

"Brooks Palmer is an expert at helping people discover the freedom that comes from de-cluttering their lives. In the process, he helps them discover who they are and the life they should really be living.

Read this book...it may just change your life!"

— MATTHEW KELLY, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Off Balance* and *The Rhythm of Life*

# CLUTTER BUSTING YOUR LIFE

Clearing Physical and  
Emotional Clutter to Reconnect  
with Yourself and Others

**BROOKS PALMER**

author of *Clutter Busting*

# Praise for *Clutter Busting Your Life*

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Clutter is so much more than the physical objects we cling to. Fortunately, Brooks Palmer is so much more than a clutter buster. The defenses, anger, and general dopiness we use to protect our tender selves are no match for his gentleness, humor, and insight. Through compelling stories and simple exercises he helps us identify and release our attachment to the stuff that's getting in the way of our happiness. I'm beginning to think that Brooks might be able to clutter bust us all the way to work and peace."

— Colleen Wainwright, writer, speaker,  
and creator of Communicatrix.co

*Clutter busting* is a clever and useful term for eliminating everything in your life that does not serve you, including certain persons and relationship patterns. *Clutter Busting Your Life* is filled with interesting stories and useful guidance about replacing physical and emotional baggage with freedom and joyful relationships."

— Harville Hendrix, PhD, author  
*Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*

Both physical and emotional clutter can take up a lot of space. In *Clutter Busting Your Life*, Brooks Palmer provides inspiring examples, humor, and encouragement to help readers let go of clutter, along with small steps that can help people create a new and joyful life. If you're looking for ways to let go of clutter, then this book is for you."

— Tammy Strobel, author of *You Can Buy Happiness  
(and It's Cheap)* and RowdyKittens.co

# Praise for *Clutter Busting*

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*Clutter Busting* literally changed my life. Brooks's gentle yet firm voice inspired me to act, to widen my eyes and take a fresh look around — and undo pockets of clutter, not only in my closet and the trunk of my car but also in my heart. This book is filled with practical, useful wisdom.”

— Marc Lesser, author

*Less: Accomplishing More by Doing Less*

I have needed this book for years, and I loved it! Brooks's advice helped me clean up clutter, which gave me more time, energy, and creativity.”

— Robert J. Kriegel, PhD, *New York Times* bestselling author

author of *If It Ain't Broke, Break It*

If you want to make your space into a transformative tool that supports your life and work, you need *Clutter Busting*.”

— Julia Mossbridge, PhD, author

*Unfolding: The Perpetual Science of Your Soul's Work*

Before I even finished this book, I had to start implementing some of the recommendations. By the time I read the last page, not only my home but also my family dynamic and my career were unrecognizable. It was like a miracle.”

— Debra Halperin Poneman, founder of Yes to Success Seminars and bestselling author

*Chicken Soup for the American Idol Soul*

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**BROOKS PALMER**



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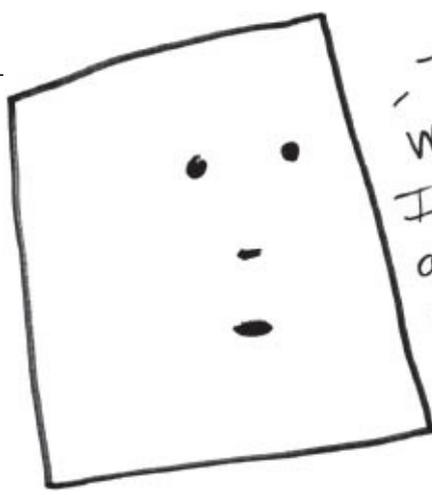
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*This book is dedicated to you. Thank you for being open to letting go of your false armor. Our hearts are more powerful than anything we hide behind to protect ourselves.*



- The store  
was closed so  
I went home  
and hugged  
what I own.

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# INTRODUCTION

I never set out to write another clutter-busting book. When I finished my first book, *Clutter Busting: Letting Go of What's Holding You Back*, I felt I had covered all the bases for every type of clutter. I meant it to be truly an all-purpose clutter book, the only one you'd ever need. The gist of my message was: You are sacred. Your stuff is not. In that book I made clear that clutter is anything in your life that no longer serves you, and that when you get rid of that clutter, you feel better.

Then I went on a book tour around the country to promote *Clutter Busting*, and at every gathering people asked me questions about relationships. They understood how to deal with the clutter in their homes and offices, but they still had questions about clutter in terms of their relationships with other people — family members, partners, colleagues, and friends.

A common question was “What should I say to my brother (or sister or friend or husband)? I have to go to his house. He has stuff all over the place. I want him to get rid of things, so what should I say so that he'll do it?”

I'd answer, “Nothing. There's nothing you can do. You can't make somebody do something. You can't clutter bust someone in their home if they're not open to it, and you can't either.”

People seemed let down by that answer. I started to see that often another person's clutter became clutter for the person bothered by it. This dynamic extends to many situations. There is clutter with people's relationships with others. Some people brought up the gifts they'd received: “So-and-so gave me this thing and I don't like it, but I can't get rid of it.” They feared that getting rid of the unwanted gift would upset the person or somehow be disrespectful of their relationship. That fear in itself became clutter because it interfered with the relationship between the recipient of the gift and the giver.

