



# DECLUTTERING

*Messy Mind | Messy Environment*

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# DECLUTTERING TIPS

*Stephen Phinney*

As an organizational specialist for many years, others have asked me my “secret” to producing large volumes of media and publications in a short period of time AND on a regular schedule. The secret? **Declutter something every day.**

For example, before I leave my office each day, I declutter—put everything back in its original place. When I arrive the next morning, my desk is orderly, and my schedule book is open and ready for scheduling new adventures.

If you look at my schedule, you will note that my media productions and publications are completed, posted, and ready for release one to two months in advance. In this habit, I am rarely rushed or stressed. My creative writing ideas are scheduled as far out as one year. Thus, after settling in with Jesus within me, I look at my schedule book, fine-tune the activities of the upcoming month, and begin working on content prescheduled for two months out. In this method of madness, I have plenty of time to go to the studio for time-consuming productions.

Another example is that when I travel, my bags are packed and set to go two days before departure. My action list of what to accomplish while on the trip is completed one week before jumping on the plane. My ministry backpack is loaded and ready to go two days before I leave. This way, the two days before the trip are relaxed and ready for those last-minute dippy doodles. The number one thing that corrupts organizational management is last-minute crises. This is why I schedule time for such chaos. Planned chaos is the secret to time management.

When consulting with others who ask for my help in “*getting organized*,” they frequently default to “*I’m not you; I can’t do that.*” They tend to think I have some kind of superpower to be organized and productive. Lie! By default, I am very disorganized. It got so out of control at one point in my youthful years that I decided to master the “secrets” to an organized life and management style. And it worked!

Since we live in a culture where being told what to do is next to impossible, I only work with individuals who appreciate the benefits of being guided without passive rebellion. We have plenty of success stories; once the client decides they will do what is necessary to change their disorganized minds and environments, success follows quickly.

## **A True to Life Story:**

I received a call from a mega church. The Executive Pastor was in a precarious position. The administrative department asked if I would assist their EP in tackling his disorganization problem. I decided I would investigate the challenging offer.

After arriving at the church, the secretary ushered me to the Executive Pastor's office. He refused entry, so the secretary was forced to call the Senior Pastor, who immediately gave the EP an ultimatum: *either accept this help, or I will expect your resignation on my desk immediately.* I was allowed entrance to his office.

Upon walking in, I was shocked by the level of disorder and chaos – droves of boxes, stacks of papers, food rotting on the desk, and other signs of a seriously depressed person. After clearing off the junk on the chair in front of his desk, I sat down and asked him the question I typically ask all new clients: *Who in your life do you believe is withholding love from you?* He immediately began to weep. He shared with me the tragedy of his wife threatening him with a divorce if he didn't get his act together. With that, I asked what she meant by *getting your act together.* His reply was not a surprise to me. He said his obsession with not completing tasks has led her to the brink. Now, the most painful question I asked him. *How can you be the Executive Pastor of one of the largest churches in the state if your main habit is not finishing a task?* His reply was expected – *my Executive Assistant deserves the credit.*

As in all cases, we started with a list connected to the source of the individual who he believed was withholding love, his wife. She made a two-page list. The two of us tackled the list one item at a time. Then it was onto the office – tackling his desk first, then one box at a time. Amid all this, I coached him in the primary reason people stockpile themselves into such a crisis: people who feel dejected, lonely, and isolated pile external clutter around them to feel safe – a distorted sense of comfort. A message he embraced as truth.

After three months of daily coaching, assistance, and reorganizing his mind, this Pastor's office was ready to present it to the church's Elder Board. The lead Elder asked *What guarantees do we have that it will remain like this?* I will never forget his answer. *I have learned when you reconcile your mind with Christ by releasing His, external order flows without much effort. I am a new man.*

I conducted surprise visits for the following year. Every time I arrived, the office was not only orderly, but he was also thinking orderly. In front of him on the desk was his monthly calendar. Paging through it, he was maintaining the exact methodology I imparted to him. Today, he is known throughout his church and the general public as *a man with a plan.* His marriage is healed, his workers respect him, and most importantly, he is honored as a Christ-as-Life leader.

