

Learn how to live clutter-free

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Does living in a cluttered, disorganized environment impact more than just your physical space? Would clearing clutter release stagnant energy and give you more vitality?

Health and wellness coach Marcy Perlmutter, who has been teaching self-improvement classes at Ulster BOCES for 10 years, offered to take me through her Freedom from Clutter process to find out. Based on extensive research and her own journey freeing herself and her parents' household from clutter, the program reflects her belief that clutter is stuck energy that permeates our mental, emotional and spiritual environment.

In the last few years, my home had become a reflection of my attempt to live my life while dealing with the emotional chaos of my mother's illness and my father's escape into casinos. It also didn't help that our 1877 Victorian was in its fifth year of restoration projects.

The experience

There are eight of us, including my husband, Chester, in Perlmutter's Freedom from Clutter class. We get a binder of materials and a notebook for journaling. After introductions and sharing our goals for the four-week course, we take self-assessments.

I make a startling discovery: I acquire because I can't resist free and on-sale items, even if I don't need them. Later, as one woman talks about giving away excess cookbooks, I clutch the bottom of my chair so I don't volunteer to take them. And I don't even enjoy cooking.

Armed with this insight, a few days later, I feel a sense of victory when I bag my mother's clothes to give away and take home nothing. Another class, another realization: I leave things where they don't belong. That night, room to room, I put things away. As I



An organized kitchen pantry makes it easy to see what you have so you don't inadvertently buy duplicate items. SUBMITTED PHOTO

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Marcy Perlmutter coaches students on what to do with clutter brought to class.
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clear space, a sense of peace comes over me. The next day I systematically work through the piles on my desk, finding expired rebates and offers mixed with important paperwork. I toss, file, take action, and feel accomplished as the desk's surface appears.

I come to think of the classes as clutter therapy. We spend a good portion of the 2 1/2 hours sharing our experiences. It is a relief to know we are not alone.

Two of the women admit liking the show "Hoarders" because it makes them feel better about their own clutter. One talks about the difficulty of getting her house ready to sell after 22 years, another of living with a Porta Potty while her only bathroom is renovated.

We discuss how to get rid of things that are sentimental: The 14 sweaters knitted by a grandmother, a wedding ring from a first marriage, boxes of journals. Perlmutter coaches us to think about what nourishes us versus what depletes us. "How do those letters from your ex-husband make you feel?" she asks the recently remarried woman. "Why are you still hanging on to them?"

In weeding out, nearly all of us have uncovered books on de-cluttering. We laugh and even cry as we talk about things that have taken up so much room in our lives.

We are not alone in the process.



A neat filing system makes it easy to locate important papers. SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Perlmutter offers each class member phone coaching and arms us with techniques as well as a checklist of questions when deciding whether to keep something: Does it lift my energy? Does it have negative associations? Is it outdated or no longer useful? Have I used it in the past year? Do I have more than one? Does it need to be repaired? She advises us to determine the most important items we own and release all else.

Acquiring bargains creates my own hoarding tendencies. When I clean out the shed, I find five rakes (I never rake), four pitchforks and multiple sets of hoses. When I organize my pantry, I have 10 bottles of balsamic vinegar. I realize, with relief, that I can release or use up these extras. I also realize that I am not saving money by buying things I already have.

Another problem is that I can't find what I need so I buy it again. Two years ago we bought a 10- by 12-foot screen canvas gazebo. In the fall, my husband took it down and put it in the garage. The next June, we could only find the poles and had to buy a whole new gazebo. This summer, we couldn't find the instructions on how to put the new one together. We wasted two days searching. How much our clutter costs us in time and money.

Luckily, we have an hour coaching session scheduled with Perlmutter.

We decide to use it as a kick in the butt to clean out the garage. We set the phone on speaker as she instructs us to separate things into piles: What goes, what stays. While Chester hefts and hoists she counsels me. I'm upset that the garage has become not only a dumping ground for us but for those working on our house. Empty paint stripping cans, rags, boxes, clothes meant for a garage sale now moldy, books, a water stained Berber rug, my handsewn tablecloth from Turkey inexplicably bunched up under old tires. On the floor in a corner: the gazebo instructions.