Sometimes someone would bring a partner, friend, or family member to the talk and then “out” him or her cluttery ways, expecting me to tell this person that they should get rid of their stuff. This often made them defensive, and an argument would ensue. It made things worse.

Other people talked about furniture and other artifacts they'd inherited from a deceased relative. They felt oppressed by this stuff but also tremendously guilty for even thinking about clutter busting the deceased's belongings.

In all these situations, it became clear that the question of what to keep and what to throw away was more complicated and nuanced than just evaluating one's own opinion about an item. The real clutter was frequently people's conflicted emotions about someone else. They wanted to know how to get some relief.

What was going on was subtler than the question posed in my first book: “Do you love this, or can you let it go?”

The purpose of that question was to help my readers determine whether something was part

their life or not. Asking this question is a way to be direct and honest with yourself: to consider something — a tangible object, a person, a situation, or a way of living — and asking whether or not it is really part of your life right now. There's something clarifying about honestly considering an item and seeing how you feel about it. That is the crux of clutter busting.

This book, *Clutter Busting Your Life*, delves more deeply into the nature of our *relationships* — our connections with ourselves and with the people in our lives — and how clutter intrudes, distorts, and diminishes these connections. The intrusion itself becomes clutter. This book illuminates what happens when we become emotionally involved in relationship clutter and lose sight of the connection and joy that come from the relationship itself. This subtle awareness allows the interference of clutter to diminish so that we can enjoy the relationship again. Clearing this internal clutter is even more profound than getting rid of our things because our greatest joy comes from our connection with ourselves and others. In sum, anything that interferes with, blocks, interrupts, or destroys this joy is clutter.

## How This Book Is Organized

The main purpose of clutter busting is to reconnect with ourselves. When we are mentally or emotionally divorced from ourselves, we suffer. What I've learned from my more than ten years as a professional clutter buster is that we often embody this disconnection in our homes and workplaces: those piles of moldy boxes, those counters and desks covered with stacks of paper, that couch we hate but can't seem to part with, the overstuffed clothes closet, the storage locker we've been afraid to revisit for three years, the densely packed and tangled drawers and cabinets — all represent some cluttered aspect of our inner life.

So the first relationship I address in this book is the one we have with ourselves. Having a deep understanding of this relationship makes it easier to understand our relationships with others. The book starts by shining a spotlight on the things in our lives that affect our relationship with ourselves. We look at what we bring into our lives in an attempt to cover up our innate lovingness. Things that make us smarter, more beautiful, more powerful, more spiritual, or more prosperous are not bad in and of themselves, but when we use them as armor for our gentle selves, we end up losing the connection with the part of ourselves that is crucial for our peace of mind and happiness. This dynamic is also fundamental in our relationships with others.

Once we have shined a spotlight on ourselves, we review basic clutter-busting techniques. Even for those who have read the first book, this review contains important reminders of what the process entails and how to approach it. The rest of the book then takes you through all aspects of clutter busting within your relationships.

The first step is to look at how we use clutter as a buffer against others. We try to defend ourselves from being hurt in relationships by protecting ourselves with stuff. What we really want is to feel safe and connected with others, but this armor destroys the experience of unity that we crave. Clutter shields provide us with a sense of power, but it is a false power; our defenses only increase our disconnection. Our fear, pain, and grief hypnotize us into believing we need these shields to avoid more hurt, but we don't. In fact, we are stronger without them. No amount of armor can give us peace of mind. I know because I've tried, and so have all my clients.

Then we consider the ways in which relationships are tangible things. Often we think of relationships as abstract. We diminish them in our minds. In the same way that space exists in a room but is covered up by the things in that space, our relationships exist but are obscured by emotion.

clutter. Relationships need our attention as much as our bodies, cars, and homes.

One of the main ways this emotional clutter manifests is in our attempts to control others so they won't hurt us. Unfortunately, these efforts create distance, dispelling connection and concealing the delicate feelings of closeness and spontaneity that bring us joy. The clutter of control creates suffering.

We'll also take a look at how we unknowingly hide our emotional or relationship clutter in our living spaces. This clutter was too much to bear, and so we hid it under our stuff. When we begin clutter bust, it comes to the surface of our awareness. Because we have a lot of unresolved feelings in process, we can get overwhelmed and take it out on the person we share the space with. In this book, I suggest some gentler ways to ride through this storm so that healing can take place.

Then we'll investigate how past relationships can negatively influence us, particularly those with former romantic partners, with ex-friends, and with deceased parents and relatives. Our emotional attachments can keep painful aspects of these relationships alive and prevent us from moving on from starting new, healthy relationships. When we take a closer look, we see how clutter keeps us tied to the past. Seeing this allows us to break through the restrictive aspects of that bond while maintaining the connections with the people we love.

When we investigate the clutter in our relationships, we sometimes find that someone in our lives has themselves become clutter. Perhaps they weren't originally, but our current relationship with them is now harming us, and we don't see it because of our attachment to positive memories. Sometimes relationships were never healthy to begin with. Just like our things, a relationship is clutter when it doesn't serve our well-being. So we'll examine when it's okay to clutter bust a person.

