

Clutter Clean-up

Too much mess? You're probably a garden-variety clutter bug, but you may be a compulsive hoarder. Our Coach on Call shows you the difference—and helps you with both.

BY SANDY MAYNARD



“What if I need them someday?”

We all have a bit of the “pack rat” in us. Either we save more shopping bags than we could ever use or stuff our closets with clothes that no longer fit. For some of us, such behavior can get out of control—and the clutter can become more than an annoyance.

Generally, there are two kinds of clutterers: compulsive hoarders and I’ll-get-to-it-later people. The difference is dramatic. Compulsive hoarding is a symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Hoarders are completely unable to discard useless items. Their living space becomes cluttered to the point of unlivability. Their surroundings can lead them to shame, isolation, and shattered self-esteem. If not checked, this behavior can bring the hoarder extreme distress and impairment of functioning—perhaps devastation.

The most infamous example of this was Langley Collyer, who roamed the streets of New York City at night, pulling junk from garbage cans. He filled his Fifth Avenue mansion with more than 120 tons of refuse. After a booby trap Langley rigged for burglars misfired and crushed him instead, he and his invalid brother were found dead among the debris.

ILLUSTRATION: AUDREY ROBINSON

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

The Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation at:
www.ocfoundation.org

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) at:
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/ocd.cfm>

Compulsive hoarding, a psychiatric condition that affects less than 1% of the population, begs for professional help [for further information, see the box on page 18]. Those afflicted benefit from psychotherapy and antidepressants and/or anti-anxiety medications.

Help from a Pro

For most people with AD/HD, organization doesn't come easy. Working with a coach who understands the challenges you face in tackling an overstuffed closet or piles of paperwork can make tasks less daunting. Here's how.

- > **DECISION-MAKING** Difficulty in making a decision often stems from the fear of making a wrong decision. Having someone else validate your choices can be comforting.
- > **CATEGORIZING AND SORTING** An organizer can help you sort through overwhelming piles of paper and divide them into files that are easy to retrieve.
- > **LETTING GO** A coach can ease your mind about releasing memorabilia.
- > **SAVING** An organizer can also advise on how—and where—to store those must-keep items.
- > **MEETING GOALS** With a coach's help, you can learn to set clear and realistic goals.
- > **ACCOUNTABILITY** It's harder to procrastinate when your coach is around—you have someone to answer to.
- > **FORGETFULNESS** Clutter bugs will leave things out on purpose, to be seen and not forgotten. A pro can help you organize things in an orderly fashion, without removing them from your line of sight.

To find an organizational coach, see the classifieds in the back of this magazine, or log onto www.ADDitudemag.com. Or contact the National Association of Professional Organizers in Glenview, Illinois (847-375-4746, www.napo.net).

Clutter-bug behavior, on the other hand, is much less severe, affects far more people than compulsive hoarding—and is commonly found in adults with ADD. We think cleaning out the garage, the closets, or the office is a good idea, but we usually don't get around to it. If we do, we get distracted during the cleanup, sidetracked so often that we never finish. As we stall, our

7 WAYS to Clean It Up



- 1** Never ask, "What can I use this for?" Instead, ask, "How can I do without this?" Rather than coming up with a million excuses to keep an item, you'll come up with reasons to throw it away.
- 2** Establish "clear surfaces," such as the dining room table, kitchen counter, or coffee table, where items must be put away once you're through with them.
- 3** Define other areas where things may be left out until you're ready to deal with them. For example, you might leave a package on a bench in the front hall until you mail it.
- 4** Remain disengaged in material that you are sorting. Quickly scan it to decide where it should be filed, but don't let yourself read the whole letter.
- 5** Over-estimate the amount of time it will take to organize yourself. In fact, double the time. If you think you can clean up your office in one day, plan to take the whole weekend. You may need the extra days. If you finish early, reward yourself with a bike ride or movie.
- 6** Put a wastebasket in each room of your house. Sometimes clutter accumulates because we don't take the time to walk it to the basket in the next room.
- 7** Make clutter control part of your daily routine. Each evening, make sure the dinner things are put away, so the breakfast routine runs smoothly. Just before lunch, de-clutter your desk at the office, so unimportant papers don't distract you when you return. Just 10 minutes a day spent on de-cluttering your workspace can make a big difference in your productivity.

mess spreads throughout the whole house. It's not that we want to be surrounded with useless stuff, it's that our brains just don't respond to clutter the way others' do.

ADD clutterers also may have an emotional attachment to possessions, transferring feelings for the giver onto what was given. (It's just too hard to part with that lawn statue from dear, funny Aunt Betty.) And will we ever read through that mountain-high stack of old newspapers? Probably not. But, again, our brains interpret that pile differently than the brains of other people: "What if I need those papers someday? What if I need them and they're gone?"

Unlike compulsive hoarders, clutter bugs can benefit from professional organizing and coaching. Although sometimes reluctant at first, most clutterers enjoy and appreciate the guidance they receive in making tough decisions about what to keep, what to get rid of, and where to put what's left over. (Hoarders become threatened by or resentful of the same help.) I have had the pleasure of seeing "clutter-blind" clients tackle those piles and rip apart their closets with fierce determination. And with each clutter-free area, ADD individuals gain resolve to keep their lives neat and organized.

Sandy Maynard is ADDitude's expert Coach on Call. She is a member of the American Coaching Association and the National Association of Professional Organizers. For more of her articles, log onto www.additudemag.com/experts.asp or www.sandymaynard.com.

Mental Cleansing

Getting organized isn't always about cleaning out the closets. Sometimes we need to clear out our minds. In her book *Conquering Chronic Disorganization* (Squall Press, Inc.), professional organizer Judith Kolberg offers these tips:

> IGNORE YOUR INNER VOICE.

Can an office be too quiet? Sure. And that's when your inner voice—telling you to call back Aunt Becky, e-mail your friends, and get off track—takes over. For some, external noise can drown out the ruckus in your head. Try reading at a cafe, or working with the radio on—it may just improve your concentration.



> **CONTROL YOUR TIME.** Your office is neat, but your head is cluttered with priorities and your to-do list is too long. To make the list more manageable, take a file folder and label one side Now and the other side Not Now. Write tasks down on post-it notes and stick them on both sides. When you move one out of Now, move another one from Not Now in.

> **LET IT BE BORING.** Sorry, but filing is supposed to be dull. So don't get sidetracked by trying to make it interesting with artistic labels or perfectly placed papers. Focus on the real goal: getting organized.