

Why Is It So Hard to Let Go Of Stuff?

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Where does all our stuff come from, anyway, and why is it so hard to get rid of it? While one person can throw it out, or give it all away, leaving no clutter behind, another person lives surrounded eyeball high with his or her life's accumulation, unable to part with any of it. Yet another person who would like to get rid of too much stuff has no idea where or how to begin to let go of it.

Today, working as a coach, I help my clients organize inner space. I help them prioritize, plan, focus and chunk down tasks, while working to achieve their goals. In my coach's toolbox, I am grateful to have strategies, tools, and hands-on experience from the years when I worked as a professional organizer helping people to de-clutter and organize their external space.

While working as an organizer, helping people let go of too much stuff and organize what was left, I first heard about something called ADD or Attention Deficit Disorder. Back then, my clients didn't know too much more about it than I did, but they had this feeling that it had something to do with them. They knew it made de-cluttering and organizing a challenge throughout their entire lives.

Thus began my continuing education in ADD, or what the medical world refers to, today, as AD/HD. The slash indicates with or without hyperactivity. In this article, I will refer to it as both ADD and AD/HD.

I soon learned that my approach, in working with my clients, was different from that of many organizers I soon began to meet. I was interested in the boggles my clients experienced, and I was interested in how my clients might possibly be able to do this organizing thing their way and get results. I wanted to know about all of the things affecting their ability to succeed and what might help.

So, I listened and watched, working beside my clients with curiosity and objectivity. When I discovered the field of coaching, I knew that this was for me. I wanted to help people create desired change in any and every aspect of their lives.

At the same time that I was learning about coaching, I was leaning more and

more about ADD. I actively sought out information from the experts, from books, and from my best teachers--my clients. I could clearly see the effects that ADD had on one's thinking, planning, and maintaining. I realized that the challenge of clutter and of letting go was not an external problem, it was an internal one, as well.

Today, we know that AD/HD, as well as, learning disabilities (LD), depression and head injury are some of the conditions that affect brain wiring and brain chemistry. These brain differences frequently complicate one's ability to let go of stuff, organize what's left, and stick with the often less than exciting task of completing things.

They affect the machine part of the brain. This in turn affects the mind part of the brain, the part of the brain that *wants* to have order, that *desires* to live with less stress, and *imagines* a more beautiful and satisfying environment. Sometimes, the machine part of the brain and the mind are at war or at least in conflict.

As if having one of the conditions mentioned above, isn't enough to affect one's ability to de-clutter and organize, there is yet another layer of challenge—temperament and personality. Temperament is a part of your personality. An aspect of temperament that you are likely familiar with has to do with introversion and extroversion, but that is only one aspect.

For the most part, you were born with your own temperament and certain aspects of your personality. It is the way you naturally or innately tend to orient towards people, things and tasks. Yes, your personality has been shaped by life experience. However, you have built-in preferences regarding how you see the world, how you take it in, and how you process what you experience. These preferences are not about skills that you learned or the ultimate decisions you make in life. They are simply traits that travelled with you through the birth canal into the light of day, and in many ways they affect how you see the light of day.

You can learn more about your temperament or personality by taking the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). This is a widely respected tool, administered by many professionals in different settings to help individuals learn more about themselves at work, home and in relationships. You can take an online version of the MBTI for free. It will reveal half of your Type. They will ask you to pay a modest fee to receive the full assessment. There are also books that can help you understand your personal type better. Refer to the resource list.

Another tool that many people enjoy and learn from, regarding understanding aspects of their personality, is the Enneagram. You can find helpful information about the Enneagram, online, as well.

So, exactly how does your temperament or personality affect how you deal with the task of de-cluttering and the challenge of organizing? I want to share with

you, my very own unscientific temperament/personality sorter learned from working side by side with people in the midst of their clutter challenges. This is not going to be a description of the productive helpful side of these personality traits. It is going to be about the challenging side of these traits, described with a light touch.

Here are six types of collectors or clutterers and the challenges each type has with stuff, i.e., paper, books, emails—read and unread, and online files of information. I suspect you will recognize someone you know who falls into one of these categories. You just might find yourself among them.

