

# The perils of having a hoard mentality

Clutter can mess with your head, raising anxiety levels and even causing depression

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Our surroundings have a much bigger influence on our mental health than we think. Imagine the difference between living in a messy, disorganised space and an orderly, well-organised one. The first is likely to make you feel overwhelmed, frustrated and anxious, and the second, calm, safe and in control.

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ESSLIN TERRIGHENA, PSYCHOLOGIST

There's a reason being in cluttered spaces is stressful. The human brain can only take in and process a certain amount of information from the external environment. With so many sights, sounds, smells and sensations competing for our attention, it can be a challenge for the brain to process everything at once.

But how is clutter linked to depression? Dr Esslin Terrighena, a psychologist at Mind Balance in Central, says clutter can make us feel frustrated by the way it invades our home, which, for many of us, is our safe space. Often, we do not know where to start with getting rid of the clutter, so we feel helpless and overwhelmed.

If nothing gets done the clutter builds up, which exacerbates the

frustration. In addition, we may feel guilty for accumulating so many items, irritated when we cannot find what we need, trapped as the clutter accumulates, stifled as we cannot find inspiration, and embarrassed when friends see the mess.

"On top of this," she continues, "our brains are trying to juggle all the stimuli in our environment, making it difficult for us to rest. Having many items around us can enhance our distress by reminding us of all the things we still have not accomplished – not just decluttering itself, but also reading all those books we bought or fixing that chair that broke 12 months ago."

Terrighena says the discomfort caused in the brain by overwhelming input may further trick the brain into thinking there is some sort of danger in our surroundings, triggering our anxiety. At a cognitive level, we may engage in negative self-talk, telling ourselves we are incapable of decluttering our space. We may also find it harder to concentrate and remember things.

The science backs this up. A study published in 2010 in the journal *Psychiatry Research* confirmed a strong link between clutter and depression, more so than with other disorders. David Tolin, a psychologist who specialises in hoarding and who conducted the study, noted that hoarding participants reported higher levels of depression than control participants and participants with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

A later study, done by UCLA's Centre of Everyday Lives and Families, revealed that women had elevated levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, when

surrounded by too many physical objects in their home; cortisol is associated with depressive and anxious symptoms. The study also found that men were not as emotionally bothered by mess and clutter, which created even more stress in the relationship.

The irony about clutter is it also makes us feel safe and secure. This is why we find it hard to part with objects that are meaningful to us, or items that have been in our possession for a while that we feel we must hold on to, "just in case" (we think we will use them one day, but that day usually never comes).

"Despite the negative effects on our well-being, we may find ourselves clinging to the clutter as our new safety blanket, and in the worst case, sliding deeper into a cycle of clutter and depression," Terrighena says. "Such is the self-reinforcing nature of clutter."

Terrighena believes clutter is often a sign of underlying emotional issues that have yet to be dealt with. There are many reasons we hang on to things – they might remind us of happier times, like clothes we used to be able to fit into when we were slimmer, or they might remind us of someone we would like to be, perhaps an artist, which sees us holding on to art materials that we never use.

"Our brains can adapt to continuous, unchanging input over time – for instance, when we have piles of paperwork stacked up all around us for weeks our brains eventually will find them less worthy of processing," Terrighena says.

"But as our relationship to clutter is often emotional, these items may remain salient for us, keeping them active and reducing

the likelihood of adaptation." Of course, this does not mean you have to toss out everything you own to be happy. The trick to decluttering is knowing what to keep and throw, and organising the items you do end up keeping.

Professional organiser Sharon Lam, founder of Home Therapy Hong Kong, has some excellent tips for decluttering. She suggests sorting through clothes, books and paper first, followed by items that have sentimental value. Only keep the ones that make you happy and that align with your current lifestyle.

We may find ourselves clinging to the clutter as our safety blanket

ESSLIN TERRIGHENA

"Fold and store clothes vertically," she says. "This not only saves space but makes it easier to find what you are looking for. Store accessories in drawers with dividers, and only hang up coats, suits and formal wear.

"As for name cards, photos and documents, digitise them by scanning or taking photographs of them. Only keep important documents like contracts or birth certificates – store these in a single folder and label them. In the kitchen, you will want to get rid of expired and duplicated items. Clear the counter and group the same categories of items into drawers or containers."

With space so tight in Hong Kong, it's important to get the right furniture. Caroline Basham, founder and director of Caroline B Personal Management says that buying a bed with storage below, or installing a 50cm deep raised floor may be all you need.

Decluttering may seem daunting, but you don't have to rush it.

Terrighena recommends clearing one room at a time and exploring the reasons for holding on to certain things. She also suggests making the process fun and rewarding yourself as you get rid of items. When you're done decluttering, you're sure to notice the difference. "Decluttering can be empowering," she says.

**A sink before and after decluttering.**  
Photos:  
Handouts