## FOR THE UNORGANIZED

Decluttering your home/office is not just a way to make your space look neater and tidier. It is also a powerful strategy to improve your mindset, reduce your stress, and enhance your well-being. In this article, we will explore the benefits of decluttering, the challenges that may arise, and the best tips and methods to achieve a clutter-free home/office. Whether you are a minimalist or a maximalist, you will find some useful and practical advice to help you transform your home/office and your life.

- Start by removing trash and sorting items into three piles: keep, donate, and toss.
- Avoid dumping small things on tables and invest in hooks, catch-all trays, and under-bench storage.
- Divide and conquer the mess by removing everything from the area you want to organize and placing it in an organized “pile” to be sorted.
- Stop stockpiling for the misnomer of organizing it for placement on another day. If you touch it, put it in its proper place immediately. If you are a major procrastinator, put it in front of the door – forcing you to take it on your way out of that room.
- Make a decluttering plan and schedule 20-30 minutes every day to put things where they belong before exiting the space. Start with your work area, then move on to clearing out a single drawer or zone. Don’t stop, no matter how long it takes you until every storage space contains the necessities of daily work habits.
- Group similar items together and find specific storage for everything you intend to keep. Remember the general rule: if you haven’t used it over the past year, consider getting rid of it.
- Be smart with storage and keep your items organized by using drawer dividers, shallow bins, cubbies, or labeled baskets.

### **Here is what I learned from Shifrah Combiths.**

Shifrah is learning a thing or two about how to keep a fairly organized and pretty clean house with a grateful heart in a way that leaves plenty of time for the people who matter most. Shifrah grew up in San Francisco but has come to appreciate smaller-town life in Tallahassee, Florida, which she now calls home. She's been writing professionally for twenty years, and she loves lifestyle photography, memory keeping, gardening, reading, and going to the beach with her husband and children.

**Decluttering is just editing your home or office.** And since your home or office story is always being written, decluttering is a never-ending task.

**The reward**—and the reason that keeps me going when decluttering seems like an overwhelming task—is that, in the end, your home/office will contain only the things that

serve you. You'll be surrounded by things that make you happy. Because just like editing, once the extra, unnecessary stuff is deleted, only the best is left.

### **Resist Passive Rebellion**

*"Keep what you need and what makes you organized"* is enough of a north star for some people. But many of us need a little extra guidance to help decide what's worth keeping.

## **These 27 time-tested decluttering tips can help.**

### **1. Don't treat your home/office like a storage unit.**

Keeping something because you might need it someday is like paying the mortgage to a storage company—and it comes at the expense of living in an empty, breathable space. So think twice about hanging on to the curtain rods or the six old cell phones.

### **2. Realize that what you keep costs you a lot.**

Many times, you're tempted to hang on to things because you feel like it's a waste of money if you should ever have to buy them again. But there's a cost to keeping something. You need to think about where to store it, give up the actual storage space, or take up precious empty space. Then you'll need to spend time organizing it and then remembering where you put it and when you need it, and then putting it away, organizing it again when it gets messy, and well.... you get the picture. Is that item really worth the time and effort it's going to take to keep it?

### **3. Give yourself permission to buy again.**

Since the thought of having to part with money down the road is painful, you may choose to keep many things that you may not otherwise. But the simple but powerful conscious act of giving yourself permission to buy again down the road (with the knowledge that you're gaining so much now by letting go) will help you get so many more things out of your home/office.

### **4. Touch it once.**

So much clutter comes from holding on to things that need action. Keeping the "touch it once" principle at the forefront of your mind will help you develop smart practices. For example, stand by the recycling bin with your handful of mail as you sort it and sign those permission slips as soon as they come. This cuts down drastically on paper clutter, take-it-upstairs clutter, and more.

### **5. Ask yourself if it's "the best, the favorite, or necessary."**

This decluttering mantra, coined by Emily Ley, helps you narrow down your possessions to the best of the crop. If you're looking at an overly large collection of mixing bowls, for instance, narrow it down to the best ones. A kitchen towel collection can similarly be whittled down by choosing to keep only the favorites.

