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LET GO *of clutter*

Create a healthy environment | Cheryl Patterson

Can't find your keys, wallet, or glasses? Are you embarrassed to have people in your home or car because of the clutter? When being disorganized affects our social choices, functional spaces, and work productivity, chances are it's also affecting our health. ▶

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LIFESTYLE

Our environments are an important extension of who we are and have an impact on our well-being. External clutter affects our physical, psychological, and functional effectiveness.

Integrative physician Isaac Eliaz, MD, LAc, MS, likens external effectiveness to our internal one. He says, "The digestive system is a perfect example of this. Healthy digestion is an efficient, organized sorting process that dictates what to keep as nourishment, where to send nutrients, and what to detoxify as waste."

DISORGANIZATION IMPACTS HEALTH

Eliaz notices a parallel between patients whose lives are disorganized and physical symptoms such as congestion, bloating, inflammation, and digestive problems, which can progress into more severe health problems.

We may experience these health problems at home or at work. Research on workspace indicates that when the physical environment interferes with achieving our objectives, it fuels stress. This can limit motivation, performance, and social interaction, and trigger physiological processes.

Health risks linked to the resulting stress include suppressed immune response, heart disease, insomnia, obesity, memory impairment, and depression. Excessive clutter can also expose us to bacteria, mold, and pests.

DECLUTTER FOR YOUR HEALTH

Eliaz suggests that discarding unnecessary things and clearing surroundings results in a spaciousness and efficiency that enables greater energy, improved

digestion, internal detoxification, and vitality.

Even the moderate exercise we get from housework can boost mental health, reduce stress, and promote healthy circulation, according to Eliaz.

"On a physical level, strong organization means better blood flow, as well as less inflammation, hyperviscosity, and oxidative stress," he says. "This allows for the right nutrients to get to the right places, providing better antioxidant protection, which helps beat back chronic conditions from cancer and diabetes to cardiovascular disease and depression."

Clearing clutter also allows our bodies to detox from the resulting stress effects. Fats, sugars, and harmful hormones such as cortisol aren't released in the bloodstream to combat stress.

Being organized may also free us up mentally and channel our focus onto other things, and inspire creativity and meaningful activities.

Professional organizer Rowena List says, "When you are more organized you have time to make healthy food choices, to cook better for yourself, time to exercise. But if you cannot find your gym bag or your clean gym clothes, you cannot get healthy."

It's normal to have some clutter, and it's not realistic to compare our home to a pristine magazine layout. But when clutter gets in the way of having a functioning, usable, and relaxing home, we feel disorganized.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE DISORGANIZATION

According to List, "If you cannot find something in 20 seconds or less you are considered disorganized." She adds that although it sounds harsh, the bottom line is "the item you are looking for is not in its place." This may result in us being constantly late



or not being able to have people over. It's disruptive to our life.

Our external environment also seems to have a direct impact on how people feel about themselves. List has noticed that feelings such as guilt and shame go hand in hand with clutter. She finds that people are often hard on themselves for not having things together or for not living more functionally.

THREE IMPORTANT NEEDS

Research on environmental comfort suggests that the degree of comfort we experience in our surroundings depends on the physical, functional, and psychological needs they meet.

1. Physical needs

These include hygiene, accessibility, and safety.

2. Functional needs

These enable us to easily utilize space that supports adequate mobility to perform tasks and activities. The more functional our environment, the more energy we can direct toward other tasks.

3. Psychological needs

These include feeling a sense of control, choice, or empowerment over our space.

A supportive environment is achieved when our needs are met at

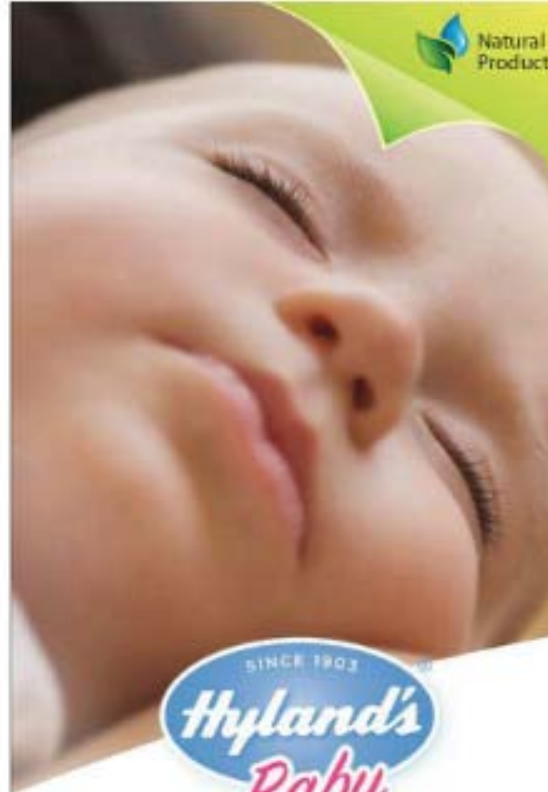
all three levels, ensuring optimal productivity. The degree to which an environment is supportive depends on whether our energy is going to desired tasks or being consumed coping with environmental conditions.

List has had clients say that once they weren't consumed with clutter and got organized, they started working on getting healthy. She often hears comments like, "I knew it was something I needed to do but was putting it off. Now that my home is organized I have more time to go for a daily walk, prepare healthy meals, and take time to relax."

START SIMPLE

The goal is to start simple and in small increments for items or areas of concern—15 minutes at a time. If the problem seems bigger than a few piles or lost items, it's okay to ask for help with clearing the clutter, inside and out.

An important part of a successful cleanse—internally or externally—is letting go, according to Eliaz. "Like a huge weight has lifted, we can experience freedom from unnecessary distractions and disorder when our physical, mental, and emotional energies are best optimized in a clean, organized, health-promoting environment." >



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LIFESTYLE

5 TIPS FOR GETTING ORGANIZED

"Organization starts with detox, with getting rid of 'stuff,' both internally and externally," says Eliaz.

1. Take small steps

List recommends starting in small steps. "Take 15 minutes and organize just your T-shirts. Toss all the old ones, donate all the ones you longer wear or do not like." Then do the same for gym clothes or other items of concern.

2. Tackle the pantry

The spice rack or the pantry may be a good start for people concerned about their health. Get rid of any spices or food items that are more than a year old or that aren't healthy (such as those loaded with salt).

3. Organize your desk

Perhaps the top of your desk needs attention. Get rid of papers you don't need anymore, and deal with those you need to.



4. Junk the junk mail

Eliminate junk mail by signing up with reddotcampaign.ca. They will provide a sticker for your mailbox, or you can make your own "no junk mail" sticker.

5. Eliminate the paper trail

Set up bills via e-post and receive them online. You won't have to deal with a pile of envelopes that accumulate seemingly overnight. **a**

Cheryl Patterson is a stress columnist and freelance writer, and enjoys writing about a variety of health-related topics. cherylpatrickson.ca



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