other nostalgic items can evoke the same memories while taking up much less space.

Remember the 80/20 rule: Most people wear only 20% of their clothing 80% of time. Much of the rest reflects past sizes, past self-images or past life roles. Recognize them for what they are. "If you want to move forward, release the past, starting with your closet," writes Jennifer Baumgartner in her book "You Are What You Wear."

Take inventory: How many pairs of jeans/shoes/ties/black dresses or other favorite items do you have and how many do you need? Set some limits, suggests Linda Samuels, president of the Institute for Challenging Disorganization.

Purchase mindfully: Will you really use this—or are you trying to fill an emotional void? A closet full of clothes and shoes with price tags still attached is a telltale sign of the latter. "You can never get enough of what you don't need," says psychologist April Lane Benson, who specializes in treating compulsive shoppers.

Try a trial separation: If parting with things seems painful, stash them temporarily in an accessible place and see if the feeling passes.

Linda Samuels, president of the Institute for Challenging Disorganization, an education and research group, says there's no reason to get rid of things just for the sake of doing it.

"Figure out what's important to you and create an environment that supports that," she says.

Robert McCollum, a state tax auditor and Ms. James's husband, says he treasures items like the broken fairy wand one daughter carried around for months.

"I don't want to lose my memories, and I don't need a professional organizer," he says. "I've already organized it all in bins." The only problem would be if they ever move to a place that doesn't have 1,000 square feet of storage, he adds.

Sometimes the memories people cling to are images of themselves in different roles or happier times. "Our closets are windows into our internal selves," says Jennifer Baumgartner, a Baltimore psychologist and author of "You Are What You Wear."

"Say you're holding on to your team uniforms from college," she says. "Ask yourself, what about that experience did you like? What can you do in your life now to recapture that?"

Somebody-might-need-this thinking is often what drives people to save stacks of newspapers, magazines, outdated electronic equipment, decades of financial records and craft supplies. With a little imagination, anything could be fodder for scrapbooks or Halloween costumes.

For people afraid to toss things they might want in the future, Dr. Baumgartner says it helps to have a worst-case scenario plan. "What if you do need that tutu you've given away for a Halloween costume? What would you do? You can find almost anything on [eBay](https://www.eBay.com)."

Some people have many issues going on simultaneously. Larry Auerbach, who works from his New York City home doing photo retouching and print production, had 1,200 pounds of books, hundreds of DVDs, thousands of slides, negatives and prints and financial records back to the 1980s—all in his 600-square-foot apartment.

He heard Ms. Shine speak at an adult ADHD support group and liked her ideas about digitizing. In many home visits, she helped him decide what to shred, what to scan and what to save in an improved filing system.

He spent hours copying his DVDs and CDs onto his computer, tossing the hard cases and consolidating the discs in plastic sleeves. "That brought up the question: why save them at all?" he says. He donated

dozens to a nearby library and put others on the street, where they promptly disappeared. "It makes me happy to think somebody else can use them. They're not garbage," he says.

Ms. Shine says it's very common for people with ADHD to get overwhelmed by papers and possessions. "They beat up on themselves and fear making the wrong decision." But they can learn many new decision-making skills that can make decluttering easier.

Can people be too neat, too organized and too quick to part with things? There, too, it's all subjective. What matters is whether your habits distress you or others.

"Guilty as charged. My family makes fun of me," says Dr. Baumgartner. "I have to control my desire to remove stuff. Often I literally have nothing to wear."

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