

LONG LIVE CLUTTER

Zoë Beaty tried decluttering – and ended up more miserable than minimalist. Here's why, she says, you should hold on to your inner hoarder



As I type this article, on my desk there are 11 books, five magazines, seven folders and an

indeterminable amount of paper – emails, newspaper articles, stories half-written and half-forgotten. There are two mugs (one travel, covered in rabbits, unused since January), a discarded spoon, two hand creams and a pile of notebooks. Quietly perching beside an unopened box of tea bags, there's a tiny figurine of a dinosaur.

I don't need all these things. I could rid my working space of 80% of it and create what's routinely considered a positive working space: Zen-like and calming. The kind of place Gwyneth Paltrow might blog about. I could do the same to my house, where books are piled in a makeshift library around my bed, where drawers struggle to confine the unworn clothes they house, and postcards and prized trinkets – like the gloriously tacky side-dish bearing Pat Butcher's face, picked up from a car boot sale years ago – sit happily on every surface. I could rid my spaces – my life – of the old mobile phones and six-year-old

if you have a decluttered space, it reflects order in your life. A neat, organised space gives us inner calm and a sense of self-discipline, boosting happiness levels, as well as reducing stress and anxiety."

Last year, I too aspired to be decluttered. Previously I'd tried, only to take everything out of my huge wardrobe, donate one or two things to charity, and promptly repack it. I'd always been a classic hoarder, holding on to anything that could be assigned a 'just in case' prefix, and collecting oddments which became simultaneously useless and important to me.

I kept nostalgic closest – the secret leftovers of people I used to be; a messy memoriam of teenage angst and ego. Notebooks filled with morose, self-pitying poetry and a list of every person I'd snogged. Love letters, stories crafted sleeplessly at 3am and mementoes – a dried bunch of flowers – of deceptively toxic relationships. The first draft of a piano score I've never played since I won a competition with it at school, and awful CDs I can't bear to listen to. The first duvet covers I owned at university, kept safe in a plastic box, 'just in case' I need a cheap, acrylic single bedsheet again.

So when the opportunity to live

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credit cards wedged in books and, according to the rhetoric around clutter and its antithesis, minimalism, I'd be happier. Except, I did that. And I didn't feel happier at all.

Research suggests that physical clutter can overload your senses. According to professional organiser Lynne Gilberg, it can make you feel overwhelmed and exacerbate anxiety, as well as encourage procrastination. Socially, being decluttered feels like an aspirational goal – it's why Marie Kondo's infamous book, *The Life-Changing Magic Of Tidying Up*, was a bestseller on five continents. It's why feng shui exists. It's why pared-back Scandi interiors are so popular. The connotations are alluring: discipline and purity. Even the way we speak about minimalism (in 'clean lines') screams clarity and control.

"It's quite simple," says Susanna Halonen, the Happyologist (happyologist.co.uk) and author of *Screw Finding Your Passion*. "Clutter in your space often reflects a cluttered state of mind;

in a simpler way arrived, when I moved out of my flat temporarily last summer, I grabbed the chance to give up the things that were figuratively, according to most experts, weighing me down.

I took few belongings: my favourite clothes (leather skirts, trousers, jeans and T-shirts), a towel, a few books (*The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, poetry to lift my spirits). I had my radio, a few photos, my laptop, a small crate of bathroom products and my make-up bag. It all fitted in one suitcase and an oversized handbag.

I'll admit that, to begin with, I felt pretty smug. I hoped to be the person who didn't need possessions – unmaterialistic, uncomplicated, stripped-back and free-spirited. For the first four weeks, I convinced myself that the majority of what I'd left in storage would be binned. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't name the things I owned that weren't with me.



→ I castigated myself for being spoilt and selfish. I was – still am – privileged to own too much stuff. Who else could benefit from the things I was so casually discarding?

It took around four months for the grief to kick in. By then, I had moved to a new flat in south London and started a new job. The circumstances, I concede, are particular – I was new to living alone, in an unfamiliar flat and an unfamiliar job. And science says instability makes us more prone to materialism. I wasn't particularly secure in any area of my life. But there was one thing I knew would make me feel better: my clutter.

When I thought about what I wanted, I realised it wasn't new things, but the old me. I wanted to look at the fridge and see an odd magnet my mum bought me from her last trip to the coast. I wanted the option of seeing the worn-out T-shirts or embarrassing halter-neck tops I wore, optimistically, on dates. When I looked around, I didn't want to see soulless white walls and a curated bathroom shelf. It felt hollow and, eventually, so did I.

