

Script – Print – Clutter’s Grip on Our Mental Health

Too much “stuff” can lead to stress and anxiety

Clutter is all around us. It's the clothes scattered throughout the kids' bedrooms, stacks of paperwork piled high on our desks at work, even fast food wrappers strewn around in the backseat of the car. While society may lead us to believe that we need more “stuff” to make us happy, in reality it's making us more anxious, frazzled and often times depressed.

“I look at clutter in two different ways,” says Loni Nolte, a behavioral medicine provider for OSF HealthCare. “I look at the clutter we carry around in our heads, when our thoughts are racing and overwhelming to us. I also look at it as the physical component when we have stuff hanging around needlessly, overtaking our functional space – a counter where we need to cook, a sink where we need to be able to use water and worst case people storing stuff in their ovens, which is pretty scary to think about. When we get busier or we have emotional attachments that aren't feeling fulfilled, we do tend to hang on to extra stuff.”

Dealing with clutter while trying to manage life during a pandemic only compounds matters, says Nolte. Especially at home, where adults and kids have spent a fair amount of time together, working and doing school remotely.

“So we try to create regular routines that help us stay on track better with our clutter and our responsibilities,” she says. “Let's face it – we're busy people here. Everyone is used to having to cram a lot into their days and that's why COVID has had such an impact, because our routines went away. People had to re-sort their clutter and set up new work systems.”

According to Nolte, there are many reasons why people tend to hang on to things for too long: sentimental reasons, the fear of letting go, emotional attachment and impulse decisions all contribute to the daily clutter in our lives. To better assess the situation, Nolte suggests creating a framework to help you decide the best way to tackle your clutter.

“Is this something I'm still using? Is this something that still functions? If you're hanging on to a McDonald's toy from when you were eight and you're now 30, unless there is a real emotional attachment to it, it's probably something you don't need in your life,” says Nolte. “There are times people have that unrealistic thought in their heads that ‘I might need this,’ ‘I might be able to fix this,’ ‘it's still good.’ But you haven't fixed it, it's taking up space and you've bought three new ones since then; that's clutter.”

The beginning of the year, especially during the cold, winter months is the best time to create a plan and begin to organize your space, whether it's at home or the office. For example, take time each week to prepare a box of items you no longer need or use and deliver it to the local Goodwill or Salvation Army. Another helpful tip is to rearrange your closets periodically and group things by color or by style. If you notice that you haven't worn something or you don't like it any longer, then it's time to re-gift or pass on that item.

“Clutter bogs you down,” says Nolte. “It takes more energy carrying all that stuff around with you, thinking about it, worrying about it, wondering about it. Whereas when we force ourselves

to become logical with it and combine our emotion with our logic, that's when we tend to become more successful because we're a well-blended individual that way."

So now is the time to do a physical and mental cleansing of your life. Go through your home and throw away any paper or broken items. Recycle magazines, for example, and donate or sell clothes, old toys, books, and household items. Remove the mental clutter by spending less time on social media, limiting screen time, rid yourself of toxic relationships and work on living a healthy lifestyle – exercise regularly, drink more water, get more sleep and limit your alcohol and caffeine intake.

"Slow down, tidy up your space, and take a few minutes to regroup and breathe or step outside so you can bring yourself back down," says Nolte. "Keep routines. The more routine you are the more successful you will be in the things you need to do. And that also means self-care. I find people do so much better when they allow themselves that 30 minutes to read a book, talk with a friend or whatever the case may be."

For more information on behavioral and mental health services, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).