In the last chapter, I talk about how to clutter bust with someone else. You can clutter bust successfully with a partner, friend, family member, or coworker. The clutter-busting process itself can become a way to build and reinforce kind and honest relationships. For example, I once worked with a couple who were arguing over almost everything I was asking them about. At one point, they were in particularly heated disagreement over where in their bedroom to put a painting a relative had given them. This painting had been on the floor and leaning against the wall for more than a year. I stepped in and simplified things by asking, "Do you like this painting?" They both answered clearly at the same time, "No." Then they laughed together. That "no" reconnected them. Their argument was actually not about the painting but about their broken connection. By simplifying things, they were able to let go of the involvement with their relationship clutter, reconnect, and work together again without interference. The last chapter will teach you how to do this in your relationships.

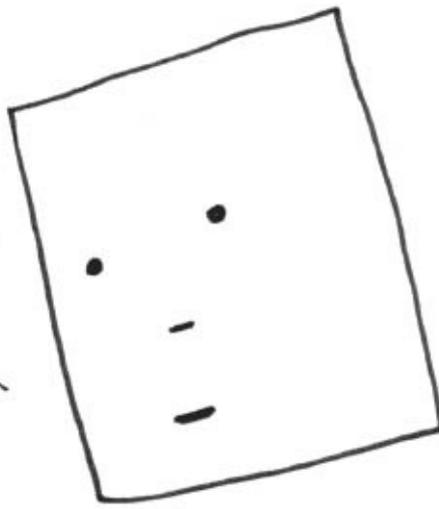
Throughout, I provide exercises to help you put all this into practice. Some help you identify your clutter armor and assist you in removing it. This armor wears you out and doesn't look very good on you anyway. Other exercises focus on the emotional clutter that's disturbing you and your relationships. Still others are designed to be done with the people you are close to.

In the end, this book takes the original clutter-busting question, "Is this of actual value to me, can I get rid of it?" and brings it into a deeper place that reconnects you with yourself and others. We will learn to look matter-of-factly at the things in our environment and determine if they help or hurt our lives and relationships. It might be scary to consider something we're invested in. But what if we're living with something that is actually hurting us?

Connection with another is our most joyful experience, and this book will help you remove any obstacles to it.

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No one  
knew of the  
buried  
treasure,  
so it was  
worthless.



## THE CLUTTER OF FALSE ARMOR

I came to my client's front door and was greeted by a small piece of paper covering the glass. The words on it read, "Occupants are home and are armed." The word *armed* had been heavily underlined with a pen. I thought, "It's the antiwelcome mat. I think he wants to be left alone." It's a good thing I don't take these things personally.

I rang the buzzer. From behind the door I heard a defensive, "Who is it?" I said, "It's Brooks, the clutter-busting guy." I heard the clicks of four door locks opening. The door cracked open slightly and a man's face peered out. I nodded and said hi, and he opened the door the rest of the way. The man was in his late fifties and dressed in black and had a tough-guy, don't-mess-with-me air. He reminded me of Charles Bronson in *Death Wish*. I shook his hand, and for a moment I could see fear and sadness in his eyes beneath his rough veneer. I remember thinking that it felt as if his inner core was filled with tears.

My client invited me in. It was difficult to get past the stacks of paper and boxes obscuring the entrance. The space was dark. Some light from a dim bulb at the end of the hallway revealed the pathways he had carved for himself out of the clutter. They were mazes. The musty smell of mold in the air made it difficult to breathe. He boasted that I was only the third person he had let into his house in the past twelve years.

Then he gave me a tour of the house. I couldn't see the extent of the clutter on each floor because the walls of clutter were a couple of feet taller than me. Bungee cords held them back so they wouldn't collapse. I feared the cords would break and the mounds of stuff would topple and kill us both. My client showed me where he slept — on a soiled comforter lying in one of the pathways. The place felt haunted.

There was no empty space. There was no feeling of life in the place. He said in his rough-and-gruff, matter-of-fact voice that every night for the past six months he had lain in bed and put a shotgun in his mouth. But for some reason, he couldn't get himself to pull the trigger.

It was the first time I felt overwhelmed in a job. I didn't know how I could help this client. The tears began to fill his eyes. He tried clearing his throat to stop the emotions that were erupting. He said in a soft, cracking voice, "I can't take the pain of this anymore. I feel so ashamed that I'm living this way." That was the opening, the crack letting in the light. His pretend wall of toughness had tumbled, revealing his fragility.

I was suddenly inspired. I grabbed a trash bag and waded into the clutter. I said, "Let's start here." He looked stunned. I pulled out an empty soda bottle. I said, "What about this? Do you need this, or can we let it go?" He didn't know what to say. He was filled with so much inertia that it was hard for him to think. Somehow he managed to say, "I guess I can let it go."

As we worked he told me he used to live clutter-free. He had few possessions, and he liked living

with open space. He used to be very social. He worked at a top-level creative job that he loved. His colleagues there felt like his family. But twelve years ago he was fired in an abrupt and unkind manner. My client was deeply hurt, and he reacted defensively by shutting himself off from the world. He filled his home with needless things to insulate himself from the world. But he could never feel safe enough.

After a few hours of working together, I asked him, “How about the sign on your front door, the one that says, ‘Occupants are home and are *armed*’? Can we let it go?”