The Unscientific Collector Clutterer Typology

The Environmentalist

This first category or type includes a growing number of individuals. Given the critical need to protect our environment and manage our resources, one could justify how this individual's passionate world view is important to our very survival. However, individuals who have this personality trait, probably walked the earth long before the concept of recycling and ecology became as important and relevant, as it is today.

Environmentalists can't bear to part with anything that might add waste to our planet. It is truly hard for them to throw things out, since letting go also means giving up something potentially reusable, and they can find a use and an environmental excuse for keeping almost everything. In fact, I think the concept of recycling was invented so that the environmentalist could save even more things.

Environmentalists hate throwing things out. One might say that they carry the waste of the world on their shoulders.

Yesterday's Paper Mystic, Today's Internet Junkie

Paper mystics find giving up printed material impossible, because every word and every page holds potential meaning in their life or might be important for someone else, some day, like the guy down the block. If they should lose or throw out a certain article, magazine or book, they might never get it back again. The very thought of throwing out those stacks of unread material which might contain the answer to the whereabouts of the holy grail or the definitive answer to the origins of the universe is tantamount to sacrilege and is unbearable to consider.

The paper mystic of yesterday is morphing into today's *Internet Junkie*. Internet junkies collect information in online files. They collect blog sites and news feeds and save links to all the information available in the universe. Unfortunately, their

collecting possibilities are limitless. Their available space and time is cluttered with way too many distracting possibilities. What's more, they haven't yet read any of this saved stuff. It's all about waiting for the future, when they will someday soon, but not now, have time to read it or pass it on. Paper mystic or internet junkie, both are stuck on the written word and stuck on collecting it in all its forms.

The Archivist

The archivists experience intense religious attachment to anything old. They enjoy remembering the past by holding onto a letter, written years ago, a faded photo, a favorite item of clothing, or some small trinket.

I had a distant relative who was an archivist. She had, among the miscellaneous items hanging on the pegboard wall of her kitchen, a green plastic pint container, the kind that holds the berries you buy from the grocery store. Each time I sat in her kitchen, I never asked her what significance this item held for her. I just stared and wondered who was going to be the lucky person to inherit it.

Archivists are curators of their own personal uncategorized museum of artifacts. They have a fondness for the good old days. They often believe that what they are storing will have some future value and meaning to others, usually, some poor unsuspecting relative. It's now and what once was that matters most to them. It's not really about the future and who inherits their stuff.

The Touchy-Feely.

The touch-feelies likes to be surrounded by a certain amount of stuff, which they can see and touch. It gives them great comfort. For the touchy-feely, every possession has a feeling or story associated with it. Therefore, they can't bear to part with any of these items. It makes them feel good when they find a forgotten item buried in heaps of other forgotten items. At the same time, staunchly believing that this is comforting, the touch-feely person isn't at all happy living with too much stuff.

The touch-feely has to watch out, or they just might find themselves collecting cats, dogs, bunnies, stuffed animals or even green plastic pint containers.

The Artisan

The ever-creative and inventive artisan sees the unlimited possibilities for turning collected materials, including other people's trash, into mobiles, sculptures, furnishings, clothing, holiday decorations and various and sundry objects d'art. It is hard for the artisan not to see every cast off object as a future work of art. Focused on the future, the present gets over-filled with possibilities. The artisan's imagination never ends, but available space does.

Sandra Felton, author of several books, and creator of the organization, Messies Anonymous, <http://www.messies.com/>, said that she once took the plastic stay from a bra, (*indeed*, this was many years ago), bent one end into a hook shape and said to herself, "This could hang on the Christmas tree." Luckily, the rational side of her brain kicked in and put a stop to this musing.

Artisans are often very sensitive people. They don't wish to have their creativity restricted. They have nightmares that other people or entities, like schools and corporations, might try to crush or restrain them. Having the artisan's eye is both a blessing and a curse. It is a burden being an artist, always focused on possibilities and compelled to fill space with future-oriented materials. It is challenging for the artisan to trust that letting go, editing, and artful containing is not about restraining, but actually, about liberation.

The Perfectionist

Perfectionists hide behind stacks and stacks of paper and old stuff. From the outside looking in, one would never entertain the thought that they are perfectionists, but the perfectionists know themselves very well. They won't even get started on letting go and clearing out clutter, because they cannot do it perfectly.