### **6. Ask yourself if it's useful or beautiful.**

"Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful." Adhering to this famous saying attributed to William Morris is a good way to avoid accumulating excess.

### **7. Ask yourself if it sparks joy.**

Marie Kondo has become a cultural standard-bearer of the decluttering and minimization movement. Her famous shtick involves having people ask themselves if each and every single belonging in their possession sparks joy. It works for some (including me), and if it works for you, it's a galvanizing way to let go of so many things.

### **8. Recognize that the important part of a gift is the act of giving and receiving.**

It's so hard to get rid of gifts. You appreciate the thoughtfulness shown in getting and giving you something, and you wouldn't want to dishonor that in any way. But if the gift itself is something you don't need or enjoy, it's okay to let it go guilt-free. The transaction of love and care—what makes the gift meaningful—has been taken to heart.

### **9. Keep a box in your closet.**

This super simple trick is disproportionately powerful. The idea is that every time you put something on and don't feel good in it, you toss it in the box. It's an in-the-moment, painless way to declutter your wardrobe.

### **10. Practice one-in-one-out.**

Promise yourself that with each new thing that comes into your house to stay, you'll get rid of one other thing. This helps keep your storage math straight: You shouldn't accumulate one single "extra" thing if you truly stick to this rule. Having a designated "outbox" for the items you'll donate or give away (as opposed to just tossing) helps you keep the habit.

### **11. Use the 90/90 rule.**

The Minimalists' 90/90 rule asks you to ask yourself if you've used the item in the last 90 days and if you will use it in the 90 days to come. If the answer to both is no, it goes. The

actual 90-day period is flexible, and you can adjust it to suit your lifestyle, but the framework helps you decide whether an item is as necessary as you might think.

### **12. Use washi tape to declutter your kitchen.**

To decide what's worth keeping in the kitchen, set a designated length of time, such as six months or a year, to give you a chance to see what tools you actually use. You'll know which items pass the test by sticking a piece of washi tape or masking tape to each thing at the start of your experiment. When you use the tool, peel the tape off. At the end of the time, get rid of any unused thing that still has tape on it.

### **13. Declutter by area.**

Looking at one freshly cleaned-out space might inspire you to declutter the rest of your home/office, too. So keep the momentum going by decluttering deeply in small areas, instead of decluttering a little at a time all across your home/office—because at the end of the latter, you have a full bag of donations but no specific peacefully-decluttered space to point to. For instance, you could decide to declutter—all the way—the junk drawer or a particular cabinet in the kitchen.

### **14. Go on a decluttering binge.**

On the other hand, an empty garbage bag or donation box might be just the thing to spring you into action. If the idea of filling it with things you no longer need inspires you, get to work. Don't forget to put it in your car to get it completely out of your house.

### **15. Employ the “Ex Test.”**

This mind trick helps you evaluate how important something really is to you. It goes like this: Would you contact a detested ex (romantic or otherwise) to get the item back? If not, then it can't be that important. Say goodbye.

### **16. Ask yourself if you'd buy it now.**

Asking yourself, “If I were shopping now, would I buy this?” is so useful. It will help you cull your collection of things down to only what's serving you in your present life. The question will help you shed clothing that's no longer “you,” no longer fits you, “useful” items that are not part of your current life, and broken things that—be honest—you are never going to fix.

### **17. Try the hanger trick.**

This decluttering hack is similar to the washi tape one, only this time, you're turning hangers around in your closet. Commit to a specific period of time, say three months, and get rid of anything you haven't reached for and worn within that time span. You won't have

to think and remember because you have the hanger trick: If all your hangers hook over the bar right now, flip the hanger so it hooks from behind when you hang every worn-it-already garment back up. At the end of your time period, donate what hasn't been turned around.

### **18. Shop for others.**

Rather than approaching decluttering with the mindset of finding things to get rid of, consider instead what you could part with—books, clothes, craft supplies—so that others can have it. This takes the sting out of parting with items, and the fresh tactic could renew your efforts to lighten your own load.