He went dark and tough again, and his vulnerability vanished. He said, “No, that sign stays! I need to protect myself. No one’s ever tried to break in because that’s up there!”

I gently told him that the sign wasn’t protecting him from the one person who was causing him the greatest pain and misery — himself. He made himself live in squalor. Every night he put a shotgun barrel in his mouth and threatened his life. He terrorized himself. The sign wasn’t stopping him.

Tears flooded his eyes, and he cried for a while, his whole body shaking. It felt as if shackles were breaking off his body. This man felt the need to protect himself from being hurt with an aura of violence and power. But the things he was using to protect himself hadn’t made him safer; they had hurt him. He saw that he couldn’t rely on them anymore, and the mighty power of his heart came to his defense. My client went downstairs and took down the sign. When he came back up, the color had returned to his face. I could feel his true presence shining through. It reminded me of the movie *The Exorcist*, when the demon leaves the little girl and she’s healthy again.

We spent the next few months dismantling the clutter fortress in his home. As we worked side by side, I could see his inspiration grow as he came home to his heart.

Having dropped his severe protective stance, he reconnected with a girlfriend from thirty years ago, and they became a couple again. He spent evenings and weekends with her, and they relished their time together. By dropping his false armor, he restored his connection with himself, and he became open to connecting with others.

When this remarkable client finished clutter busting, he sold his home and rented a small cottage from some long-lost friends. Now he sees them daily and often has dinner with them. He also took up painting and has been showing his art in galleries in Los Angeles. My client also got a job helping people out of unfortunate and desperate situations. I still keep in contact with him. It seems he found that the only safe and satisfying way to live is being open to his beautiful, innate sensitivity, without the interference of clutter.

## **The Beauty of Being Sensitive**

The dominant factor of all your experiences is your relationship with yourself. When you have a strong connection with your open, sensitive self, you tend to move with the flow of events. You derive greater personal satisfaction from your life. You feel a thriving curiosity about the way things are. You experience greater clarity, seeing things as they are in front of you.

When the clutter in your life cuts you off from experiencing this basic relationship, when the connection with yourself is weak, you can experience anguish over different aspects of your life. You can experience great worry and fear about possible future events. Your relationships with others are often chaotic. You misinterpret what’s happening and make decisions that cause you even more grief.

For more than ten years, I’ve seen hundreds of people let go of the clutter of false armor they once desperately hung on to in order to feel safe. They replaced living in fear with embracing the beauty of an openly sensitive life.

When I speak of sensitivity, I don't mean this in a negative way. Being sensitive is often equated with being weak. "If I'm open to feeling too much, I can get hurt." I like to use the word *sensitivity* more positively. Being sensitive means being aware of ourselves and our environment. We know what we feel. We sense when something feels good, and we know when something hurts. When we are open, we respond in a way that nourishes and protects us. When we deny that, when we cover that up, we are living in numbness. We can't respond positively if we're not aware of what's going on. In a certain sense, we're not protected, even though we think we are.

Naturally, we want to protect ourselves. Some protective measures are useful and make a positive difference in our lives. And then there's clutter. My client tried to protect himself by hiding behind a tough persona and behind walls of stuff. These pseudo-protective devices make us feel safe, but maintaining this armor comes at a cost. We get lost in our efforts to preserve our false armor and don't see that it in fact hurts us. It keeps us from the joyful connections we most want, and it disrupts the creativity and flexibility we need to live a happy, connected life.

By clutter busting, we identify which of the things in our homes and lives are hurting us so we can let go of them and start feeling connected with ourselves again. When we remove these impediments to connection, we experience joy.

## Openness to Intuition

A natural strength comes from being open. We feel the hum of life itself, regardless of whether or not we like what is going on in our lives. When we're open, we naturally tap into our intelligence and intuition.

Like a lot of people, for many years before I went to college I was kind of clueless. I walked around in a trance of anger. On some level I felt the anger served me because it felt like protection; it kept people away. But because it kept people away, my anger was my clutter. I was missing out on the joy of connection with others.

But when I went to college, I started meditating. I would sit by myself, close my eyes, and watch what happened inside me. Sometimes I would sense the presence of things. I experienced a quiet and powerful energy that was everywhere, including in me. As a lovely by-product I became more aware of my emotions.

The new openness I was feeling in college was starting to improve my intuition, which helped me save my ass on a number of occasions. I experienced my intuition after I decided to pledge to a fraternity. The frat brothers told me that at some point they would kidnap all the pledge brothers and take us out to the woods in the middle of nowhere and leave us with just a quarter.

One day the fraternity called a special pledge brother meeting, and that morning I decided to put a twenty-dollar bill in my shoe. I went to the house and was immediately jumped on and tied up by the frat brothers. They took my wallet and cash, but they didn't check my shoes. Rather than tensing up and fighting, I relaxed because I had a feeling that everything would be okay. It felt right to go along with what was happening.

