

HOW DO I?: DECLUTTERING

Lots of times, when you grow up in a hoarded home, the mess is so normal, you don't recognize what's clutter and what's not. When thinking about cleaning up and decluttering your own space, it's important to define for yourself what you want your "normal" to look like. It may be "the perfect space I can escape to," but you also might just want "less stuff." Use these tips to build habits as you're allowed in your house and then you'll be ready to apply them to your own home when you move out. If you like lists, there are a bunch of checklists online for free.

Note: Be aware that really dirty or gross things may trigger you. When tackling these areas, go slowly and take lots of breaks. Be sure you wear protective gear when necessary, especially around any mold or mildew. If something is too overwhelming (mold, infestations, biohazards), it's okay to not touch that area and focus elsewhere. Some things might need professional help or adult intervention, which may not be in your control. Your safety matters more than getting everything clean.

Motivation

Cleaning isn't fun, and sometimes it isn't easy. Figure out what will work for you, especially when it comes to your mobility or physical ability.

You know yourself best; use the type of reward or motivator that works for you. The ultimate reward is a calm, peaceful space where you can breathe.

Motivators and Rewards

- Reward yourself with an episode of your favorite show between bursts of cleaning.
- Light a candle or incense if your sense of smell motivates you.
- Have a snack when you've completed 30 minutes of work or when you meet a goal, like hanging up all your clothes.
- Play a game on your phone between decluttering sessions.
- Take a short walk outside after each hour.
- Use an app. There are several apps that "reward" you for time spent cleaning.

Decluttering

Clutter can have a negative impact on your mental health; when you organize your things and get rid of stuff you don't need anymore, it can help you feel better, both mentally and physically. Clutter can be overwhelming, so much so that you can't figure out where to start. DOOM piles are a frequent problem for lots of people, not only those that live in a hoarded home. "DOOM" stands for "didn't organize, only moved." These are the piles that just seem to never find a home and just get moved, many times in their same piles, sometimes for years.

The good news is that you can keep clutter under control with a little extra attention. And once you start, it might feel so good that you'll be motivated to do a little more.

Use the Vision Board exercise in the More Than Messy Toolkit to help you visualize what you'd like your space to look like. Is it just a clean floor? Is it a totally clean zen space where you can escape the chaos of the rest of the house? Is it a place you'd feel comfortable inviting your best friend into?

Baby steps can be the key to success in decluttering. Here are some examples:

- **Start with trash.** The easiest category to declutter is actual garbage—wrappers, broken things, expired stuff. Start there before tackling harder decisions.
- **Focus on one area.** Try one corner of the room or even one drawer, at a time. Start with the area where you spend the most time or that will make the most difference to you.
- **Make three piles.** Assign them keep/organize, donate, and trash. You may not want to label these, if they will raise eyebrows in your house.
- **De-duplicate.** Do you have multiple things of one kind? Get rid of all but your favorite. Collections don't count. If you collect items thoughtfully and purposely, and they bring you joy, that's a perfectly acceptable reason to keep things. The difference between collecting and hoarding is intentionality and control—collections have boundaries and purpose.
- **Recycle.** Repurpose items already in your home to be used as storage. Do you have 43 glass jars from yogurt? Grab ten, wash them, decorate them, and store makeup brushes, cotton swabs, and other things.
- **Assign a home for everything.** Relocate items to where they make the most sense. Everything should have a home. Discipline yourself to keep things in their homes once you've used them. For example, scissors live in your desk drawer; use them and return them to their home. Shoes kicked off when you walk in can pile up; if you put them in your closet in their "home," every time, you're building healthy, clutter-reducing habits. Be aware this is one of the hardest things to rewire your brain about, but keep at it!

Tip: Search online for more examples and videos of any of the above bullets; there are SO many clever ideas out there!

One thing to try and keep in mind is to detach from the "emotion of stuff." If you got something for your birthday but you don't like it or use it anymore, it's okay to give or throw it away*. Consider this your permission.

The other thing that's important to remember is that YOU get to decide when it's "clean enough." When you and your brain feel like you can relax, that's "clean enough." This is all about bringing down your level of distress or overwhelm.

*You may need to take into consideration if the hoarder in your house will be upset by this and act accordingly. If they will notice it's gone, put it in your closet instead. Keeping the peace may be more important, and that's okay.

Pests

If pests are a problem in your home, don't keep food in your room, even wrapped, unless it's in sealed containers. Don't leave food wrappers in your trash in your room. The quicker that bugs and mice realize your room is not where to come for food, the better. You may not be able to solve the pest problem in the whole house, but there are steps you can take to make your room less attractive to them.

- Bugs and mice don't like peppermint oil; put 5 drops on a cotton ball in different places around your baseboards. Replace these each month.
- Powdered cinnamon or baby powder can keep ants away.
- Roaches hate the spice mix of onion powder, garlic, and cayenne.
- Boil water with some lemon, let it cool, and spray it to keep fleas away from your room.
- A solution of half vinegar and half water in a spray bottle is another preventive measure against bugs. Spray around baseboards. Be aware that fruit flies are attracted to vinegar.
- If you can keep your shoes off the floor, it will take away options for pests to hang out. Over-the-door racks and shelves are good solutions.
- Washing sheets in the hottest water you can (130 degrees) will kill fleas in all their life stages.
- Keep your floor clutter-free and vacuum often, reducing fun, dark places for them to hang out.



