



From Chapter 25 of *Clutter Free*

50 Ways to Reduce the Stuff Coming into Your Life

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Another step on your journey to becoming clutter free is to keep unnecessary stuff from coming into your life in the first place. Here are some ideas of ways you can do that.

Encourage non-thing gifts.

Tell the people you know and love what make great gifts and which ones are harder for you to use and love. Yes, there are probably some physical, tangible things that you would use and love, but give your family the freedom to think outside the box. Some of the gifts we've encouraged are

- » perishables (we love home-baked goods)
- » gift cards (there's nothing wrong with a Starbucks gift card or an iTunes download)
- » experiences (going out to dinner together or at each other's homes)
- » just spending time together

This Christmas, my daughter Kimberly gave my parents a day of labor. Kimber offered to go to my parents' house a couple hours away and help them clean and organize their garage. It was a great way to give a gift when Kimber was short on money, and my mom appreciated it way more than any trinket Kim could have bought them.

My sweet kids know about my clutter-free quest and did their part to support me this past birthday. Justen and Kimberly got me a beautiful necklace made out of seeds. I absolutely love it and wear it almost every day. (I gave another necklace to Goodwill the same week.) They went in together on one special thing they knew I would love instead of a lot of little things I didn't need. I loved the intention behind the gift and the fact that they wanted to help me keep my stuff under control.

My stepdaughter and her boyfriend got me a pound of my favorite coffee, and my stepson got me a beautiful bouquet of flowers in my favorite colors.

Buy e-books instead of hardback or paperback.

I especially love fiction and memoirs—anything that's story based—in an e-book version. Some people balk at this and say, "I just love the feel of a book in my hands." That's fine, but if you are struggling with clutter, part of the reason may be that you are not willing to think about ways to reduce the clutter because you are stuck in old patterns. For you, is it about reading a book or how reading a book makes you feel? At first it was hard for me to get used to an e-book, but now it's my preferred way of reading. I can pull out my phone while I'm waiting at the doctor's office or I'm stuck in line at the DMV and pick up where I left off. I don't even have to be prepared: my books now follow me wherever I go.

Listen to audiobooks or other book downloads.

I am a big audiobook lover. I love to listen to books while I'm cleaning house, walking the dog, cooking dinner, and driving. Instead of buying physical books, get an Audible.com membership and download books to your phone.

Use reusable K-Cups.

I love my Keurig—one cup of coffee at a time. But not only did having all those disposable cups ready and waiting take up a lot of space, they also cost a load of money. Now I have four reusable K-Cups that I fill up every couple of days with my favorite coffee (bought on sale, of course). They take up a lot less space than the Costco-sized box of disposable cups and save me a ton of money. Yes, they take one extra minute if you fill them each morning, but if you're an experienced Keurig user, you know that this is about the same amount of time it takes for the water to heat up.

Just say no to souvenirs.

Get out of the souvenir mindset every time you go someplace new—especially with kids. As a former sales rep in the gift industry, I am guilty of setting up those displays with personalized bracelets and teddies with theme park T-shirts at every tourist trap within a hundred miles of my house. They have you right where they want you. Begging kids, tired parents. It's a deadly mix.

When Roger and I took our kids on a once-in-a-lifetime trip, we set up some souvenir ground rules ahead of time: We would buy each kid and ourselves one shirt, but each of us had to get rid of a shirt when we got home.

And then Roger saw some tall glasses he really liked. But I was on board with that because we desperately needed some new glasses (both Roger and I had been going through a clumsy phase and we were down to three). But there was a plan and a purpose in each of those souvenirs. We still have all of them and use those glasses every day.

Get off of mailing lists.

Register at www.directmail.com/junk_mail to get off those mailing lists.

Redo Christmas.

Try doing a stuff-less Christmas with part of your family. You may decide that the adults are not going to exchange gifts (after discussing with the other adults, of course) but will go in on an experience together instead. My mom told me two years ago that she didn't want any more stuff for the house. That has forced me to get creative about what I can do for her and my dad. Now I do things like gift cards to their favorite eateries, flowers, plants for their garden, or movie tickets.

Last Christmas my mom made me and each of our girls four fabric shopping totes. Did she give us stuff? Yes, but those shopping totes have saved us money (we are charged per grocery bag where I live) and stuff (no bags coming into our house). And as a bonus, my mom used up part of her fabric stockpile for quilting, which helped reduce the craft clutter in her life.

