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I Can't Pinpoint When the Problem Started – It Was Just There

By **Rebekah McCloud**
UCF Forum columnist
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As I grow older, a bad word that starts with C has crept into my vocabulary – and my environment. I'm having a hard time ridding myself of it. It niggles at my edges, and like a bad haircut it has become my constant companion.

What's the word, you ask? Clutter!

I can't really pinpoint when it began; it seems like it was just there.

I was a neat freak well into my 50s. There was a place for everything and everything in its place. I was never *Mommy Dearest* (although there's probably only two or three wire hangers in my house), but I was obsessed with the notion of an orderly environment.

One Saturday morning that suddenly changed. I had been up cleaning since the crack of dawn when I caught a glimpse of my haggard reflection in the mirror. I studied it and asked myself, "Really?"

Would it really matter if I left a sweater draped across a chair instead of hanging it in the closet? Would it really matter if I left the dishes in the dishwasher overnight rather than putting them away as soon as the cycle was over? Would it really matter if my handbags were just on a shelf and not arranged by color, size and purpose? Would it really matter if instead of having every drawer organized, I had a junk drawer? Would it matter?

Holy moly, what was I thinking? Surely I would be sucked into a black hole or into the time-space continuum or worse yet, some evil would befall me if I had indeed committed such a slovenly act.

Really, probably not. Slovenly I am not; I just have too much of what author and professional organizer Peter Walsh calls "lazy clutter." Walsh says it's a little more than

trash; it's all the stuff that we neglect and it accumulates over time on every flat surface in our homes. For me, its unopened junk mail, magazines, coupons and notes scribbled on scraps of paper.

I'm not a pack rat or a hoarder; I'm just guilty of piling it high. Sometimes I just plop things down. I have every intention of putting them away, but it never happens. Taking care of it all is becoming quite a chore that is sometimes stressful. I am not alone. The Huffington Post last year conducted a survey. They found that clutter is the fifth most common stress trigger; 47 percent of respondents worried that their homes were not clean or organized enough.

Americans in general have too much stuff to take care of. Consider these facts from the National Association of Organizing Professionals:

- 80 percent of the clutter in most homes is a result of disorganization, not lack of space.
- 1 in 11 American households rents a self-storage space, spending more than \$1,000 a year in rent and contributing to a multi-billion dollar industry.
- Unnecessary expenditures related to disorganization (last-minute shopping at premium prices, buying duplicates of misplaced items, rush charges, late fees, finance charges, etc.) can cost as much as 15 to 20 percent of your annual budget.
- We wear 20 percent of our clothes 80 percent of the time.

The National Soap and Detergent Association says that getting rid of excess clutter would eliminate 40 percent of the housework in an average home. And the U.S. Department of Energy notes that 25 percent of people with two-car garages don't have room to park cars inside due to clutter, and 32 percent only have room for one vehicle.

I don't rent a storage unit (although I probably could) or park in the garage (because there's too much stuff in there) and yes, I probably wear 20 percent of my clothes 80 percent of the time.

But, I'm making progress. Last month I started a de-cluttering project. I labeled three boxes: Keep, Throw Away, and Give Away. I even put some items in each, but unfortunately, some of the items in the Throw Away and Give Away boxes made their way back into the Keep box.

Clutter, clutter, clutter — there, I said it. Since I am not Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz and I don't have the power to click my heels together three times and go back to another

time, I am going to work more on eliminating the C word from my list. Well, there's always tomorrow.

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