

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)

---

**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

---

HEALTH & WELLNESS | July 10, 2012

## She Sees Clutter, He Sees Treasures

*Why Getting Rid of Old Books and Clothes Is So Tough On a Couple; Revealing the Power Struggle Underneath*

By ALINA DIZIK



It's the clutter of the other person that bothers people most. Alina Dizik on Lunch Break explains what psychologists and organization experts say it means for relationships, and especially what to do if you are five or 10 years into the relationship. (Photo: Getty Images)

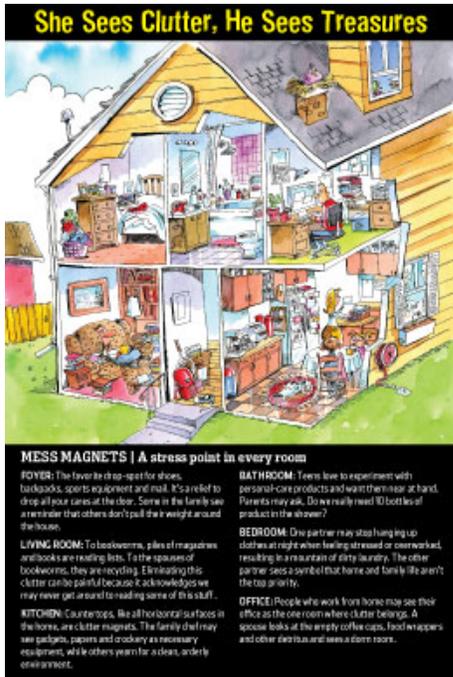
Not long after she remarried two years ago, Karen Steele realized the look of her Roseville, Calif., home had changed.

The problem is her husband's office. It has become a catchall for papers and a collection of plastic hotel keys. Pictures are stuffed into storage boxes, and there always seem to be a few plates and coffee cups scattered on the desk. When she walks into the room, she says, "I really start to unravel." She prefers spending time in the kitchen, where everything has its place.

"It's a bachelor pad in the middle of a family house," says Ms. Steele, a 43-year-old sales manager for a technology company.

Her husband, Bruce Steele, who is 49 and works in software sales, says he likes to keep his papers in stacks and close at hand so he can get to them easily while working. "I like to be able to see what I have and where it is," he says. "If I put it in a drawer, I'll never look at it again." He says he tries

to stay neat in the rest of the house.



Dave Whamond

Clutter is a powerful enemy in busy families' struggle to stay happy and sane. Its psychological aspects can contribute to stress and undermine relationships. Few couples realize the importance of dealing with it until it is way out of control, relationship experts say.

Yet when a couple decides to conquer clutter, the process itself often becomes a struggle about power or control. "If you're arguing about a dirty towel on the floor, at a deeper level you may be arguing about who's in charge," says Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist with a New York practice.

To one person, a certain amount of disarray may be comforting and acceptable. To another, a disorganized household signals that home and family life aren't a top priority.

In therapy, many couples are embarrassed about discussing clutter-related conflict, Dr. Hallowell says. They worry it seems petty to complain about a pile of mail, or dirty socks on the bedroom chair. "It's not

talked about like sex or money, but it's as common as either of those," he says.

Both chronic clutterers and neat freaks may have a very mild form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, therapists say, because of how they handle the need to part with possessions. Hoarding is at the most serious end of the spectrum.

Charla Bregante, 49, and her husband Paul Kretschmer, 57, have been seeing a couples' therapist to address issues in their marriage including clutter. Both acknowledge they tend to leave the house messy, but the current lack of order was the source of a bigger rift, triggering "deeper issues like priorities, and how we spend our time and how much time we're at home and how much each person cares what other people think of us," Ms. Bregante says.

### Live Chat Recap

Alina Dizik and Dr. Patty Ann Tublin chatted with readers about the impact of clutter on their relationships on July 10. [Replay the event.](#)

When she was a stay-at-home mom, Ms. Bregante says she was expected to keep the home neat. Now that she's back at work, coaching students with severe disabilities, the house is messier than it used to be. She says her husband hasn't picked up the slack.