Go to Target (or wherever your weakness lies) less often.

Target is a tough store for me to go to now that I'm striving for a clutter-free life. If I'm going there for groceries, it's so easy to get sucked into the home goods section for a cute pillow or dishtowel. For me, it's better to go less often and then...

Shop with a list.

When I have a list of exactly what I need, I am way less likely to stroll into aisles I have no business being in. I try to make a game out of shopping—if I have ten things on my list, can I make it to the checkout aisle in less than ten minutes without bodychecking anyone?

Love your library.

Yes, it's a great way to watch DVDs and try out books without having them permanently in your home, but now many libraries loan items you may not have even considered. After the Oakland Hills fire in 1991, the local library started a resource center to help the victims of that devastating fire. Part of that offering was a tool-lending library that has more than five thousand items that can be checked out as easily as borrowing the latest Stephen King novel.

Be neighborly.

Exactly how many times are you going to use that wok this year? Once? Twice? How many times will your neighbor use theirs? If you are close enough with your neighbors, offer to let them use something that would enhance their life—lend them your tent for their next camping trip, or your barbecue grill for their next family cookout. That way, you will already have a deposit of good will the next time you want to borrow their weed whacker.

Refuse the hanger.

When you buy a new article of clothing, just say no to the hanger. Wire or otherwise.

Keep it simple.

I used to be the kind of mom who wanted to decorate for every single holiday—Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July, it didn't matter. I wanted coordinating plates for every occasion. Until I realized I either had to clear away all the clutter in order to decorate or just decorate on top of the junk.

I still like to decorate, but I keep it much simpler. Now that my life has gotten a little simpler and less cluttered, so has my decorating for holidays. My plates? I have a dozen clear glass plates that I bought for two dollars each at IKEA ten years ago, and they go with everything for every holiday.

Do a seasonal switch-out.

Instead of a major preholiday shopping trip and later declutter, keep four bins in your garage or attic, one for each season. In them, keep treasured items for winter, spring, summer, and fall, and each season, swap out the next bin and mix the seasonal stuff in with your tried-and-true standbys.

Think permanent.

Instead of scented candles (which never, ever get used up in my house), try a Scentsy wax warmer. Instead of disposable liquid soap containers, pick up a really cute dispenser and some refills.

Think temporary.

If you do have temporary things, use them all up before you buy more. Which means that even if the scented candles are on a "buy two get ten free" sale, remind yourself that you have to burn all ten that you bought last year before you restock.

Make do with multi-duty wrapping paper.

Have a basic roll of wrapping paper that you use for every occasion. If you're more folksy, grab a roll of craft paper and use twine as ribbon. Or if you love to be a bit more dramatic, how about a roll of silver foil—that would work for a kid's birthday party or a wedding gift.

Don't replace—reimagine.

I've been using my bread maker religiously for the past year. Every week I make at least one loaf of bread and a batch of rolls for us to consume. But last week, my beloved bread maker decided it kneaded its last loaf.

I'd been reconsidering the whole bread maker for a couple of reasons. First, I use it only to knead the dough (I hated the tough loaves it baked). And second, it takes up a lot of room on my kitchen counter. I decided it was worth having on the counter since I used it at least twice a week, but given its size, it definitely was an investment in counter space. And since it weighed in at over seventeen pounds, I had a semi-rational fear of dropping it on my toes every time I moved it.

But when I recently put the ingredients in it and it failed to whirl to life, I decided it was time to try a new method—dough by KitchenAid. I pulled out the bread pan and dumped the ingredients into my KitchenAid bowl. Following some instructions I found online, I was able to rescue the dough. The good news? The rolls turned out better mixed in the KitchenAid than in the bread maker. I just reclaimed a huge chunk of counter space and saved a hundred dollars at the same time.

What could you do without? When your alarm clock dies, do you really need a new one, or does the alarm on your cell phone suffice? When your TV dies, do you need to replace it, or do you watch everything on your computer anyway?

“Buy one get one free” is not your friend.

Yes, it may be in certain cases (some food items and things like laundry detergent). But if you are buying an extra just to get one free, make sure it is actually something you will use. “Buy one get one free” helps you only if it's something you'll use. But buy an ink cartridge and get this flashlight shaped like a race car for free is not a good clutter-reducing plan.

