

Banish Clutter Forever

How the Toothbrush Principle will change your life

by

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Introduction

Have you always wanted to be one of the glamorous people in those ‘lifestyle’ ads? The ones who look flawless and exist in a perfect, comfortable and luxurious environment? They always seem to be relaxing don’t they? Or perhaps your dreams are more modest? Do you just wish the physical chaos in your house wasn’t making it so hard for you to get the simplest thing done? Do both of these visions of your possible future seem impossible to reach?

Living in a well organised and even very tidy space, all the time, without spending huge amounts of time maintaining it, is not just possible, but is actually easier and less stressful than living in chaos. Yes, read that sentence again. Not just possible, but once you have the principles in place, it is **EASIER**. I know, because I have lived that way for many years and helped many of my friends to do so too. I wasn’t born knowing how to do that, either. There is no such thing as having a ‘tidy gene’. Tidiness (or the ability to be well organised- things don’t have to look tidy if you don’t want them to) is a skill which is usually unconsciously learned, but it can be consciously acquired whatever age you are. I discovered how to do that and I’ve set out all the principles I discovered here for you, in the easiest system possible. Perhaps you don’t believe that I was ever messy. Or perhaps you think your mess is just far worse than I can imagine. Not so. Here is a little of my story.

I grew up in an incredibly untidy inefficient household. Both the systems for organising time and for organising things were very chaotic. As a child, I wondered how other people managed to live differently.

I lived with my extended family in an old and crumbling Victorian house. We had originally rented one floor and gradually taken over another. One whole room on that top floor – one of the biggest lightest rooms in the house - was filled from floor to ceiling with junk and furniture. As long as I could remember no one had gone into it although I had peeped into it once. I longed to know what was in there. I imagined, as a seven year old, that I would find some treasure that had been overlooked. I wanted to have an adventure in it and I was sure that tangle of furniture legs would be my Amazonian forest.

Money was very very tight in my family. We rented that draughty, broken down and difficult-to-keep clean house with lead pipes, broken sash windows and peeling paint. As a child I thought that the reason that our household felt so chaotic was the fact that the house was so bad. When the council decided to knock the whole block down and promised to re-house us in a newly refurbished home, I dreamed of having my own room instead of a sharing a

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bed in a sort of bed/sitting room with my mother and my younger sister. I dreamed of privacy and most of all, I dreamed of living in a beautiful and tidy space.

My mother had stored away umpteen things that were ‘too good to use now’ with the promise that we would use them in the new house. I hated the chaos. I hated the way I could never find anything. I hated the way it wasn’t safe to put something down because someone would move it and you’d have to spend hours looking for it. I hated the way we put things by and never enjoyed the good things we had. I was sure this wouldn’t happen in the new house. The new house was to be the promised land.

When I was 12, the council finally fulfilled their promise. And a couple of very surprising things happened. First of all, the day I’d waited for when I could explore the junk room never came. My mother never even unlocked it. Who knows what was in there? She just couldn’t face sorting it out and left everything to be destroyed and taken away with the rubble. She had told me it was full of antiques, and as the room had got filled up in the 1960s when many people sold their old fashioned furniture for peanuts, it quite possibly was. We were never given the chance to benefit from their use or from their sale because she was overwhelmed with our other, very tatty possessions.

The other interesting thing that happened was that when we finally got to our new home, there was a room for everyone. However, my mother filled her room with spare furniture and other items and moved into my room. So my room was never beautiful or tidy or coordinated. I was very disappointed. I noticed that other family members also compulsively filled their bedrooms with junk that they never used... to the point where there was hardly any floor space. The cellar was packed; The attics were packed; The cupboards were bursting. It was as chaotic as ever, even though we had had a fresh start, within three months of moving in.

This was my first lesson about clutter, although I didn’t know it at the time. Clutter isn’t caused by lack of time or space, but by indecision and the lack of a good system. It builds itself to match the exact blueprint inside the head of the person whose home it is, in the same way as a builder will lay one brick on top of another according to the architect’s plans. In my mother’s case, she also had a layer of myths and resistances (part of her emotional clutter) which stopped her ever changing her mindset and finding better ways to organise things. One of the purposes of this book is to build new and efficient blueprints for you so that your well-organised space stays that way easily.