Mr. Kretschmer agrees the transition was difficult. He dislikes clutter, and he wants the house to be cleaner. But back when his wife stayed at home with the children, he says, he gave up control over how and when housework got done. "I've acknowledged that I want to do more cleaning in the house," he says. The couple's conflicts over the issue, he adds, "show we're in a power struggle."

With a therapist's oversight, the couple has been making lists of what needs to be cleaned in each room of their three-bedroom condo, and they have set a deadline for clearing out much of the

clutter by mid-July: That is when they are expecting an exchange student to arrive from Japan and spend 10 days in their Goleta, Calif., home.

There's more to de-cluttering than filling up a few Hefty bags, though.



Getty Images

Parting with books, clothes, toys and baby gear can be traumatic for one partner, leaving the other puzzled and unsympathetic.

Parting with books, clothes, toys and baby gear can be traumatic for one partner, leaving the other puzzled and unsympathetic, says Patty Ann Tublin, a Stamford, Conn., clinical psychologist who specializes in couples.

The emotional misalignment may be especially sharp if the clutter is made up of sentimental items from a previous marriage or relationship. Working together to sort through these kinds of belongings can actually ease stress and help create a sense of emotional closeness between spouses, she says.

Rather than criticism of the behavior that led to the clutter, a joke recognizing that it is a common problem can help to lighten the mood, Dr. Hallowell says. Once in a while, it can be a nice gesture to help clear up the other person's clutter (although it's best to avoid simply piling it all up elsewhere).

Women are no more or less likely to have clutter than men, Dr. Hallowell says.

Attitudes toward clutter often are learned in childhood. Harry Falber, 66, says his mother was always leaving papers around, and his wife collects knickknacks, just the way her own mother does.

"You walk into her house, and you've got to walk in sideways," Mr. Falber says of his mother-in-law. "It's charming stuff. It's not like 'Grey Gardens.'"

After 16 years of marriage, Mr. Falber, says he and his wife, Patricia Falber, 54, have designated "no man's zones" in their four-bedroom home in Weston, Conn., including the granite kitchen countertop, where neither person's stuff is tolerated. "We've come up with an unspoken truce where you keep your stuff in your agreed-upon area," Mr. Falber says.

Neither spouse is completely clutter-free, but they say they each keep their clutter separate. When it's time to clean, it's clear who has responsibility for what. "Clutter cannot be intermingled," Mr. Falber says.

To get his wife's cooperation in tackling clutter, Warren Techentin says he waits for the right moment to point out, tactfully, to her that the clothing she leaves around when under stress is getting out of control.

"Occasionally you have to say something, but you would do it at a time and in a manner that is amusing," says Mr. Techentin, 43, a Los Angeles architect who works with residential interiors.

Mr. Techentin says for his clients he incorporates extra storage space around clutter hot spots, such as shelves covered by wood paneling to hold mail, located near the entryway. He avoids adding too many horizontal surfaces, though, because they quickly turn into clutter magnets.

Kelli Wilson, a professional organizer in Sacramento, Calif., says her standard process for helping clients de-clutter is, first, to ask them to remove obvious trash or recycling. Then collect and donate unwanted clothing, toys, household items and books. The rest is sorted and put away.

It's important to have storage space for every item to prevent more pile-ups, she adds. If there are things you don't have room to store comfortably, give serious thought to getting rid of them.

Set realistic goals, Ms. Wilson says. She tells her clients a lived-in house will never look like the cover of a home-décor magazine. "If they can live and be comfortable than that's OK," she says.

---

### *Moving Beyond Mess*

Here are tips for creating a clutterfree home—and keeping it that way.

- Pick a stress-free moment to ask your partner to help you clean.
- Discuss the mess using humor.
- Don't take the argument beyond physical clutter and into areas where it could hurt your partner's self esteem.
- Write out a To Do list.
- Clear out space so that each item you plan to keep has a place.
- Designate some spaces as off-limits to clutter at all times. Others may be clutter-acceptable, cleared out periodically.
- Teach children to tackle their own clutter.
- Occasionally, pick up after your partner to demonstrate good will.

**Write to** Alina Dizik at [alina.dizik@dowjones.com](mailto:alina.dizik@dowjones.com)

Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)