

# *The lazy girl's guide to a* PRISTINE PAD

When faced with a messy home, most people who aren't that domestically competent tend to do the same thing: wait for it to get to the point where you cannot stand to look at it for a second longer; then spend a day or two cleaning like a maniac until it's livable with again. You do the same thing a few weeks later; then nothing in between. This is 'marathon cleaning' and it doesn't work because it's not sustainable. Your house is only clean for a few days at a time, at most. By doing a little tidying more frequently, everyone can get their mess under control and transform their home from somewhere they're embarrassed and stressed out by into a place that's comfortable and calm.

Looking at the bigger picture of your home is always going to be overwhelming and makes getting started seem like an impossible proposition. You see a big mess and assume it means a big clean-up, consuming energy and leaving you with no time for anything else.

But there's no rule that says you have to do all of it at once. Step away from that big picture, turn a critical eye to smaller sections and break tasks down into manageable chunks of time. I call them 20/10s – 20 minutes of cleaning, followed by a ten-minute break. Twenty minutes is not a long time, but you will be

surprised by how much you can accomplish. And it's easier to get started when you know there is an end in sight, very soon.

The break is not optional. Breaks are important to show you that you can stop when you need or want to – and they interrupt the thought process that wants to turn a cleaning session into a marathon. You can do almost anything for just 20 minutes if you know that you can then reward yourself for that work. You decide how many 20/10s you want to do at a given time. Had a long day at work? One or two sessions will keep things neater without driving you over the edge. And you can mess

around with the timing until it works for you. Maybe a 45/15 is more your speed. People with mobility or energy limitations may find that a 5/15 works without being more than they can handle. Most tasks take far less time in reality than they do in your mind when you are trying to avoid them. Twenty minutes can be enough time to put away one or two loads of clean laundry or to take a bathroom from horrifying to habitable.

## THE PERFECTIONIST'S PARADOX

Perfectionism can be a convenient excuse for letting the mess linger. Telling yourself that you won't be satisfied until your home looks like a magazine photo shoot isn't going to

help your mental health if your dirty clothes are littering the floor and you haven't emptied the dishwasher in days. Not only are you holding yourself to impossible standards, you're giving yourself the OK to avoid the problem entirely.

Doing something is always better than doing nothing. Even though starting a load of laundry or putting the clean dishes away doesn't mean your home will be picture-perfect, it'll definitely be nicer than it is now.

Giving yourself permission to stop after 20 minutes will help you to redefine what a job well done really is and take pride in what you have managed to achieve up to that point. No matter how thoroughly you clean, it's always going to get messy again. That is the nature of housework. Let go of 'perfect' and embrace 'good enough'.

## DO A LITTLE BIT EVERY DAY

With just a small amount of work on a daily basis, you can catch up with the mess you've made that day and get a little ahead of the curve by making a dent in your baseline mess. Soon you'll find that with just one 20-minute session on the days that you don't have much time, you can start on the bigger projects that have been plaguing the landscape of your home for longer than you can remember.

Integrate a bit of housework into what you're already doing, such as ➤





◀ folding up clean clothes or pairing socks while you're catching up on your favourite TV series. Bring the laptop into the kitchen and listen to a 20-minute podcast while you clear up the dishes. You don't have to stop your life in order to clean. Get into the habit of a 20-minute session as soon as you get home, while you're still in a work mindset. Once you relax on the sofa in front of the TV, it's harder to find the motivation to unload the dishwasher.

### PUT IT AWAY, NOT DOWN

Every time you leave empty packaging on the kitchen worktop instead of putting it into the recycling bin, every time you kick off your shoes and leave them wherever they land instead of putting them away, every time you return from a shopping trip and leave the bags on the floor, you are making the mess worse. By being mindful about where items end up, you can stop the chaos from escalating. The best part about changing this particular habit is that the better you get at it, the less you have to clean up later on.

