

# CLUTTER THERAPY

Real couples, professional organizers, and relationship experts  
share ideas so that clashing styles can happily coexist.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

You love your partner. But you don't love your partner's stuff. (Or your partner's aversion to *your* stuff.) "Clutter is a common issue for couples," says therapist Anna Osborn, the founder of Life Unscripted Counseling. In fact, nearly half of all couples who live together argue over clutter, one survey found. Seven percent have the argument *daily*.

One reason the topic is so charged is that "our possessions help make up our identity," says Robin Coulter, PhD, professor of marketing at the University of Connecticut, who studies our complicated relationship with belongings. "A T-shirt may look ready for the ragbag, but it can hold significant emotional meaning," she explains. "An attempt to throw it out can seem like a personal attack." The tension, Osborn says, is less about the stuff and more about the emotion that gets assigned to it. Alas, this kind of conflict is not going to be defused with a quick run to the Container Store.

Our individual attitudes toward how we manage possessions often have deep roots, Coulter says. For some, the objects provide a sense of security. For others, excess can cause stress. But it is possible for different approaches to live in harmony. Just consider the cases on these pages.



## CLUTTER CONFLICT 1

### Clean Surfaces vs. Landing Zones

**THE COUPLE:** Mandy and David Y.,  
Minneapolis

**THE TENSION:** "I used to get irritated when my husband would leave receipts, magazines, and his lunch bag on the kitchen island," Mandy says. "I care about the aesthetics of our space, so when I see piles, I get anxious."

**THE SOLUTION:** "We agreed to declare no-fly zones," Mandy says. "Anything on the island and desk has to be cleared by the end of the evening. That lets my husband put items there when he's arriving home, and it alleviates my stress because I know the spaces won't be cluttered forever." The trick is setting up a system for those landing spots so the more

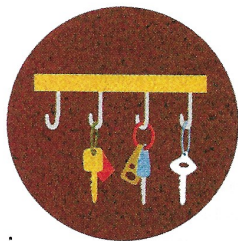
organized partner feels there's order, explains Cena Block, a certified professional organizer and the founder of Sane Spaces. Any new setup should be as easy to follow as the old one so the habit sticks (and so the partner who likes to come home and drop their stuff doesn't feel totally aggrieved). Mandy adds that she's also focusing on gratitude: "He's in law enforcement. When I see his lunch bag on the counter, I remind myself it means he made it home safe today."

## Help for Hot Spots

**BACK DOOR:** Place a tray on a table to catch keys, phones, and other odds and ends. If space is at a premium, hang wall hooks for keys and bags.

**BEDROOM CHAIR:** Another frustratingly common pile magnet. (It's all too easy to rationalize, "I'll wear this sweatshirt tomorrow, so I'll just drape it here rather than fold it and put it away.") "A hook hung near where clothes tend to land makes it easy to rewear them," says Sara Pedersen, a professional organizer and the founder of Time to Organize.

**DINING ROOM TABLE:** After you excavate an area, put a beautiful object there as a reminder that it's now a no-dumping zone. "It acts as a visual stop sign," Pedersen says.



## CLUTTER CONFLICT 2

### The Tidier vs. The Pack Rat

**THE COUPLE:** Lisa and Steven A., Fall River, Massachusetts

**THE TENSION:** "I like to have things in their place," Lisa says. "My dad was a Portuguese immigrant, and in our house order was a sign of pride and accomplishment. My husband was raised Northern English working class. Coming from scarcity, he wants to keep everything. He buys pants, and even if he doesn't like them, he keeps them forever. If I don't wear something after two seasons, it's gone."

**THE SOLUTION:** Cede entire areas. You are not going to turn a magpie into Marie Kondo overnight, so agree on which spaces will be clutter-free and which will be anything goes, Block says. "His domain is the computer area, which I don't try to organize," Lisa says. "For everything else, I create systems."

If space is limited or the extra stuff is affecting how your household functions, work together to reduce volume. "Establish physical boundaries," says Beth Penn, author of *The Little Book of Tidying*. For example, your partner can collect mugs, but they all have to fit on one shelf. Savers may be willing to pare down but feel overwhelmed. "Volunteer to do the heavy lifting," says organizing coach Alejandra Costello, founder of Alejandra.tv. "The other person can just sit there and say yes or no as you hold up one shirt at a time."

#### UNDERSTAND THE EMOTIONS:

Your partner may be reluctant to part with stuff because of an emotional attachment. "Letting go of an item can seem like a betrayal of a relationship: *Grandma left me this sewing machine!* Or it represents memories that recall past glories," says certified professional organizer Julie Bestry, president of Best Results Organizing.