The fraternity brothers loaded five of us pledge brothers into cars. They drove us an hour away from the woods of Maryland. They let us out, untied us, gave us a quarter, and left in a hurry. My fellow pledges were panicked. I told them not to worry. I took off my shoe and showed them the twenty-dollar bill. We walked for fifteen minutes and came to an isolated McDonald's. Outside was a parked cab. The cabbie was inside, smoking a joint and eating a Big Mac. When I asked him if he could give us a ride to Washington, DC, he agreed. He drove us back, going ninety miles an hour, sometime

down one-way streets the wrong way. I was fascinated by how the universe was unfolding this very odd situation.

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When we got back to the frat house and went inside, no one was there. We waited, and half an hour later the brothers returned and were stunned to find us sitting there. Openness to my intuition had taken care of all.

When we stop hiding behind the clutter of manufactured might, we become aware of and move with, rather than fighting, the flow of life. I don't mean that esoterically. Clues and answers are naturally built into everyday life. They are kindly placed there to help. When we disregard that assistance, we can't help but screw up. We need all the help we can get. By clutter busting, we gain access to our own built-in support.

## Unencumbering Yourself

One of my clients had lived amid the multitudes of musty boxes of stuff in her garage for years. It felt as if she'd been hiding behind all these things, and now that the shell was being removed, she was scared. In fact, living behind things for so long had only made her more fearful and shaky. She was like a person who never exercised because she was scared of being injured, so her body had atrophied and became fragile, almost brittle.

As we sorted through and removed her junk, box by box, I gently encouraged her. I told my client that she looked as though she was coming back to life, that there was light in her face and eyes. I told her that there's strength in being open and delicate. We're so used to thinking that vitality lies in displays of power, but in truth our tenderness and basic sensitivity possess a much greater strength. One clutter-busting workshop participant kept telling me that she felt like she wasn't doing enough. She said, "I want to be supereffective, with a laser focus." The thing is, she was already accomplishing a lot.

I told her that when she said she wanted laser focus, she looked really tired. It was as if her body was holding up a sign that said, "Please stop, I'm exhausted!" It was wearing her out. This way of living was itself clutter because it wasn't giving her the peace of mind she hoped it would.

Hearing this caused her to stop in her tracks. A part of her recognized what she was doing. She took a breath, and the hyperdrive part of her switched off. She relaxed and reconnected to herself. She looked like a whole person.

It's a great thing to learn and grow, but if we do it compulsively, only to make us feel powerful enough to avoid failing or being hurt, we will exhaust ourselves because we will always fail. We can never be powerful enough to avoid that.

The *Today* show recently had their female hosts appear on the air without any makeup. They seemed uncomfortable without their usual layers of face paint and mascara. But they also seemed interesting and real. There was a light coming through their faces that was attractive, and I felt I could connect with them.

When we hide behind the guise of a strong persona, we may feel powerful, but it's a pretension. Deep down, we know it's a show of might that keeps others at bay. It's just not as innately satisfying as simply being ourselves, matter-of-factly and without fear. You are amazing when you are your unencumbered natural self, without trying to hide your faults and hurts. A real person is much more alluring than someone pretending to have it all together.

Imagine taking off your suit of protective armor as you would your clothes. Notice how much lighter you feel. You're no longer distracted and encumbered by the weight.

- In what way can you give yourself some nurturing attention?
- What can you do now that would make your life more comfortable and peaceful?

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Where do I wear armor in my life?
- In what ways do I pretend to be something I'm not?
- What's underneath the layers?
- In what special ways is the light still able to shine from this place within?
- What would it feel like if I uncovered this special part of myself?
- How would I benefit?

### **The Clutter of Control**

The clutter of control occurs when we think someone should change, or we want them to do something for our benefit, even if it's not for theirs — for instance, when we want them to get rid of something we don't like but that they value.

When we try to control another person, we are seeing them as an object. They are no longer a person with feelings but a thing to manipulate. We are familiar with using things as tools to get work done, and sometimes we treat others the same way. If we can cajole, bully, or entice others into doing the things we want them to do, we assume our life will be improved. But these efforts tend to backfire. The impulse behind controlling is often our fear of being hurt by someone, so we subtly and sometimes not so subtly push them for our own protection. This manipulation does not respect or honor the other person, so it undercuts our connection with them.

By nature, people resist manipulation; we all resent attempts to control us. We don't like other people judging us and telling us we need to be better people. This is why even if we succeed in manipulating someone else, we tend to feel frustrated, since the other person ends up resenting us, and the distance between us grows.

The same dynamic applies to us. Sometimes we try to force ourselves to be and act a particular way, believing it will help us. This compulsive drive to dominate ourselves can be too harsh. We judge ourselves and hurt our connection with ourselves. We might think this is necessary medicine, but it's clutter because it ends up making us miserable.

I once worked with a client who complained a lot about her weight. When she found pictures of herself, she would say, "I look like a pig," or, "I don't know how I got to be so big! What's wrong with

me?” or, “Oh, God, I hate these pictures of myself. I’m so fat.” She said she wanted to lose weight and was deeply disappointed that she couldn’t. In a disapproving tone, she said she felt that she should be doing better. Her eyes were glazed, and her voice was quiet and sorrowful. She sounded dejected and hopeless. She worried out loud about how she appeared to her friends and family.

I told her that no one notices the things we think are problems. We think people see the things that we think are wrong with our lives. But they don’t. Chances are they are busy worrying about how others think of them. We are the only ones who see these things as a problem. Sometimes we shame ourselves with relentless criticism as a way to control our behavior.