### MAKE YOUR BED

A made bed creates a focal point of cleanliness and order; making an untidy room look better – while unmade beds attract even more mess. First the bedding is in disarray. Then laundry starts to pile on it. Then there's so much other stuff on it that there's no room to sleep unless you toss everything on to the floor. Sometime later, you realise that you can't remember when you last washed your sheets. Taking a minute to make your bed immediately snaps some order into

the chaos. It's also a great place to start if you aren't ready to tackle anything more complex. It's one step, one tiny thing to do in the morning and then you're done.

### DEAL WITH YOUR INVISIBLE CORNERS

These are areas that have become dumping grounds for random junk for so long that you fail to really register them when you look around. Maybe it's a pile of unopened post and random electronic accessories stashed under a table against a wall, or a stack of unpacked boxes in a little-used cupboard.

If your home still doesn't feel tidy after regular maintenance cleaning, it is in all likelihood because of these areas that have grown unnoticed over time. It won't take long to deal with them – the difficult part is stopping them from reappearing. Something about those particular spots makes them prime dumping grounds. You might need to rearrange things so that these corners no longer exist.

### KEEP FLAT SURFACES CLEAR

Flat surfaces tend to accumulate a lot of stuff and make everything else look bad. By keeping just the most visible surfaces clear on a daily basis, you will be tackling a significant amount of your overall mess.

Pick a surface that you see multiple times a day and devote one or two 20/10s to clearing it off completely. Then take five minutes or so every day to make sure it is cleared again. If your kitchen counter always ends up a mess of shopping bags, junk mail and random things you just drop there, make that your focus. If your bedside table is so overcrowded that you can't fit your

phone on to it overnight to charge, then that might be a good place to start. Make sure you aren't just relocating the mess somewhere else. Find a logical home for each item or throw it away.

### ASSESS YOUR STORAGE

We're disorganised primarily because we have more stuff than storage. There are two solutions: less stuff or more storage, and less stuff is almost always the better option. We all need a certain number of things, and getting rid of the lot is no better to aspire to than never getting rid of anything at all, yet we tend to view a minimalist home as something we should constantly strive towards. You don't need to chuck everything away but nor do you need five of each item. It's finding a balance that matters.

Redefine minimalism to fit your own life. Reducing your number of possessions is a great goal and it will make a huge difference to the level of mess in your home. Just try not to get overwhelmed by the need to make your home look like carefully staged pictures of rooms that people never use. Instead, ask if everything has a use or a place. If something has a use but no place, it is always going to seem in the way. And if something has a place but no use, then it's taking up valuable storage space that could be used for something else. Ask yourself:

- When did I last use it? A kitchen blowtorch may have seemed like a good idea but have you actually made crême brûlée?
- Am I ever going to need this again?
- Am I keeping it because there's a small chance I might use it one day? That camping kitchen set may have been too cute to leave in the shop –

but if you can't sleep without your 800-thread cotton sheets and bugs horrify you, maybe you are unlikely to ever go camping?

● Am I holding on to it because I feel guilty for spending money on it? Keeping something indefinitely isn't going to get your money back. Accept that cash is gone and try to make more careful financial decisions next time.

### GIFTS (OR MORE STUFF!)

Gifts can be tricky. They fall into a category of stuff that has a lot of emotion attached to it. But you should look at gifts in exactly the same way as any other item you are trying to make a decision about. Do you use it? Love it? Is it stressing you out? Why are you keeping it?

The real value of a gift is in the giving and receiving of it. The actual item itself is far less important. And once a gift is given it belongs to you – and you are free to get rid of it whenever and however you please. ❏

■ **Unf-ck Your Habitat: You're Better Than Your Mess** by *Rachel Hoffman* is published by *Bluebird*, price £8.99. To order a copy for the discounted price of £6.74 until 15 January, visit [you-bookshop.co.uk](http://you-bookshop.co.uk) or call 0844 571 0640; p&p is free on orders over £15



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