**MAKE A MEMENTO:** "My husband has played baseball since he was 5 and had stacks and stacks of old uniforms," Osborn says. "I asked if I could make a quilt out of them. Now he uses it every time he watches TV."

**GO DIGITAL:** Scan memorabilia like letters, programs, and ticket stubs, Penn says. (She likes the Evernote Scannable app.) Or take photos of soon-to-be-gone-but-not-forgotten objects and show them off in a revolving electronic frame.

#### SHOWCASE A FEW TREASURES:

Instead of keeping 15 boxes of Great Aunt Jean's belongings in the basement, display one setting of her china on a special shelf. "Often what people want is to tell the story of how something came into their lives," Bestry says. Sort through stuff together and just listen. "Once they share it, they can let the thing go."



### CLUTTER CONFLICT 3

#### My Own Stuff Organizer vs. The Whole House Organizer

**THE COUPLE:** Meg and Keith R., Grand Rapids, Michigan

**THE TENSION:** “My husband has a compartmentalized toolbox, meticulously wraps his audio cords, and sorts his Legos by color,” Meg says. “But when it came to the common areas, he had no interest. I felt like a nagging wife when I told him where to put things.”

**THE SOLUTION:** “One evening, while my husband was putting the dishes away in seemingly random places, I asked him, ‘Why did you put that bowl there?’ He replied, ‘Because it fit,’” Meg says. The solve? They labeled the shelves. “It didn’t take him any more time, and I wasn’t constantly telling him where to put things.”

**MAKE IT SIMPLE:** Label broad categories so you don’t have to endlessly refine the system. If you don’t like the look of labels, Costello says, use them as “training wheels” and remove them once you have the system down.

**PLAY TO THEIR STRENGTHS:** “Compliments go a long way,” Pedersen says. “Say, ‘You did such a great job organizing your sports gear! Can you help me find a system for the shoes?’” Or suggest they use their demonstrated skills for a similar challenge: The tool tender might do well organizing all those knives crammed in the kitchen drawer.



### CLUTTER CONFLICT 4

#### Organizing Daily vs. Only When Things Are Chaotic

**THE COUPLE:** Farrah and Phillip F., Glen Burnie, Maryland

**THE TENSION:** “My husband prefers to neaten up his personal spaces—nightstand, closet, toiletries—weekly, and I’m a daily tidier,” Farrah says.

**THE SOLUTION:** “We now spend five minutes a day tidying together,” Farrah explains. “You have to come up with rules of engagement,” Block says. “Nagging never works.”

**MAKE IT (MORE) FUN:** Agree on a regular tidying time, then put on music or a podcast. Or consider it bonding during a busy day. Set a timer so the session is satisfyingly finite—and brief.

**DIVIDE AND CONQUER:** Consider attaching a running to-do list to the fridge. Family members can check off an organizing task when they’re so inclined (rather than waiting around to be told what to do).

**TAKE THE LEAD:** If you feel the need to tidy daily but your partner doesn’t, the onus might be on you. “Some people get a cleaning high,” Pedersen says. “Go around the house with a basket each evening and collect your partner’s out-of-place stuff. Once a week, your partner clears the basket. Knowing it won’t be there forever may reduce your tension.”

### LEARN TO TALK LIKE A TEAM

**Pick a good time.** Do not tackle the subject when you are tired and cranky. “Sit down over coffee or take a walk to discuss it,” suggests therapist Debra Roberts, author of *The Relationship Protocol*.

**Lead with “I” statements.** If your partner has a different attitude toward stuff, they may not realize the Mt. Everest of hats in the hall closet gets you twitchy. First explain how the situation makes you feel, Osborn advises. Try, “I feel really upset when you put mail all over the counter, because I can’t easily cook, and cooking is how I unwind.” Speaking about your emotions in this way encourages empathy and understanding. Using “you” statements can put the other person on the defensive.

**Progress to “we” statements.** Suggest possible solutions; don’t dictate. Using “we” during the problem-solving stage of a conversation reminds the other person that you’re a team. Say, “Let’s work together to find a system so we’re not tripping over shoes when we come in the door. I have some ideas, and I’d like to hear yours.”

**Follow up.** Check back in a month to assess how the new plan is working for both of you. Meanwhile, praise progress lavishly. “It helps having a mantra to repeat silently so you don’t snap the next time you see the countertop cluttered,” Osborn says. “Try, ‘We’re on the same team.’”