Have a beneficiary.

My daughter, Kimberly, is on a budget. As in a “can I come over and raid your fridge so I can use my money to put gas in my car to make it to work” kind of budget. So if I get a free gift with purchase, a free sample of foo-foo shampoo, or a little gift from a speaking engagement that is a duplicate of something I already have, I love to pass those things along to her. (And that child who wouldn't eat leftovers or wear her sister's hand-me-downs at sixteen is magically super grateful for that box of tea or sample facial mask as a broke twenty-two-year-old.)

I have a little area where I put all the things that Kim (or my stepdaughter, Amanda) might be interested in adopting. But they are also good at saying no to the things they won't use or love. That way I can be assured that I'm never burdening them with my clutter.

Multipurpose is multi-fabulous.

In *The Get Yourself Organized Project*, I made a list of everything I have on my kitchen counter. (I believe that the kitchen counter is the most valuable real estate of almost any house.) In that list I included a toaster and a toaster oven. (Just typing those names out, I should have known I was doubling up.) A reader asked, “Why do you have a toaster and a toaster oven both? Couldn't your toaster oven do everything your toaster does?” I had never really thought about it. We are now toasterless and we've never looked back.

Get rid of stock-up mentality.

I used to think that when something was on sale, I had to buy a hundred of those items. But the truth is that there will always be another big sale. And there will always be more toothpaste. So yes, let yourself have one or two extra tubes for one of those late-night emergencies, but don't fill your cabinets with stuff just because it's a good deal or you think you might need it.

Go neutral with your decorating.

If you have a turquoise couch and an orange carpet, you are stuck with that color scheme and will always feel tempted to buy (and hoard) things that match it. Plus, come Christmas when your color scheme may be red and green, you'll have to totally redecorate. Instead, save up for a tan couch, a gray rug, and a brown coffee table and then decorate with a few fun punches of color that can change with the seasons.

Go neutral with your beauty.

Pick up a few, essential items in neutral colors (white nail polish, a black headband) and then get rid of all the stuff that matches only one outfit. The same goes for shoes, although I'm never going to be the one to tell you that you don't need those red cowboy boots.

Experiment.

Is your mug shelf making you mad? Pack up half of those bad boys and see what you miss. If you just can't live without your limited edition Doctor Who TARDIS mug (with removable lid), awesome—go dig it out of the box. But if you find you don't miss any of those mugs, pack them up and send them to Goodwill where someone will cherish your oversized Rugrats drinking cup.

Know yourself.

When you know you look pale in pink, dumpy A-line skirts, and hate anything peppermint, you will be less tempted by dirt-cheap sales on things you know you won't love. That pink A-line skirt on sale for eight dollars is no bargain if you know you'll never wear it. Give the peppermint tea that came in a holiday gift basket to a friend. To thine own self be uncluttered.

Make your décor do double duty.

I used to have a table runner for every holiday. Now? I have one that's red. It works for Christmas, New Year's, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July. Sure, I have a box with a few frips and frills, but I'm no longer behaving as if I'm decorating the Bergdorf Goodman Holiday Windows (which they work on year-round). I keep it simple and pretty and have to be creative because I'm not buying to impress, I'm creating to enjoy.

Rotate your inventory.

Make sure your storage areas are for storing things you actually use, not just things you don't want to deal with. I have a few tubs in the garage that get switched out every six or seven months: Out-of-Season Clothes, Out-of-Season Shoes, Out-of-Season Linens. About April or May I get down all those boxes and liberate my sandals, linen pants, and cotton sheets and pack up my wooly scarves, heavy jackets, and flannel sheets. It keeps my closets and drawers from being overrun, and it's like getting together with an old friend after six months apart. You never appreciate your cute silver flip-flops more than when your feet have been trapped in dark-brown leather boots for months on end.

Co-own.

If your brothers, sisters, brothers- and sisters-in-law, or parents all live in the same town, you don't all need to own chafing dishes, a dog carrier, and a copy of *Citizen Kane*. I know some families who have gone in together on motor homes, vacation homes, dirt bikes, and ATVs.

Make a clutter-free donation as a gift.

One Christmas, our family decided to give "stuff free" gifts. My kids chipped in and, through World Vision, bought me the sponsorship of a goat for a family in a developing country. To represent the gift, my daughters found instructions online to fold a towel into the shape of a goat (like the towel sculptures the cabin stewards make on cruise ships). Generous hearts and no stuff.

