

Baltimore Sun

By Kate Shatzkin

Sun Staff

Originally published April 24, 2005

Stuffed

Too many things in your closet, in your inbox, in your head? Technology was supposed to sweep our lives clean. Now we're more cluttered than ever.

Ro Curran, a Cockeysville freelance writer and volunteer, called professional organizer Katherine Trezise about four years ago, when she found herself dealing suddenly with the contents of two large homes owned by relatives. "They didn't part with very much," said Curran, 55. "We had enough in the basement to furnish three households."

Trezise advises clients who must empty a house with many family possessions not to take anything into their own homes right away. "Rent a storage unit," she says. "Go through them after your own grieving period, when you have more time."

People are busy

Part of the problem is that, even when we do want to find a new home for things, we resist taking the trouble to get them there. We don't want to throw away; we want to recycle, says Roland Rotz, Ph.D. EBay and other Internet selling or trading sites have been a boon, but they take time to monitor.

And even once they've gotten organized, many busy people have a hard time keeping to a system when everything else seems more pressing.

Gregg Gregory of Kensington hired Baltimore professional organizer Tara Donohue to put his home office in order. But he needs her to come back every few months; he travels so much as a leadership trainer that his piles of paperwork can easily get out of control. "My wife and I get an average of a pound of mail a day," said Gregory, 47. "That is our biggest clutter in our lives."

Organizer Julie Morgenstern said some of her clients are so busy that they make appointments with her to get organized - only to reschedule because a big work project or family activity inevitably conflicts. "There's always something else to do," she said.

Some people turn to cluttering support groups. Linnea Stouffer, a hairdresser who lives in Reisterstown, has gotten help with her clutter from an online support group patterned after Messies Anonymous.

She schedules regular pickups from charitable organizations that prompt her to donate items she doesn't use. But Stouffer, 46, still finds controlling her family's paper and possessions a battle. "You're always playing catch-up; always working on it," she said.

Resistant to change

At the extreme end of the cluttering spectrum are compulsive hoarders, the less than 1 percent of the population who have trouble parting with anything - items the rest of us would consider useless, like outdated coupons and hamburger wrappers. It can take outside intervention, such as an eviction, to force them to get rid of things.

Researchers have concluded that hoarders suffer from a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. A recent University of Iowa study linked the compulsion to certain types of brain damage from stroke, surgery or encephalitis.

Pollak, the New Hampshire psychologist, said clutterers often want help with the stuff overwhelming their homes, and feel better after a cleanup. Hoarders, he says, are far more resistant to change.

But even people with a heightened awareness of the emotional drag of clutter can have a hard time breaking completely free of it.

One day three years ago, psychologist Steinitz went through a wall of journals he had been keeping. Saving only the articles that looked interesting, he reduced the volume of paper to a one-foot pile.

"You know what?" he said recently. "I haven't read those, either."

Battle the clutter

Here are a few tips for fighting clutter in a world of overload and distraction:

Control what comes in to your home. Before you buy it, know exactly where you'll keep it - and what you'll get rid of in exchange.

Stick to one time-management method - high-tech or low - to keep track of your schedule, says organizer Julie Morgenstern.

Use organizer Kathy Trezise's strategy of viewing inherited possessions as "friends," "acquaintances," or "strangers."* Take home only the friends you'd want around your house.

Schedule a regular pickup with a charitable organization. It will prompt you to regularly donate things you no longer use.

Weed as you go. Open mail daily, over the trash can. Delete unnecessary e-mail right away, and send what you need to keep to electronic folders.

Get help, support

Clutterers Anonymous, a 12-step support group for people who struggle with clutter, has started a meeting in Baltimore from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesdays in Room 10 of St. John's of Hamilton United Methodist Church, Harford Road and Gibbons Avenue. Information: cla12n12@yahoo.com.

Copyright © 2005, The Baltimore Sun

*The "Friends, Acquaintances & Strangers" method of sorting was coined by Judith Kolberg,