“Having stuff is a touchstone for ourselves – it represents what we've done and whom we've loved”

And there was a scientific reason for that. Researchers at Yale have found that the two areas of the brain associated with pain – the anterior cingulate cortex and insula – ‘light up’ in response to letting go of items you feel a connection towards; the same ones that indicate when something is too hot. A study published in 2011 in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* states that the objects we have difficulty parting from are likely tied to our own self-worth – we view them not just as ‘mine’ but as a personification of ourselves; as ‘me’.

“Clutter is all about personality and ego,” agrees integrative psychotherapist Hilda Burke. “The stuff we gather and keep gives clues as to our identity. From this, others make deductions about us – how wealthy we are, how cultured we are, how well travelled we are. Having stuff is a touchstone for ourselves – it represents an accumulation of what we've done and whom we have loved. It reinforces what we would like to think about ourselves.”

Physical ‘things’ appear to have become less valuable in recent years. The digital age means we

now define ourselves not through our extensive collection of books or CDs, but by profiles and carefully chosen photographs or edited lists and phrases. We've become used to having ‘things’ on one device – our music and films on the iCloud; books on a single Kindle; photographs, once in a specially selected album on a shelf, lurk on Facebook. The things we used to use to showcase our personalities are no longer commonplace. One friend said he dated a girl whose bedroom was so stark, he doubted how interesting she was in the first place.

But there are psychological benefits to having ‘stuff’ around us. “Keeping our surroundings perfectly tidy and clutter-free can cause us undue stress,” says consultant clinical psychologist Dr Elizabeth Forrester. “Minimalist interiors look wonderful in pictures, but not allowing ourselves any sort of untidiness means we're in danger of setting ourselves unrealistic goals and feeling like failures when we can't uphold them.”

Clutter is having a nostalgic moment, too. Whereas in the

recent past we wanted everything we owned that defined us stored on one streamlined, paper-thin device, now we're buying back the physical manifestation of ourselves. New research from insurance company Rias says 79% of us buy or keep hold of things we don't need, purely for sentimental reasons; Waterstones has declared that books are officially ‘back’; vinyl sales are at their highest in 20 years; and Urban Outfitters is even selling cassette tapes. Todd Selby, interiors photographer and founder of creative blog *The Selby*, has even spoken of the ‘messy home’ trend that is now in full swing – a conscious move away from the immaculate rooms so often paraded on Instagram.

Now we want to fill our houses again – and I am completely behind the trend. I'm lucky to own my clutter and confident to fight its (admittedly messy) corner. Because when I lost the ‘things’ that define who I am and who I have been, I temporarily lost myself too. It might not be chic but my clutter is a part of me – and come car-boot or high hoarder, it's going to stay that way.



Love your clutter

Display possessions proudly with these choice furnishings



HIDE AWAY

This simple set of drawers from **Marks & Spencer's** new Loft range is minimalism made easy (£279, marksandspencer.com).



BLUE'S THE COLOUR

Keep your desktop organised and stylish with these display trays from Danish design firm **Nomess Copenhagen** (£70, amara.com).



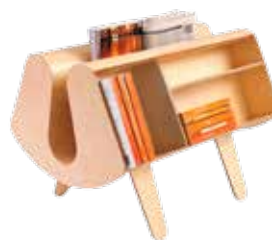
CLEVER SUPPORT

The **Block** Large Peg Board can display everything from shopping lists to stationery (£65, redcandy.co.uk).



BIG FAN

Clever Italian stationery company **Fabriano** has created this bright folder to store important documents (£31.88, fabrianoboutique.co.uk).



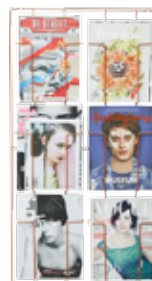
HOLD ALL

The iconic Penguin Donkey was originally designed in 1939 to hold **Penguin** books (£670, nest.co.uk).



MIRROR IMAGE

Designed by Sung Wook Park for **Umbr**a, this nifty jewellery box comes complete with mirror (£25, theorganisedhome.co.uk).



PAY AND DISPLAY

Urban Outfitters' copper magazine rack can fit various sizes – or just your *Stylist* mags (£80, urbanoutfitters.com).



MOVE IT, MOVE IT

Montana's Play storage box comes in 42 different colours and sizes for easy moving – genius (£295, skandium.com).