University of Richmond Employee Wellness

Can Decluttering Your Home Make You Happier?

“Tidying can transform your life.” This is the beguiling promise from Japanese decluttering evangelist Marie Kondo. Millions have tuned in to watch her in action on Netflix in the hope of learning how to emulate Kondo’s brand of minimalistic bliss.

Her “KonMari” method of decluttering is straightforward – tidy your home by category instead of by room, pull everything out before sorting it out, take in the full horror of your materialism, and keep only things that are useful or “spark joy”. Nothing is safe from her mission to reduce the amount of stuff in our lives – clothes, kitchen utensils, and paperwork are sifted through, assessed and discarded.

For most of us, piles of clutter may not seem like a big deal. It might mean we struggle to find a clear surface to put a glass down on occasionally or we end up stubbing a toe on a carelessly misplaced pile of sports equipment, but it doesn’t make our life any worse. In fact, most of us quite like our stuff – it helps to turn the buildings we live in into homes and can give us a rush of satisfaction.

Most of us may not feel so strongly about our possessions, but things that are tied to emotionally significant memories can nevertheless represent a piece of your identity that is difficult to discard. When you struggle to part with that jersey you wore on the junior varsity basketball team, for example, you are not really clinging to the shirt itself. Instead, you’re hanging onto the memories represented by that now-tattered item of clothing you probably won’t wear again. Its sentimental value may make giving the jersey away feel like giving up a piece of your own identity.

But do cluttered spaces subconsciously make us less happy?

Certainly, it seems living in an untidy space can negatively affect many areas of our lives. Stephanie McMains and Sabine Kastner, psychologists at Princeton University, found that clutter can reduce our ability to focus on a task, which may explain why some people cannot stand to work at a messy desk.

When our surroundings feel full, it can also make us feel more anxious and stressed, with one study by psychologists Rena Repetti and Darby Saxby at University of California, Los Angeles, finding mothers living in messy houses had higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Clutter can also make it harder to fall asleep and can even make us more likely to reach for junk food, according to one study, which found participants using a “chaotic kitchen” ate twice as many cookies as those in an organized kitchen.

Sophie Scott, a cognitive neuroscientist at University College London, agrees that tidying up, whether that’s color-coordinating a bookshelf or overhauling a wardrobe, acts as a reward, which increases the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine, also known as the brain’s “pleasure chemical” in the brain. She warns, however, that while a good clean out can make us happy, it will only improve our mood if we set ourselves manageable goals.

Nevertheless, there are benefits to clutter. It often represents nostalgia or important memories. And one study by researchers at the University of Minnesota found a messy environment can make us more creative, whereas orderly surroundings make us more likely to conform to traditional expectations.

As Albert Einstein – the owner of a notoriously messy desk – is often quoted, although perhaps apocryphally, as saying: “If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?”

Source: BBC
Healthy Cooking: Healthier Carrot Cake Banana Bread with Cream Cheese Frosting

Ingredients:
- 1 1/2 cups whole wheat flour
- 1/2 cup quick oats
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- 1/4 tsp. nutmeg
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 2 very ripe bananas, mashed
- 1/2 coconut sugar or brown sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 tsp. vanilla
- 1/4 cup unsweetened applesauce
- 1 cup shredded carrots (about 2 carrots)
- 1/3 cup milk of choice
- 2 tbsp. melted and cooled coconut oil
- 1/3 cup chopped pecans or walnuts

For the frosting:
- 4 oz. cream cheese, softened
- 1/3 cup powdered sugar
- 1/4 tsp. cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp. vanilla extract

Directions:
1. Preheat oven to 350F. Spray a loaf pan with nonstick cooking spray.
2. In a large bowl, whisk together whole wheat flour, oats, baking soda, cinnamon, and salt.
3. In a medium bowl, add bananas, sugar, egg, and vanilla, and mix until creamy and combined. Add in applesauce and milk, then fold in carrots. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and mix until just combined. Don’t overmix! Gently fold in coconut oil and 1/4 cup chopped nuts.
4. Pour into the loaf pan and bake for 50-55 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean with a few crumbs. Start checking around 45 minutes.
5. Remove from oven. After 15 minutes, remove from loaf pan and allow to cool on a wire rack until cooled completely.
6. To make frosting: beat cream cheese, powdered sugar, cinnamon, and vanilla together until smooth. Spread over cooled bread. Sprinkle 2 tablespoons of chopped nuts on top. Enjoy!
Educational Corner: Seasonal Allergies, Nip Them in the Bud!

Spring means flower buds and blooming trees — and if you're one of the millions of people who have seasonal allergies, it also means sneezing, congestion, a runny nose and other bothersome symptoms. Seasonal allergies — also called hay fever and allergic rhinitis — can make you miserable. But before you settle for plastic flowers and artificial turf, try these simple strategies to keep seasonal allergies under control.

