



18 Five-Minute Decluttering Tips to Start Conquering Your Mess

I've written a lot about simplicity and decluttering (I can't help it — I'm passionate about it!) and I've noticed that a lot of readers share my ideal of having an uncluttered home or workplace, but don't know where to start.

When your home is filled with clutter, trying to tackle a mountain of stuff can be quite overwhelming.

So here's my advice: start with just five minutes. Baby steps are important. Sure, five minutes won't barely make a dent in your mountain, but it's a start. Celebrate when you've made that start!

Then take another five minutes tomorrow. And another the next day. Before you know it, you'll have cleared a whole closet or a room and then half your house and then ... who knows? Maybe before long your house will be even more uncluttered than mine. We'll have a challenge!

For those who are overwhelmed by their clutter, here are some great ways to get started, five minutes at a time.

1. Designate a spot for incoming papers. Papers often account for a lot of our clutter. This is because we put them in different spots — on the counter, on the table, on our desk, in a drawer, on top of our dresser, in our car. No wonder we can't find anything! Designate an in-box tray or spot in your home (or at your office, for that matter) and don't put down papers anywhere but that spot. Got mail? Put it in the inbox. Got school papers? Put it in the inbox. Receipts, warranties, manuals, notices, flyers? In the inbox! This one little change can really transform your paperwork.

2. Start clearing a starting zone. What you want to do is clear one area. This is your no-clutter zone. It can be a counter, or your kitchen table, or the three-foot perimeter around your couch. Wherever you start, make a rule: nothing can be placed there that's not actually in use. Everything must be put away. Once you have that clutter-free zone, keep it that way! Now, each day, slowly expand your no-clutter zone until it envelopes the whole house! Unfortunately, the neighbors don't seem to like it when you try to expand the no-clutter zone to their house, and start hauling away their unused exercise equipment and torn underwear when they're not at home. Some people don't appreciate simplicity, I guess.

3. Clear off a counter. You want to get your house so that all flat spaces are clear of clutter. Maybe they have a toaster on them, maybe a decorative candle, but not a lot of clutter. So start with one counter. Clear off everything possible, except maybe one or two essential things. Have a blender you haven't used since jazzercise was all the rage? Put it in the cupboard! Clear off all papers and all the other junk you've been tossing on the counter too.

4. Pick a shelf. Now that you've done a counter, try a shelf. It doesn't matter what shelf. Could be a shelf in a closet, or on a bookshelf. Don't tackle the whole bookshelf — just one shelf. Clear all non-essential things and leave it looking neat and clutter-free.

5. Schedule a decluttering weekend. Maybe you don't feel like doing a huge decluttering session right now. But if you take the time to schedule it for later this month, you can clear your schedule, and if you have a family, get them involved too. The more hands pitching in, the better. Get boxes and trash bags ready, and plan a trip to a charity to drop off donated items. You might not get the entire house decluttered during the weekend, but you'll probably make great progress.

6. Pick up 5 things, and find places for them. These should be things that you actually use, but that you just seem to put anywhere, because they don't have good places. If you don't know exactly where things belong, you have to designate a good spot. Take a minute to think it through — where would be a good spot? Then always put those things in those spots when you're done using them. Do this for everything in your home, a few things at a time.

7. Spend a few minutes visualizing the room. When I'm decluttering, I like to take a moment to take a look at a room, and think about how I want it to look. What are the most essential pieces of furniture? What doesn't belong in the room but has just gravitated there? What is on the floor (hint: only furniture and rugs belong there) and what is on the other flat surfaces? Once I've visualized how the room will look uncluttered, and figured out what is essential, I get rid of the rest.

8. Create a "maybe" box. Sometimes when you're going through a pile of stuff, you know exactly what to keep (the stuff you love and use) and what to trash or donate. But then there's the stuff you don't use, but think you might want it or need it someday. You can't bear to get rid of that stuff! So create a "maybe" box, and put this stuff there. Then store the box somewhere hidden, out of the way. Put a note on your calendar six months from now to look in the box. Then pull it out, six months later, and see if it's anything you really needed. Usually, you can just dump the whole box, because you never needed that stuff.

9. Put a load in your car for charity. If you've decluttered a bunch of stuff, you might have a "to donate" pile that's just taking up space in a corner of your room. Take a few minutes to box it up and put it in your trunk. Then tomorrow, drop it off.

10. Create a 30-day list. The problem with decluttering is that we can declutter our butts off (don't actually try that — it's painful) but it just comes back because we buy more stuff. So fight that tendency by nipping it in the bud: don't buy the stuff in the first place. Take a minute to create a 30-day list, and every time you want to buy something that's not absolutely necessary (and no, that new Macbook Air isn't absolutely necessary), put it on the list with the date it was added to the list. Make a rule never to buy anything (except necessities) unless they've been on the list for 30 days. Often you'll lose the urge to buy the stuff and you'll save yourself a lot of money and clutter.

11. Teach your kids where things belong. This only applies to the parents among us, of course, but if you teach your kids where things go, and start teaching them the habit of putting them there, you'll go a long way to keeping your house uncluttered. Of course, they won't learn the habit overnight, so you'll have to be very very patient with them and just keep teaching them until they've got it. And better yet, set the example for them and get into the habit yourself.

12. Set up some simple folders. Sometimes our papers pile up high because we don't have good places to put them. Create some simple folders with labels for your major bills and similar paperwork. Put them in one spot. Your system doesn't have to be complete, but keep some extra folders and labels in case you need to quickly create a new file.

13. Learn to file quickly. Once you've created your simple filing system, you just need to learn to use it regularly. Take a handful of papers from your pile, or your inbox, and go through them one at a time, starting from the top paper and working down. Make quick decisions: trash them, file them immediately, or make a note of the action required and put them in an "action" file. Don't put anything back on the pile, and don't put them anywhere but in a folder (and no cheating "to be filed" folders!) or in the trash/recycling bin.

14. Pull out some clothes you don't wear. As you're getting ready for work, and going through your closet for something to wear, spend a few minutes pulling out ones you haven't worn in a few months. If they're seasonal clothes, store them in a box. Get rid of the rest. Do this a little at a time until your closet (and then your drawers) only contains stuff you actually wear.

15. Clear out your medicine cabinet. If you don't have one spot for medicines, create one now. Go through everything for the outdated medicines, the stuff you'll never use again, the dirty-looking bandages, the creams that you've found you're allergic to, the ointments that never had an effect on your energy or your eye wrinkles. Simplify to the essential.

16. Pull everything out of a drawer. Just take the drawer out and empty it on a table. Then sort the drawer into three piles: 1) stuff that really should go in the drawer; 2) stuff that belongs elsewhere; 3) stuff to get rid of. Clean the drawer out nice, then put the stuff in the first pile back neatly and orderly. Deal with the other piles immediately!

17. Learn to love the uncluttered look. Once you've gotten an area decluttered, you should take the time to enjoy that look. It's a lovely look. Make that your standard! Learn to hate clutter! Then catch clutter and kill it wherever it crops up.

18. Have a conversation with your SO or roommate. Sometimes the problem isn't just with us, it's with the person or people we live with. An uncluttered home is the result of a shared philosophy of simplicity of all the people living in the house. If you take a few minutes to explain that you really want to have an uncluttered house, and that you could use their help, you can go a long way to getting to that point. Try to be persuasive and encouraging rather than nagging and negative. Read more about living with a pack rat.

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