Keep a donation bin in your car.

And make it a weekly task to drop things off at Goodwill.

Give a cooking lesson as a nonclutter gift.

Give cooking lessons as a gift instead of something else that will clutter. Not only is a cooking class something you can do with a spouse or a friend, you'll finally discover which of all those kitchen tools you've been hoarding you actually need to keep.

Focus on one hobby at a time.

Don't collect hobbies. For so many of us buying the tools is actually more fun than doing the hobby. Only one hobby at a time ensures you don't buy scads of yarn for knitting when in reality you are spending all your time working on your latest watercolors.

Give a national park pass.

Give a family member a gift that gets all of you out of the house (or suggest this to Grandma when she asks what to get your family for Christmas). Think nonclutter!

Break your mall habit.

We are shopaholics. Reports show that shopping malls have become the third most frequented location for Americans, after home and work.

If you're going there "just to window shop," statistics say that you may be fooling yourself:

- » 75 percent of all Americans visit a mall at least once a month.
- » Shopping malls have become community centers for social and recreational activities.
- » On average, shoppers visit 3.4 times per month and stay 1 hour and 24 minutes.
- » The average number of stores entered per visit is two.
- » On average, a purchase is made in nearly half of all stores visited.
- » 81 percent of all shoppers make at least one purchase each visit.
- » 34.5 percent of all shoppers are browsers, and they spend an average of \$128.36 per trip.

(www.jcdecauxna.com/mall/document/mall-phenomenon)

Refuse the bag.

In some US cities, single-use carryout bags are now illegal (city ordinance), so the people who live there are in the habit of carrying a few reusable bags in their car or purse. That or they end up with groceries all over the back of the car. According to some of my friends who live in these cities, it's nice to not have stacks of paper or plastic bags lying around their house.

Buy used when you can.

Used items rarely come with packaging that you have to dispose of.

Don't get a storage unit.

It's too easy to buy more stuff you don't need if there's extra room to store it. If you have a storage unit, realize it is one more thing draining your time, money, and energy. Find the ten items in there you really care about and get them out. Everything else—sell, give away, or donate.

Refuse to renew.

Don't renew subscriptions for those magazines that sit untouched each week as they come through your mail.

Don't bring work home.

This is impossible for some, but as much as you can keep your office in your office and out of your home, you are contributing to your peace of mind. I had one friend who left work early to beat traffic, and then he would work at home for ninety minutes. Or at least that was the plan. Turned out he would spend a few hours every night on work stuff, seriously ruining any free time he had. Finally, he resolved that the only thing he would bring home from the office was his laptop. No papers, no charger. His battery would last about two hours, so he had to have his work completed and saved long before the battery ran out. He did admit that he had an emergency charger, but he made it so inconvenient to get to that he would dig it out only if there was a real emergency.

Make a spending plan.

Require a two-person agreement—you and your spouse must agree on the purchase before you spend X amount of dollars on something. This could stop a lot of mall trips.

Ask yourself, "In three years will I be glad that I bought this today?"

Ask yourself, "If I buy a new book, am I willing to get rid of two that I've read? If not, is this book worth buying?"

Ask yourself, "Where will this be placed in the house when I get it home?"

If you can't think of a place (or of what you'll get rid of to make room for it), then think twice before it becomes clutter.

Ask yourself, "If my spouse were with me, would I still spend the money on this?"

This keeps me from about 20 percent of all my potential purchases.

No more tubs.

Go for a year without buying any storage tubs, organizers, see-through shoe boxes, or any other containers for your items. Instead, get rid of as much stuff as possible and use the storage tubs, organizers, see-through shoe boxes, or any other containers you already have to store your stuff.

Leave it in the car.

I don't bring trash into the house. If it's in the car, I leave it in the car until I am either heading to my garbage can or can clean it out while at a gas station.

Recycle your mail ASAP.

My paper recycling bin is directly next to my mailbox in my garage. Probably close to 80 percent of my mail never even goes into the house. A word of caution here: You'll want to be sure to shred any junk mail, such as credit card applications, that contain any personal information.

Make tea instead of buying bottles of it.

Imagine your home clean and clutter free.

That feeling is worth more than anything you are holding in your hand to purchase.