### **19. Pretend you're moving.**

This one's a mental exercise: Pretend you're moving from one apartment to another, and you need to pack everything up, pay to have it moved, and then unpack it. Use this mental framework to scan your closets and storage spaces—if you see an item that you wouldn't go to all that effort to keep, get rid of it right now.

### **20. Paper stacks begone with a three-pronged approach.**

To work through paper clutter, create three options for each paper you handle: shred, file, recycle. By confining your options, you force yourself to actually deal with the paper piles you've been avoiding. "File" includes storing digitally.

### **21. Try the 10 percent method.**

The 10 percent method works especially well for those who have a hard time letting go of what they own. The key to the method is being able to see everything that belongs to a certain group of items. For instance, your shoes. Pull them all out and into one space, and then make it a goal to reduce the total number by 10 percent.

### **22. Do a little bit at a time.**

"Little bit" can vary, but the idea is that you put a parameter on your time and energy. You can do this by designating a certain area you'll work through start-to-finish (as long as it's not a huge one) or by pre-determining a set amount of time. This way, you won't sabotage your big-picture decluttering efforts by burning yourself out before you really even get going.

### **23. Remember what you gain by letting go.**

Decluttering opens the door for some pretty great things. You gain space, time, and energy, among other things. Keep your eye on the prize and use the motivation to redouble your decluttering verve.



#### **24. Limit yourself.**

One way to decide how much to keep and how much to set free is by setting a limit on how much space you'll take up with that one category of items. For instance, if your collection of t-shirts is spilling out of the two drawer dividers you designated for them, pare down.

#### **25. Don't buy containers or organizers until you purge.**

Buying baskets, bins, and dividers is my favorite part, too, but if you have these around before you declutter, you risk organizing stuff you don't need, and that's risky. Purge before you splurge, and then get exactly and only what you need to organize what's left.

#### **26. You won't start liking something you never liked.**

You might have perfectly useful hand-me-down lamps stuffed in your closet because it feels wasteful to get rid of them, but you don't really want to use them in your own home/office. The solution is simple: Out they go. You aren't going to suddenly start liking them. But someone somewhere out there will.

#### **27. These two common pitfalls aren't reasons to keep things.**

Having something for a long time or something valuable does not mean that you have to keep it. The same criteria (useful, beautiful, joy, etc.) apply just as much to these types of items as to anything else.

*Thank you, Shifrah, for your awesome input!*

## **Decluttering is important!**

**Emotional Well-Being:** When you declutter your living or working space, it can significantly impact your mood and state of mind. Putting things in their proper place gives you a renewed sense of control over your environment. It's like reclaiming a sense of mastery and efficiency. You feel more competent and efficient when your surroundings are organized.

**Productivity Boost:** A clutter-free environment leads to increased productivity. When your space is organized, you can find things easily, which saves time and mental energy. Conversely, living in a cluttered space is associated with reduced productivity and chronic procrastination.

**Physical Health:** Piles of clutter can harbor dust, pests, and other dirt that's challenging to clean. By decluttering, you create a healthier living environment.

**Better Sleep:** A tidy home/office promotes relaxation and better sleep. When your surroundings are clutter-free, your mind can rest more easily, leading to improved sleep quality.

**Sense of Control:** Decluttering gives you a sense of control over your environment. It's empowering to know where things are and to maintain an organized space.

**Dynamic Spiritual Life:** *Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. (2 Peter 1:5-7) The Lord is a God of order. When we apply this principle to everything we touch, we will discover a house or office that is ready for a visit from the God of the universe and beyond.*

My number one daily routine is to put everything in its proper place before I leave my office at the end of a workday. This sets the stage for an organized mind when I arrive in the morning.

Remember, decluttering isn't just about aesthetics; it's about reflecting that God is a God of order, plus it's creating a harmonious and inspiring space that supports your overall well-being, as well as a reflection of the "type" of believer you are. So go ahead and tackle that overflowing junk drawer or sort through those piles on our desk – your future will thank you!

Dr. Stephen Phinney

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