The project takes all day and turns our driveway into a junk yard. As I make dinner, Chester comes in: "Guess, what I found?" he asks, then pulls out the original gazebo canvas wrapped in an old tablecloth.

After dealing with the garage, the basement is still a daunting chore. What if I didn't have to do it all myself? What about companies like the Clutter Busters service offered through Clean 'n Tidy in Poughkeepsie, who come in and do it for you? How would it feel to have professionals clean and organize seven years worth of junk?

It may feel overwhelming to me, but when Tom Klug, owner of the family-run business, comes to appraise the project, he says, "I'm used to

RESOURCES

Marcy Perlmutter

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Freedom From Clutter Courses and Coaching

Ulster BOCES
Port Ewen

Web: www.ulsterboces.org

Freedom From Clutter Boot Camp

5:30-8:30 p.m. Tuesdays starts Oct. 30 and Jan. 15: \$189.

Freedom From Clutter I: Discover the Secret

5:30-8:30 p.m. Thursdays starts Sept. 13: \$149.

Freedom From Clutter II: Master the Secret

5:30-8:30 p.m. Thursdays starts Oct. 18: \$149.

Freedom From Clutter III: Profit From the Secret

5:30-8:30 p.m. Thursdays starts Nov. 29: \$149;

Clean 'n Tidy Clutter Buster Services

Free in-home evaluation

Price varies by job

Phone: 845-790-3820

Web: www.cleanntidyhome.com

hoarders. This is nothing.”

It takes a three-person team just over two hours to make my basement sparkle. It even smells clean. I recognize organizing techniques Perlmutter had given us: Group like items together. Now all the paint and supplies are neatly stacked in one section, even the work bench against the wall that had been piled a foot high with junk is now a clear work bench again. The relief is palpable.

The bottom line

Freedom from Clutter Class and Coaching: To say this experience was invaluable is an understatement. All of us in class made and shared so many discoveries about our habits and why we create clutter in the first place. My husband and I both made significant strides in de-cluttering and organizing. I found that to be able to control some aspect of my life, while dealing with issues beyond my control, like my mother's illness, was psychologically liberating. I also



Marcy Perlmutter, standing, offers advice on dealing with paper clutter. SUBMITTED PHOTO

found a sense of peace, calm and pleasure when opening up an organized pantry, shed, cupboard, or entering my office with its now easy-to-find files.

For those who need it, Perlmutter can send someone as “extra hands” to work through the process one-on-one, but I found the phone coaching worked. She honored my style of doing things, and empowered me to make my own decisions and create systems that worked for me. Sometimes I just needed her permission to get rid of stuff, like that ugly gift from someone who might come by someday expecting to see it.

And the male point of view? Chester says, “I went to the de-clutter class reluctantly, expecting to hate it: I grew up with little brothers and sisters constantly getting into my stuff, so my stuff is sacred. But by the end of that first class Perlmutter had won me over. Her informative and psychologically astute binder gave me a simple way to get rid of things —What if I need that L-shaped scrap of metal one day?— and not get bogged down over some long-lost letter. And when I put the process into play with Perlmutter coaching me on speaker phone — that is, keeping the fire lit under my butt — I made amazing progress. CDs and vinyl I haven’t listened to in ages are bagged and await a trip to Goodwill instead of cluttering up the shelves.”

By exploring the psychological as well as physical reality of clutter, Perlmutter helped us to recognize our tendencies and set us up for a lifelong ability to live clutter free.

Clutter Busters: When you just want to get it done, Clutter Busters can do it for you. It is a wonderful feeling to just walk away from something and return to it spic and span. I can’t imagine a better way to deal with emptying out a house that isn’t yours or overflowing clutter. Calling in Clutter Busters freed me up to work on other things and to experience the pleasure of a clean basement with no cobwebs in my hair. Eventually, I will still have to use the tools Perlmutter taught us to decide what we want to keep and what we want to toss, but working in a clean and organized basement will make it so much easier.

The Holistic Guinea Pig is a monthly experiential look at holistic practices in the Hudson Valley. If you have a holistic practice or therapy you would like Linda Freeman to experience and report on, contact her at holisticguineapig@gmail.com.

Note: The phone number for acupuncturist Dr. Laurie Mallis of SearchLight Medical covered in Living & Being in May and July issues is 845-592-4310.