Note: These tips can help with minor pest issues in your personal space, but if your home has a serious infestation, this might require professional pest control. That's beyond your responsibility to fix.

20 Easy Ways to Declutter a Little at a Time

Overwhelm is real, and it can really prevent you from making good progress. Sometimes tricking your brain can work. If you start to feel overwhelmed, try one of these ideas:

- Make a timed cleaning playlist and clean until it's done playing.
- Count slowly to 100 and declutter until you finish.
- Sort things by color and clean one color a day or week.
- Use a calendar. If it's the 10th of the month, clean up 10 things. If it's the 18th, pick up 18 things. Do this, and you'll never have to pick up more than 31 things!
- Put your clothes in one of three places at the end of the day: closet, drawer, or laundry basket. Keeping them off the bed or floor in the first place prevents you from having to clean it up later.
- Pick up/throw away 25 items every time you enter your room.
- Call a friend and put them on speaker while you clean stuff off your floor.
- Are you a list maker? Make a list of things to do to tidy up your space and add checkboxes. Check them off as they are done. It's easy to see your progress this way!
- Use a box or small trash can in your room with a small garbage bag and make sure all your trash goes in that. Take the trash out when it gets full. Smuggle it if you have to.
- Use rubber gloves to quickly grab pet hair from fabric.
- Set a timer on your phone and clean until it goes off.
- Make your bed. Every day. It doesn't have to be perfect, but it's a good way to have order on the biggest thing in your room.
- Roll dice to see how many things you will pick up. Roll as many times as you like.
- Listen to an audiobook and listen to a chapter or two while you clean.
- Be specific about your cleaning goals. Don't say, "I'm going to clean my room." Say instead, "I'm going to clean off my bed and wash my sheets." That's much more likely to bring success and keep you motivated to meet your next goal.
- Put some music on and clean until you finish an album.
- If you're watching a show with commercials, clean during the commercials. You'd be surprised how much you can do in two minutes. And at the end of your show, your space will feel more comfortable.
- Don't think about it; just do it. Just make your bed. Just put your shoes away. Just take your trash out.
- Have a timed contest with a sibling in your own rooms to see who can clean the most.
- Remove one thing a day. Give or throw it away. Until you are left with only the things you really love or need.

Set Yourself Up for Success

Set a Goal

- Use the Vision Board exercise to determine what success looks like to you. The only right answer is what YOU want to strive for.

Make Progress

- Use the Energy Check-in, Creating My Calm Corner, and Gratitude & Goals exercises to help you determine what you have time and energy for. If you get overwhelmed or can't seem to find motivation for a few days, try the When I Get Stuck exercise.
- It doesn't all have to happen at once, but making progress will build motivation to do more in the future. Before you know it, you'll have a room you like spending time in.

Build on Your Success

- Once you have areas neat and tidy and looking like you had envisioned, you may want to revisit your Vision Board and make some adjustments you hadn't thought of.
- Try to maintain what you've accomplished. Habits take time to build, and it's easy to slide backward. If you do, it's both okay and totally normal.

Accessibility Considerations

Decluttering can be physically demanding. Adapt these tips to your abilities:

- If bending/lifting is difficult, use grabber tools or ask for help with low items.
- If standing for long periods is hard, work while sitting or take frequent breaks.
- If decision-making is challenging (executive function), use the simple three-pile method (keep, trash, donate) or have someone help you sort.
- If sensory issues make certain textures/smells overwhelming, wear gloves or use tools to avoid direct contact.
- If you have limited mobility, focus on areas you can easily reach—eye-level surfaces, seated-height spaces.
- If cleaning products trigger sensitivities, use alternatives like vinegar/water solutions or fragrance-free options.

There's no shame in needing accommodations or help. Work within your abilities and ask for support when you need it.

Important Reminders

- **Progress isn't linear.** Your space might get messy again, and that's normal. Just reset when you can.
- **"Clean enough" is YOUR standard.** Not magazine-perfect, not someone else's idea—just what helps you breathe easier.
- **You may need to work around restrictions.** If throwing things away will cause conflict, be strategic. Keep the peace when necessary.
- **Detach from guilt about stuff.** You're allowed to get rid of things, even gifts, even things that cost money, even things with "memories." Your peace matters more.
- **Maintenance is harder than you think.** Keeping things organized after you've decluttered takes ongoing effort. Be patient with yourself as you build new habits.
- **You're learning skills for your future.** Every time you organize, declutter, or maintain a space, you're practicing for when you have your own place.

Real Talk

Decluttering when you live in a hoarded home is complicated. You're fighting against:

- Years of learned behavior (clutter feels "normal")
- Limited space that may get re-cluttered by others
- Possible pushback if family notices you're throwing things away
- Emotional exhaustion from living in chaos
- Not knowing what "organized" even looks like

That's a lot.

But here's the thing: even small improvements matter. A clear corner. A made bed. A trash can that gets emptied regularly. These aren't just about tidiness—they're about taking back control of your environment, one small decision at a time.

You're not trying to become a minimalist or have a perfect Instagram-worthy room.

You're just trying to create a space where you can think, breathe, and exist without constant stress.

That's worth working toward.

And when you eventually have your own place? You'll already know how to do this. You'll have practiced the skills. You'll know what works for you and what doesn't.

Start small. Be patient with yourself. Celebrate tiny wins. Keep going.