Reduce your exposure to allergy triggers.
To reduce your exposure to the things that trigger your allergy signs and symptoms (allergens):
- Stay indoors on dry, windy days. The best time to go outside is after a good rain, which helps clear pollen from the air.
- Delegate lawn mowing, weed pulling and other gardening chores that stir up allergens.
- Remove clothes you've worn outside and shower to rinse pollen from your skin and hair.
- Don't hang laundry outside — pollen can stick to sheets and towels.

Take extra steps when pollen counts are high.
Seasonal allergy signs and symptoms can flare up when there's a lot of pollen in the air. These steps can help you reduce your exposure:
- Check your local TV or radio station, your local newspaper, or the Internet for pollen forecasts and current pollen levels.
- If high pollen counts are forecasted, start taking allergy medications before your symptoms start.
- Close doors and windows at night or any other time when pollen counts are high.
- Avoid outdoor activity in the early morning when pollen counts are highest.

Keep indoor air clean. There's no miracle product that can eliminate all allergens from the air in your home, but these suggestions may help:
- Use the air conditioning in your house and car.
- If you have forced air heating or air conditioning in your house, use high-efficiency filters and follow regular maintenance schedules.
- Keep indoor air dry with a dehumidifier.

Try and over-the-counter remedy. Several types of nonprescription medications can help ease allergy symptoms. They include:
- Oral antihistamines. Antihistamines can help relieve sneezing, itching, a runny nose and watery eyes. Examples of oral antihistamines include loratadine (Claritin, Alavert), cetirizine (Zyrtec Allergy) and fexofenadine (Allegra Allergy).
- Decongestants. Oral decongestants such as pseudoephedrine (Sudafed, Afrinol, others) can provide temporary relief from nasal stuffiness. Decongestants also come in nasal sprays, such as oxymetazoline (Afrin) and phenylephrine (Neo-Synephrine). Only use nasal decongestants for a few days in a row.

When remedies aren't enough, see your doctor.
For many people, avoiding allergens and taking over-the-counter medications is enough to ease symptoms. But if your seasonal allergies are still bothersome, don't give up. A number of other treatments are available.

For some people, allergy shots (allergen immunotherapy) can be a good option. Also known as desensitization, this treatment involves regular injections containing tiny amounts of the substances that cause your allergies. Over time, these injections reduce the immune system reaction that causes symptoms. For some allergies, treatment can be given as tablets under the tongue.

Source: Mayo Clinic
Fresh herbs are such a simple way to add a punch of flavor to your food. If you ever shy away from the herb section at the grocery store – don’t! Utilize these ingredients to your benefit in your home cooking. For a relatively low cost, pick up a couple of herbs on your next shopping trip or try your hand at gardening by cultivating a few types of herbs in pots or garden beds.

**Parsley:** my personal favorite, buy the Italian parsley (also called flat leaf) rather than the curly. It has a brighter flavor. Pick the leaves off the stems, chop, and add to your Italian, Mediterranean, Greek dishes. Try this [pasta dish](#) for a punch of parsley.

**Cilantro:** you either love it or you hate it. While some think it has a soapy flavor, cilantro brightens up any dish that has a spicy or deep flavor, think along the lines of spicy pork tacos. Don’t be fooled at the store, it looks similar to parsley but cilantro has a thinner texture and more feathery edges. [Zhough](#) is an addictive spicy cilantro sauce you’ll want to put on everything.

**Basil:** the ultimate companion to a beautiful summer tomato, basil is synonymous with Italian cuisine. Use this fragrant herb to complete a Caprese salad, top off a tomato sauce, or make fresh [pesto](#). Did you know that there are different varieties of Basil? One such variety is [Thai Basil](#) which is often used in Southeast Asian cuisines and have a slightly different appearance.

**Mint:** this herb grows ferociously in a garden and provides beautiful, fresh flavor to salads, sauces, and drinks. Aside from a few classic cocktails using mint, use this herb to make punchy sauces like [Yogurt Mint Sauce](#) and [Mint Chutney](#), or summery salads like [Watermelon, Feta, and Mint Salad](#).

Aside from the many culinary applications, herbs can provide some health benefits too. Herbs (and spices) can provide antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects as well as may have some properties to help affect cognition and mood. Not to mention, herbs are a way to heighten tastes of food without adding extra salt, sugar, or fats – three things that can negatively impact our overall health if we overuse them in our diets.

Lastly, while fresh herbs do have a brighter flavor, if you’re in a pinch, dried herbs will elevate a dish too. Just remember, dried herbs are more potent, so you’ll use less of the dried herb compared to what you would have added if it was fresh.