Some part of her assumed this criticism was necessary as a way to help her lose weight. But it did nothing to help her. Kicking herself in the ass had left her weak and unable to take good care of herself. I said, “I think this critical part of you would be more useful working as a parts inspector on a car assembly line. Then it can find faults all day long and get paid for it.”

She laughed. She stopped talking about her weight and started to be more positive. She said, “You know, I think mostly I want to feel more healthy. That would make me happy.”

Recognizing our controlling behavior, no matter where it’s directed, makes it hard to continue with it. Suddenly, we see that it’s not working — and that there’s another choice.

## **The Clutter of Avoidance**

When we are uncomfortable, sad, angry, or disappointed, often we want to escape these feelings. We don’t think we can handle them. Or maybe we think, “I don’t want to be sad. I want to be happy, so I’ll get drunk or buy something fun and new.” In this way, we try to avoid pain or to distract ourselves from the pain we’re already feeling.

Our culture encourages us to buy things to avoid feeling hurt or powerless. We constantly see ads depicting someone who is in some kind of pain. Then that person gets a particular product and becomes happy. The music swells, the actor smiles, the voice-over confidently spouts platitudes.

Things are presented to us as offering instant relief — a powerful and persuasive message. Most of us are experiencing some kind of pain. We might feel frustrated at work or in a relationship. We might be angry about our financial situation. Our head or stomach aches. When we are in pain, physical or emotional, we are open to suggestions. It’s easy to be pulled in by the alluring thought, “If I get \_\_\_\_\_, then I’ll be okay again.” We are trained to think and believe this. I know I’ve thought this many times, especially about new technology.

However, the stuff we get in the hopes of feeling better is clutter unless we really love it. Usually at best, it provides very temporary relief. Then our unpleasant feelings come back. I remember once feeling really sad and thinking, “I need a pint of Ben & Jerry’s Cherry Garcia ice cream.” On the container, Ben and Jerry look really happy. There are all those bright psychedelic colors. And then there’s the delicious rich, sugary ice cream inside. So I got a pint and ate the whole thing and felt much better. It was like magic. I thought, “This is great!”

The next morning I didn’t feel so great, and later in the day I felt worse. I felt sad again, and tired. So I got another pint from my friends Ben and Jerry. This flavor was double chocolate something or other. I ate that and felt good — not great. An hour later I felt sad again, and my stomach hurt. So I stopped buying ice cream.

I also gave up trying to run away. Intuitively, I knew it was impossible to get away from myself and the awareness brought a powerful sense of relief. I let myself experience and appreciate the sadness, which went from being an unbearable pain to a beautiful sensation. My sadness had a dep

and vitality that I hadn't even realized.

Once I saw a commercial that said, "Be even more amazing!" I thought, "Yes!" And then thought, "Wait. What does that even mean? If I'm already amazing, isn't that enough? And what special qualities and magic powers does this product contain that will increase my amazing quotient?"

While ads have a way of creating a problem where one doesn't exist, in general the desire for something better simply keeps us from feeling satisfied with what we have. Our lives are generally okay. Sure, we might want more of something, but if we got it, pretty soon we'd want more of something else. But what's wrong with accepting our life as it is? With being satisfied with how amazing we are right now? This way of thinking won't stop us from growing, learning, and discovering. The natural urge to change and grow comes from a general sense of happiness, not from a need to acquire things to be happy.

I think we're lucky when we understand that our clutter is not making us happy. Yes, we can enjoy our things. Yes, they do make our lives easier at times. But to believe that things have the power to remove our sadness and make us better people will bring us disappointment and eventually despair.

So, feel sad for a little while. Let anger remain for a moment. Sit with it. Maybe even notice the feelings with some curiosity, like watching leaves falling from a tree. They're a mix of colors, some still partially green, some red, or orange, or yellow, or brown. Then rake the leaves and put them in a bag on the curb. When we don't immediately get some clutter to distract ourselves from what we're feeling, the feelings have a chance to pass naturally.

## EXERCISE

One morning you wake up after years of impulsively acquiring stuff. You had a pretty wild time, and now you're feeling tired and dragged out. You notice there are reminders of the blowout strewn about your home. Now it's time to clean up. You get out a trash bag, a donation bag, and a recycling bag and begin to take a look around.

What things did you buy to make you feel high, things that felt exciting to purchase but that you used once or twice, or never, and haven't picked up since? Does something spark that embarrassed, "What was I thinking?" reaction? That's a red flag.

Right now, it doesn't matter that you bought these things. We'll talk about possible reasons later. What helps is knowing that you don't care for them now. It feels really good to pick this stuff up and put it in trash bags. If you don't need it, don't use it, and don't love it, put it in one of the bags. Don't worry about why you bought it; don't worry that you didn't use it or that you don't like it.

You want to feel good *now*. Look through your clothes, your CDs and DVDs, your books. Crack open your cupboards, closets, and drawers. Look for the things that now feel stale and old, that make your head feel foggy. They've lost their vibrancy.

With each thing you find and toss, you will feel that much more sober. It's exciting to feel your feet on the ground again.

