

# Conquering Clutter

by Nancy Levenson, Contributor

Be honest. Do you have boxes of dusty, unused stuff in the basement, piles of potentially important papers in the office, or a deep pile of toys littering the living room floor? If you answered yes, you shouldn't feel bad. You're like most of us. In fact, if you claim to have a clutter-free home, you're either one of the lucky few or you're in denial.

According to Missy Gerber, professional organizer and founder of Organizers Northwest (<http://www.organizersnw.com/>), some level of clutter is practically ubiquitous. "We all have spaces where we stash stuff. When someone comes over, we put it all into a paper bag, and into the closet it goes," she says.

Gerber says that clutter comes from many sources. We buy items that aren't on our shopping lists, and people give us things we don't need. And we feel guilty for getting rid of gifts, even if we don't find them useful or beautiful.

## Fall out of the Clutter Zone

Is your clutter interfering with your life? If it bothers you, the answer is probably "yes." The question is "How bad is it?" According to Gerber, there are several levels of clutter.

- **Level 1.** Think of this as "normal clutter." People with normal clutter have items out of place, but the doorways are accessible and it's still possible to vacuum the floors.
- **Level 2.** There are piles in front of a doorway, so you stop using it. At this level, it's impossible to clean because of the clutter, and the space becomes dirty.
- **Level 3.** The clutter spills outside. Maybe there's a television or a couch in the yard somewhere. The level of cleanliness is severely compromised (e.g., there may be animal feces in the home). Structural damage is also common.
- **Level 4.** Food may be dropped and lost, or you can't access entire rooms because there's too much stuff.

If you recognize your situation as falling somewhere in levels 2-4, it might take more than simple organizational tips to gain control. Learn more about the psychology of clutter, and find out how to deal with the hoarding compulsion.

## Complications Caused by Clutter

So, you have an untidy laundry room. Big deal, right? In Gerber's clutter-conquering career, she's seen the mischief that clutter can cause, and it's more than just an unsightly mess. "Having a cluttered space can be very stressful," she says. "And when [the clutter] gets to a certain level, isolation becomes an issue."

There's also a connection between clutter and poorly managed finances. It's not uncommon for Gerber's clients to buy things for emotional reasons, which can get very expensive. On the more pragmatic side, it's easy to lose bills in the clutter and end up missing payments.

What's more, clutter can cause relationship problems (if one spouse can't handle the mess, for example). And, of course, a highly cluttered space can become unsanitary and potentially dangerous. "Something as simple as a slippery pile of catalogs on the floor can be unsafe, especially for kids," says Gerber.

## Confronting Your Clutter Monster

People avoid dealing with their clutter because they get overwhelmed. But according to Gerber, there are few keys to success. "First, take the time to build a system where everything has a place," she suggests. This does take time, but without this step, you'll just be tidying up, not addressing the real problem.

Gerber's process goes like this:

1. Set aside a few hours to conquer a room (or even part of a room, like the closet).

2. Take everything out of the space and sort like items together.
3. Get rid of anything you don't use on a regular basis or that you don't absolutely love.
4. Assign a home for each type of item that you're keeping. Once that's all done, find containers for the items you're keeping and label them.

Sound daunting? Don't do it alone! Enlist the help of a friend or hire a professional organizing service like the one Gerber started. And remember that clearing the clutter is an ongoing process. "People often talk about 'getting organized once and for all.' But that's a misconception," says Gerber. "It's like saving for your retirement. You work at it over time."

### ***Nancy Levenson***

*Nancy Levenson is a freelance writer based in Portland, Ore. Her work has been published online at [www.portlandor.about.com](http://www.portlandor.about.com) (<http://www.portlandor.about.com/>) and [www.citysearch.com](http://www.citysearch.com) (<http://www.citysearch.com/>) and in magazines such as *Cottage Living* and *Northwest Homes and Gardens*. She is also a contributor to the *Best Places* guidebooks.*