Despite the fact that this household is the one I grew up in, today I’m self employed, work from home, travel a lot for business purposes, and I’ve learned step-by-step how to organise my house, my business and my time properly in order to survive. I want you to know that I’ve seen clutter (and the dirt it can collect) far worse than yours and lived in it, and I’ve learned very consciously how to stop creating it. You can learn to do that too, whatever your inherited patterns are.

I rarely lose anything, forget appointments, or miss deadlines. My house is very tidy most of the time. And I hardly ever spend more than 10 minutes a day tidying up. Most days, I don't tidy up at all. Okay, I live alone, but it wasn't that different when I was married. If you are a Mum, or self employed, I would guess you already manage a minor miracle in scheduling. Being tidy as well probably seems like one step too far. But think of the long term benefits if you took it on. Wouldn't your life run more smoothly, your house be easier to clean, and far nicer to invite friends to and relax in when your children are in bed, or your work is done, at the end of the day? Wouldn't there be less stress and less expense if things were where you expected to find them and not broken, dirty or lost? Wouldn't you have more time to do what you love, or to focus on the really important things in your life if you weren't holding the mess back all the time? But I'm guessing you don't have a way to create this at the moment, do you? Well, I'd like to help.

I think I have the answers you need. I have a really simple system here that I have been sharing with my friends for years. One that will help you to solve your own individual recurring clutter jams whether they're on the scale of a nudge in a car park or a four lane pile up.

How to use this book

I recommend that you read the first two chapters of this book to get a feel for the method, and try out the Bathroom exercise in Chapter two before you go any further. That will be the quickest way for you to see how effectively this approach can work for you. Reading the next four chapters and the 'Maintenance and troubleshooting' section will help you to banish any inherited tendencies you have to create clutter. Once you understand the basic principles however, this book is designed to be held in your hand if necessary and to 'talk' you through the process in each specific room as you clear. It is not obligatory that you clear rooms in the order that the chapters are arranged but it is recommended, especially if you are new to being organised, have trouble letting things go, or you have the whole house to sort out.

This isn't a book of hints and tips on how to get organised and it won't work if you try the method out in a piecemeal fashion in any particular area you've decided to clear. It isn't a quick fix and if you want to keep your home clutter free, you will need patience while you give yourself time to absorb the new ways of thinking you will have to adopt. On the other hand, once you've mastered the method, you won't find yourself having to have huge 'crash diet' type clear outs which only last for a short time, anymore. And you won't need to spend lots of time everyday tidying up. This simple system will enable you to live clutter free forever.

Chapter one

What is the toothbrush principle?

Something I noticed that was common to most people who live in utter chaos with all their junk was this: they wanted to be different, they were ashamed of their mess, but they didn't know how to change. When the mess got too much, they tidied up, and for a day or so that was the way it stayed. Then one of two things would happen. Either they would need something that was right at the back of the cupboard and have to pull everything out to get it and be so fed up or in a hurry that they didn't put it back or, you guessed it, they wouldn't be able to remember where it was. In 24 hours the mess would be back and they'd have given up in disgust. Tidying up without a larger system in mind is much like crash dieting. It looks very good in the short term, but it doesn't solve the problem in the long term.

Something else I noticed though was this. I'd never come across one of them who ever lost their toothbrush. Or had to 'tidy it away'! Their instinct to create a system which was efficient and easy to maintain around something really essential and basic like brushing their teeth was already automatic for them. Similarly with their tea mugs, kettle, milk and sugar. I have hardly ever been to a house, however chaotic and messy, where the person inviting me has not been able to find the materials to make me a cup of tea in five minutes! Why? Because these systems are essential and because they are pretty standard from house to house, therefore our clutterholics had learned them. But these systems also contain every principle you'll ever need to make your house well organised *and to keep it well organised* effortlessly. That is the crucial piece of information that you may have been missing. What I am trying to say is, *you already know how to do this!*

'Well organised' versus 'tidy'