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## The Clutter of Self-Criticism

When I work with people to clear the clutter from their homes and offices, I often hear these very smart people being very mean to themselves. “Why did I screw up like this? I’m such an idiot — why did I do that? I’m so stupid!” It feels so violent. It’s as if they are finding the most delicate part of themselves — and punching it as hard as they can. They’re punching themselves in the heart. When people do this, their faces become ashen, they lose the brightness in their eyes, and they look sickly. We are all unprotected from this violence because it comes from inside.

It’s hard to watch. I sometimes tell my clients, “If you’re going to be mean to yourself, I’ll have to charge you triple my usual rate.” Keeping things lighthearted helps people open up. If someone else beat them up, they’d resist, but they accept cruelty, harshness, and punishment from themselves. And yet criticism and judgment are never good motivators. When we put ourselves down, we shrink from rather than rising to the occasion. This clutter of self-criticism often invades the process of clutter busting.

When this happens to me, and I get stuck in a task and start to be critical of myself, I stop what I’m doing. I walk away from it because it’s painful to use harsh words against myself. So I go for a walk, or I take a nap, or I go to another room and play guitar. You can do similar nourishing things because you love yourself. I know you do, because you care enough about yourself to read this book.

A client once showed me her to-do list, which was many pages long. Her smile was gone. The light in her eyes was out. She hunched over and clutched the papers tightly. It looked like she was trying to protect them in some way. But no one in the room was challenging her. I hadn’t even asked her about the lists.

Then she started complaining that she hadn’t done anything on the lists. Her voice sounded tired. She said, “I’m never going to get any of this done! I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m such an idiot. I should be able to do these things. Why do I keep fucking up?” She looked like she was going to cry. She was suffering under the clutter of her criticism.

I told her it was hard for me to watch her kick herself like that. It was as if she was striking herself with lightning bolts. When we put ourselves down, the impact is greater than when someone else does it because the distance is so short.

I said, “Let’s take a look at these lists and see if there is anything that really matters to you on them.” The first item was reading at night. She felt she needed to read before she went to bed and had a number of books that were “must reading” for her. She hadn’t read any of them. When I asked her how long she had wanted to read at night, she told me for at least ten years. I asked her if she likes to read. She said, “Not really.” She looked surprised to hear herself say that. When we get a clear look and see that something we thought was gold is instead a turd, we are sobered.

I said, “That’s clutter because it’s not something you like to do. It’s not in your nature. You were hard on yourself because you didn’t actually want to do it.” She said, “I’d rather spend time with my birds, and meditate, and go to bed early.” Two beautiful songbirds chirped in a cage next to her. I said, “You probably don’t have to write those things down to do them.”

She got up and took out one of her birds from its cage. She sat back down and held the bird. It whistled happily as she rubbed its head and belly. Rather than beating herself up with forced ideas of self-improvement, she took care of herself. This kindness opened her heart to let another being in.

Get a piece of paper and a pen and sit in a cozy space. At the top of the page, write, “When I get.” At the bottom of the page, write, “I’ll be happy.” Take a deep breath. Look at the space between the two sets of words. You want to write something in the space. But wait. Don’t write anything just yet.

Get in touch with your body. Feel your pen hand itching to move. Become aware of increased saliva in your mouth. Feel your heart pumping. Imagine the things you want to write in the space, but wait.

Close your eyes. Feel your breath. Feel the sensations in your body. Be aware of your posture, how you’re sitting. Now think about what you have in your life right now that matters to you the most. Feel the powerful connection you have with each thing. Imagine the pain if you lost these things. But wait, they’re still there! How lucky are you to have these things in your life?

Open your eyes. Come back to the paper. Look at the space between the phrases at the top and bottom. What do you feel like putting in the space now?

## The Noise in Our Heads

We often undervalue ourselves in comparison to others. We praise someone while simultaneously criticizing ourselves. Our underlying motivation is to make ourselves feel miserable enough that we will try harder to improve.

This strategy is clutter because it doesn’t inspire us. It weakens us and greatly reduces our capabilities. But it’s a hard habit to drop. Comparative demeaning is deeply ingrained in our culture and psyches. It’s so instinctual that we are not encouraged to call it into question. But let’s take a deeper look.

When we observe others, we see their actions but not their thoughts. We just see a person doing something. This makes them seem focused, strong, clear thinking, and stable. We then compare this to our own efforts at trying to lead our lives amid a loud barrage of critical, sabotaging, fearful, nostalgic, self-doubting, fantasizing, and confusing thoughts. Our thoughts tend to be incessant, illogical, and demeaning. For most of us, if we spoke all our thoughts out loud, we would sound crazy.

But when we observe others, we see their outer life but not their inner — and we assume it’s entirely unlike ours. Yet if we were inside their heads, we would hear a voice that sounded strikingly familiar. We would realize that behind someone’s quiet, focused demeanor a very different internal monologue is running: one of harsh criticism and petty, envious thoughts. Maybe we would even hear them compare themselves negatively to us. We would seem focused, stable, and clearheaded. In this dynamic, we are more similar to others than we imagine.