Perfectionists cause themselves a great deal of pain, and they are always surprised to read about themselves in articles like this. Like some rare species, they didn't think anybody could possibly recognize them, camouflaged in the jungle of can't let go and too much stuff.

Perfectionists get stuck looking toward the future, wanting, and silently despairing. They can imagine the beauty of a de-cluttered and de-stressed environment. It lures them, but they cannot figure out how to get to that picture perfect place. So, they just give up even trying.

The Procrastinator

I feel the need to describe this last category, not as a seventh temperament or personality type, but as a category needing recognition. Procrastinators are found among each of the previous collector clutter types.

Procrastinators look lazy to all those around them. They look as if they just don't care, or as if they have simply gotten used to living with too much stuff. Procrastinators will sometimes rationalize and defend having all their stuff, but don't be fooled, they care, and they aren't lazy. In summary, if you identify strongly with any of the six collector types, and you also have AD/HD, you are likely a procrastinator.

Figuring out where to begin, deciding what to keep, what to let go of, how to store what remains and how not to get distracted, while doing this painfully slow and not very exciting task, is truly challenging. The outside world, looking in, might label you as a procrastinator. What they don't know is that you already call yourself names. You don't need the world judging you, as well.

In Conclusion

In this unofficial typology, I have focused only on the challenges. When you read between the lines, however, each of these types are associated with a unique set of gifts. If you identify with the challenges in any one of these categories, own the gift part of it, as well. Understand that the way you see the world is valuable and important to all of us. Owning the gift part is a responsibility. Accept who you are, let blame fall away, focus on your desire to create and enjoy a less stressed, de-cluttered, beautiful and functional space, whatever that space may be, and then get help with letting go and organizing what's left.

Getting Help with the Challenges

What can you do? Find support. Find yourself a professional organizer or a coach with organizational skills and training. There are organizers skilled in working with individuals who are chronically disorganized. There are organizers and coaches experienced in working with clients who have AD/HD.

If you can't afford the services of a coach or an organizer, look closer to home. Scan Craigslist online for someone who might already be trying to find a client like you to help. Or put an ad in Craigslist and describe exactly what you are looking for in a helper or teammate. Decide what you can afford. There are neighbors and even relatives, who are good at organizing. Be willing to try anything out for two hours. Don't commit to a whole day of letting go and organizing, until you know that both you, and the person helping you, are up to it.

There is magic in working with someone. De-cluttering requires sensitivity, honesty and humor. Find someone whose eyebrows won't hit the ceiling when they survey your particular collection. Choose someone who is non-judgmental, who will include you in the de-cluttering process and in organizing the stuff that stays, and find someone who smiles now and then.

Here's yet another idea, form a Clutter-Free or Getting Clear support group with one other person or a few. Consider neighbors, networking groups, and members of your church or synagogue to locate individuals willing to form an informal self-coaching group, or form a Meet-Up group. Decide how often you want to meet, weekly or bi-weekly, and for how long you would like to commit to work together, three months or six months? Establish some simple rules about how you want the group to run, and get started.

Resource List

Organizations and Websites

Adult Attention Deficit Disorder Association
<http://www.add.org/>?

Institute for Challenging Disorganization (formerly National Study Group for Chronic Disorganization)
<http://www.challengingdisorganization.org/>

National Association of Professional Organizers can provide you with organizers in your area who are skilled in meeting your specific needs.
<http://www.napo.net/who/>

Books and Online Tools

Baron, Renee, *What Type Am I? Discover Who You Really Are*, Penguin Books, 1998

Books by Sandra Felton – <http://www.messies.com/products/books/>

Humanmetrics, The Jung Typology Test
<http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes1.htm>

Introduction to the Enneagram
<http://www.enneagraminstitute.com/intro.asp>

Kiersey, D. and Bates, M., *Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types*, Prometheus Nemesis Book Company, Del Mar, CA, 1984

Craigslist - Search www.craigslist for a helper or place an ad.

Meet Up – Form a group that shares a common interest and find a space to meet.
<http://www.meetup.com/>