I use the words 'well organised' advisedly. I didn't say tidy. You can use this system to be tidy if you wish. It will work in the most modern and minimalist of homes, but the point is that you may not wish to. If you like having 'knick-knacks' and lots of visual clutter around the place and it makes you feel good, fair enough, why not? Human beings seem to fall into two categories in this regard. Those who like visual 'quietness' in order to think well, and those who function better with a bit of visual stimulus. Neither one of these preferences is superior to the other. They are simply a reflection of your temperament. The people who like visual quietness experience clutter as a competing 'noise' and it is as unpleasant to them as having a siren going off

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whilst they are trying to talk to you. Others can feel miserable without a bit of 'cosy' stimulation via their visual sense.

I am not suggesting that you become tidy if you don't want to, or that you sort out any room that (however junk filled) you are happy to live in, as it is. This book has solutions which are designed to make your house serve you better. Serve **you**. This is the point which most clutterholics forget. The reason to sort your possessions out is so that your house enables you to get on with doing what you love to do. Wouldn't that feel great?

You bought your home (or rented it). You work to pay the mortgage (or rent). You clean it and maintain it. Shouldn't it work just as hard to make you feel good? It can do so much more than merely shelter you. It can also be an inspiring space that nurtures you and provides a good backdrop for you to enjoy yourself. At the very least it should be organised in a way that allows you do your daily and weekly tasks quickly and easily. Sounds a bit one way otherwise, doesn't it?

So what is the principle?

Think about what you do when you move house. I should imagine that one of the first things you unpack is your toothbrush. It's the same when you check into a hotel. You put your toilette or wash bag by the sink. You set this system up in some form immediately even if, in the rest of the hotel room, it looks like a hurricane has hit your luggage. When you moved into your current house, on day one, you unpacked your tooth mug and put your toothbrush and toothpaste in it right by the sink in your bathroom. And there it has stayed ever since. How were you able to set up such an effective system so quickly? I know it sounds daft and incredibly simple but I want you to look at how that simple system works.

Why did you put the tooth mug, toothbrush and toothpaste by the sink? Because you have a task to do everyday which requires those three items and only those. You put them by the sink so that everything you needed for the task would be within arm's reach of where the task has to be performed. And the crucial factor here is that because everything you needed was within arm's length of where you do the task, it was easy to replace them there without thinking.

Think about that for a minute. You are never tempted put your toothbrush down somewhere else, are you? You never throw it in the bath for now and put the toothpaste on the cistern and vow to tidy them up later and then lose one or other of them in the meantime. You never forget where your toothbrush belongs and put it down somewhere random because you don't have time to, or can't find, a space for it now. But there are many other items that you regularly put down in random places, and lose, and make the tasks you need to accomplish with them hard to complete. You aren't making it

easy for yourself to be as tidy with them as you are with your toothbrush, and this is where the problem with your current system lies.

But let's go back to your incredible success. You have maintained here, one tiny but perfectly organised and efficient system, all your life, with virtually no thought whatsoever. You learned it as a child, and you maintained it because as an adult when you left home, you made the pragmatic decision that other people would only want to know you if your teeth were clean and consequently your breath was fresh. Even the most diehard clutter collectors learn this system and use it. But the trouble is, they never look at how it evolved, or why it works. They never look at it as a principle, just as a 'thing you do'. And so they miss the way in which it could apply to every other thing in their house and help them to stay well organised, just as effortlessly.

So how and why does it work?

What you automatically do with your toothbrush, actually involves two concepts; 'Zoning' and 'Completion'. They are interlinked and it is hard to get tidy and stay tidy without *both* of them in place together. This is why that 'blitz' tidying you do before your friends come round doesn't last. Let's look at these two ideas more closely.

Zoning

This concept involves placing things needed for a particular task where they will be used. Ideally as close to that place as possible. This means that you are more likely to replace them correctly without thinking after you have finished with them since you are already there, and, of course, you find them easily next time you need to do that particular task. Notice I didn't say place 'like with like'. That can look logical but actually trip you up. I don't put all my beauty products together in the bathroom. I put each one exactly where I use it - that's tidier than it sounds.....