

Pack Rat Syndrome: The Symptoms and The Cure

Imagine visiting your family doctor and asking him (or her) to write you a prescription. Any good doctor, of course, would need to make a proper diagnosis of your condition before he prescribed something for you. He would probably first ask you what brought you into his office today. With your self-diagnosis in mind, he might ask you a series of questions. Your answers to these questions would help the doctor to confirm or refute the suspected diagnosis of your illness. After the doctor diagnosed your condition, he would suggest the appropriate course of action. Perhaps he would write you a prescription for some medicine. Or perhaps he would recommend a change in your habits or lifestyle.

Wouldn't it be great if you could also go to your family doctor to write a prescription for you that would cure you of "Pack Rat Syndrome" - the need to save things?

You would walk into the office, sit down, and have a conversation that might go something like this:

Dr.: Hello! What brings you here today?

You: Well, Doctor, my house (or my office) is out of control. I've got stuff all over the place. I just don't know where to begin to get my things, or myself, organized.

Dr.: I'm glad you came in. Let's talk about your symptoms. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?

You: Not at all, Doctor.

Dr.: Good. Now, as I ask you these questions, I'd like you to answer "yes" or "no" to each one, OK?

You: Let's go!

Dr.: Here we go!

Yes No: **Are you afraid that if you discard something, you might need it someday?**

Yes No: **Do you keep something "just in case" someone else might need it**

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someday?

- Yes No: **Do you keep things because you feel guilty about letting things "go to waste"?**
- Yes No: **Do you take in other people's things they no longer want, even if you have no use for them?**
- Yes No: **Would you consider renting storage space, or even moving to a larger house or office, before you'd consider eliminating some items?**
- Yes No: **Do you have so many large "collections" that you have no space to display them all?**
- Yes No: **Do you find comfort in having a lot of things around you?**
- Yes No: **Do you buy things because they are "bargains", even when you don't need or have any place to put your great finds?**
- Yes No: **Are you overly sentimental about gifts people have given you, even when you really don't like or need the gift? Would you feel guilty about not keeping them?**
- Yes No: **Have you kept all of your grown children's school papers and artwork?**
- Yes No: **Are you afraid you'll forget something if you no longer have the physical reminder (such as mail, photographs, and memorabilia)?**
- Yes No: **Do you feel like you are giving away a part of yourself when you contemplate downsizing?**
- Yes No: **Do you feel like you can't get rid of things because they are "still good" or they "may be valuable someday"?**
- Yes No: **Are you holding on to things because you think that someday your children might want them?**

Dr.: You answered "yes" to several of those questions. It seems that you really have trouble letting go of some things. It's easy then to understand why you feel so overwhelmed.

You: What can I do about it?

Dr.: You've taken the first steps - admitting that you hold onto so many things that they are crowding you out of your home and office, and asking for help. Now, let me ask you this:

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Are you ready to commit to paring down some of those things that are causing you such distress?

You: I really want to, Doctor, but it will be hard to let things go...

Dr.: Let me give you some suggestions:

1. **Make a list of all the things in your house or office that are bothering you. Some examples may be piles of papers, full clothes closets, or cluttered kitchen counters.**
2. **Now, rank the items on the list. #1 would be the most irritating area, #2 the next most irritating, etc.**
3. **Begin working on the #1 priority. Don't worry about the other items until #1 is finished. What do you think your #1 priority would be?**

You: That's easy! For me, it's catalogs, magazines, and newspapers that are crowding me out of house and home. I've run out of places to put them. But I want to keep them because there are things in the catalogs I might want to order, recipes I might want to try, and articles I should read.

Dr.: (smiling) But you either didn't have time to read them when they arrived or they really weren't that important to you, right? Do you expect that you'll have time to catch up on the backlog, as well as keep up with the current periodicals, in the near future?

You: (smiling) No, I guess not. I suppose I could get any of that information from the Internet or the library if I really needed it.

Dr.: Right you are! But to ease your mind that you won't accidentally discard something important, like the deed to your house that is stuck between two magazines, here's a way for you to process those things that are giving you a headache:

1. **Begin in one room. Gather all the catalogs, magazines, and newspapers and sort them into 3 separate piles.**
2. **Decide that you will automatically toss all but the most recent issue.**
3. **Starting with one of the piles, look at each item one at a time and decide if you need to keep it or toss it. If you KNOW that there is something in a**

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- particular periodical that you must keep, tear it out and put it aside, then toss the periodical.
4. Now look at the items that are left over. Flip through each one to see if it deserves to be kept. If you know you'll never get around to reading it, toss it, or take it to your doctor's office or your hairdresser. (Put it in your car right now. Don't leave it in the house!) Catalogs are more of a nuisance. If you don't see something you want to order within the next week, toss the catalog. Don't worry...another one will surely be in your mailbox very soon!
 5. Designate places to keep the important newspapers, magazines, and catalogs. Where are you most likely to read them, or order from them? Keep a basket or magazine rack there to hold them.
 6. Repeat the process in each of the other rooms of your house.
 7. If you tore out pages from old periodicals, sort them into categories (such as recipes, business articles, things to order, etc.). Clear sheet protectors in 3-ring binders are a good way to store clippings. File them with other similar items, put them into your "action required" folder, or read or order the item immediately. Then toss the page.
 8. Maintain your system by using the "one in, one out" rule. When a new issue arrives, toss the old issue.

You: I think I can do this! When you break it down into these small steps, it doesn't seem as overwhelming.

Dr.: I'm glad you're feeling better. But if you find that you get stuck, or can't seem to get started, remember that a professional organizer can help you work through the process. She can be your "sounding board" and give you advice and encouragement to help you cure your Pack Rat syndrome.

Many of us have items that we just can't bear to part with. When the sheer quantity of them causes us more pain than pleasure, when they begin to negatively interfere with our health, safety, relationships, and emotions, we begin to understand that we need to make some changes. Sandra Felton, the founder of Messies Anonymous (<http://www.messies.com>), says that change comes when the pain of living in clutter is greater than the pain of change.

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If you're ready to make some changes and have a more organized living or working environment, it would be our pleasure to help you. Please email us at info@absolutely-organized.com or call 410.329.3300 for *Absolutely Organized*. We're here to help you.