Our self-critical comparisons with others are clutter that only emphasizes what’s “wrong” with us and not what’s right. When we become aware of our outrageous false comparisons, this incessant habit will lessen. “Oh, there goes that thought that I’m worse than everyone else. Is it possible that I could suck that much? It’s funny there’s such conviction in it. What if that other person is thinking the same crazy thoughts as I am?”

Intuitively you know that everyone wrestles with doubt, confusion, and worry, at least sometime

these feelings are inescapable. So when observing someone doing something you admire, imagine loud voices of doubt and fear in their heads. Imagine these thoughts at a deafening volume. How does this change your perception of them? Rather than envy, do you start to feel compassion for them. Do they struggle to be competent? Perhaps you will even feel an affinity with them. By dropping negative comparisons, you can reconnect both with yourself and with others.

## **The Clutter of Becoming a “Better Me”**

I’ve noticed that a number of recent self-improvement books use the phrase *becoming a better you*. The problem with trying to be a “better you” is the implication that you are not okay now. It also presumes that there’s an objective standard of okayness.

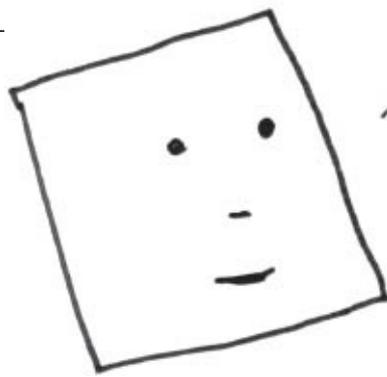
Often we want to be “better” so that other people will like us more, or so that we’ll like ourselves more. That’s clutter. Though we aren’t seeking better products, we are seeking better ways of being and better aspects of our personalities. We think, “If I can only become more generous, friendly, smart, creative, wealthy, patient, loyal, honest, funny, lovable, enlightened, or spiritual, then I’ll finally be okay.” And when we do this, we are reinforcing the feeling not only that we are not okay now, that there is something wrong with us, but also that we need another’s approval as proof that we’ve succeeded. We feel needy, wanting other people’s acknowledgment and praise to feel good.

And what do you discover if you succeed in becoming a better you? As it turns out, being liked doesn’t change how you feel about yourself. Popular people don’t like themselves any more than others like themselves.

I had a client once who told me that she wanted to be a famous author. She felt that, in her career, she had done as much work as others who were well-known. She talked about how different and better her life would be if she had won some literary awards. When she talked about it, she was gone. Her eyes were unfocused, her face was drawn, and she looked tired. She was in a fantasy world.

I described to her how she disappeared when she talked about the need to be liked as a famous person. I said her desire was clutter because it didn’t inspire her or open her heart to her work. Plus, it was making her miserable. Whenever we think something in our lives *should* be other than as it is, we drain the present moment of its vitality, which is brutal on our well-being.

My client came to. She said she realized that recognition would be a burden. She recognized that she’d be exactly the same inside, but she’d have to deal with the headaches of fame. Then she talked about some of the famous people she knew, some of whom were very unhappy. She also realized that her need to be recognized was clutter because it was interfering with her work. Rather than relying on her own intuitive insights when creating, she was thinking about what others would like and approve of.



I became a  
better me the  
day I was  
born.

When a person does something only to be liked — such as forcibly grafting a particular behavior onto themselves while ignoring their own impulses or intuition — they feel disconnected from themselves. Whether or not they win approval, this sense of disconnection often leaves them frustrated, angry, and resentful, which reinforces the feeling that something is wrong with them.

I see this happen a lot. I once worked with a client who was a comedian. She was originally from New York and had a big, vibrant personality. She swore and said whatever was on her mind. When I first came to her apartment, I noticed a metal altar that held a set of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* VHS tapes. When I asked her about them, she grew pale and quiet. I could see she was wrestling with something inside herself. She said she had constructed this altar as her way of trying to become more feminine. She'd had a string of bad relationships and blamed herself for not being feminine enough. She felt she was chasing guys away with her strong personality. She thought she should be quieter and more delicate, basically a much-reduced version of herself. She was trying to change into what she thought was a more desirable way of being so she could find a better relationship.

I said this particular definition of femininity didn't fit her. It wasn't part of her nature. And if she did somehow figure out a way to forcefully graft that persona onto herself, she would be miserable. I told her she'd be better off being herself and finding a guy who likes her as she is. She laughed hard. She understood what she had been doing and let go of the tapes.

If we're lucky, we get so tired of trying to improve ourselves that we give up. We accept who we are and let go of our fear out of sheer exhaustion. Like Popeye, we declare, "I yam what I yam," and a peace of mind follows. The funny thing is, that is a better you. It's the you holding this book, reading this page, feeling weary after years of trying to be amazing, well liked, stronger, all-powerful, and invincible. It's the you who wants to enjoy your life right now as it is. The you who wants to enjoy your relationship with yourself.

Clutter busting is not about creating a better person but about uncovering the wonderful person you are right now. When you take an honest and kind look at all your clutter, you naturally remove the things that don't serve you. You feel better without having to do, be, or have anything else.

What you discover is that your stripped-down, vulnerable, natural self contains an innate happiness.

## EXERCISE

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sample content of Clutter Busting Your Life: Clearing Physical and Emotional Clutter to Reconnect with Yourself and Others

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