



EXPERT Q & A:

ARE YOU A CLUTTERER?

A pro explains the causes of clutter, when a certain amount of mess is OK, and when it becomes a danger, to Akamai Living in December 2009.

AL: WHAT DEGREE OF CLUTTER IS STILL OK?

Nagel: There's everything from a minimalist whose desk is absolutely spic and span with nothing on it, all the way to the hoarder, the other extreme. But it's not really about neatness. The issue is function.

Clutterers can be functional. When we discuss being organized in my classes, there are four things we look at:

1. You can find everything you need when you need it.
2. You can get everything done when it's due.
3. Your space functions well for you. Neatness and attractiveness are secondary.
4. Your stuff serves you, not the other way around.

You can be organized but not neat, and you can be neat but not organized. They're not one and the same.

AL: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CLUTTERER AND A HOARDER?

Nagel: A clutterer is somebody who has a lot of clutter. The hoarder's life is run by the clutter. They don't function well because of it. It's like the distinction between someone who drinks a lot of alcohol and an alcoholic.

For example, hoarders can't find anything – all the time. They can't find their keys, they don't pay their bills on time because they haven't opened their mail, or they can't even find their mail. They can't find what they need when they need it on an ongoing basis. Their beds, chairs and couches are used to hold things, not people, so they sleep on the floor. They may use their kitchen appliances to store things, not food. Or have so many objects in front of them that they may not be accessible. Often access to rooms are obstructed or gotten to via goat trails.

In extreme cases, the clutter becomes a safety hazard. For example, one woman's kitchen caught fire because she had, amid other clutter, a rack of clothing near the range. The wind blew her a garment into a lit burner.

AL: WHEN DOES CLUTTER BECOME HAZARDOUS

Nagel: One, when it creates stress in you life. If you have a lot of stress, your body may release the stress hormone cortisol, which can affect your physical well-being.

Clutter is a safety hazard when people trip over objects or slip on papers, fall and injure themselves. What if your hallway has clutter on the floor and you have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, or you have a houseguest who's unfamiliar with the home and falls? Or, as in my previous example, excess clutter can lead to fire.

Then there's the hazard of allergies and respiratory ailments because there's so much dust and you can't get to it to keep it clean. Often insects like roaches and silverfish make it their home

If clutter is that extreme, then these individuals are hoarders, not clutterers. Hoarding is part of a deep-rooted obsessive-compulsive disorder, and usually they won't change without professional help.

I worked with one client whose house was so inundated with things that she couldn't use any of her kitchen appliances because they were blocked by shelves holding more things in front of them. You had to walk on laundry and around canned goods, some even swollen, that were everywhere on the floor. Her husband, who loved her dearly and couldn't function in that environment, built an apartment on the second floor of their home and moved there.

AL: WHAT CAUSES CLUTTER?

Nagel: There are many causes starting with the belief in scarcity. Lynn Twist writes about this in *The Soul of Money*. Before we even get out of bed in the morning, we're thinking that we don't have enough time, money or whatever. This is the culture in which we live. We view our lives from the perspective of not having enough, or more is better. Having what we need is no longer sufficient.

When you come from a place of scarcity, you hold onto things longer. You purchase more things because you tell yourself you have to have them, rather than because you really need them. For example, the fashion industry has us believing we can't wear what we wore last year, so we get new clothes, but we don't get rid of the old ones.

Clutter is also caused by a lack of organizational systems or by systems that do not function well for the individual. These are distinctly different: Lack of a system and not having the system you are already using function well for you.

We hold onto things because we believe they'll be valuable some day, collectibles like Beanie Babies. In almost every group I teach, at least one student has collected them. Obviously, there were so many produced that they will never be rare.

Discount, volume purchases add to our clutter, things like bulk vegetables that may rot before eaten or 30-roll packs of toilet paper.

Some of us leave things out as visual reminders, and that may turn into clutter. You leave something by the front door so you won't forget to return it to the store. You leave the soap powder out as a reminder to do the laundry. Then sometimes they remain there for weeks. Or you buy a pair of pants and they're too long, so you leave them on the chair to be hemmed, and six months later they're still on the chair—under all the other things you've left out in the meantime.

Although it's much better now, the computer age has created more paper clutter, not less. Many of us used to print every joke and we had piles of these. Now we're doing more to reduce paper clutter like receiving paperless statements, pay bills online and, hopefully, printing less. But many still print articles, recipes and coupons that may turn into clutter.

AL: DO WE HAVE A BIGGER CLUTTER PROBLEM IN HAWAII BECAUSE MANY PEOPLE INHERIT PARENTS' AND GRANDPARENTS' HOMES, WITH ALL THEIR ACCUMULATED GENERATIONS OF STUFF?

Nagel: I wouldn't say that Hawaii has more multigenerational clutter than the Mainland, because people on the Mainland also inherit things or keep things they sort through when parents die, and they absorb things into their own homes.

It's a bigger problem in Hawaii because we don't have much storage space. We have smaller homes with no attics or basements. If you drive around a community with open lanais and covered carports, you'll see things stacked up. I would estimate that 25 percent of two-car garages are used exclusively to store things, leaving little or no room for cars. That's why there are so many self-storage places being built everywhere.

There's also a cultural aspect in Hawaii. So many people in Asian cultures have been taught that you don't make waves, so it's very difficult to say "no thank you" when someone offers you something. There's a different set of behaviors than you might expect in other cultures.

On the Mainland, people are able to say a bit more readily, "That's really lovely, but why don't you give it to someone else because it's just going to sit in my drawer."

I teach clients and students how to say "no thank you." It's about acknowledging the giver for how special they are in their lives and getting them to see that their relationship is more about friendship and love than about the thing they're giving. And that if the gift is not a win/win proposition, the item would best be given to someone else who would gain more value from it.

So if your auntie comes to visit and she's has a bracelet which she's inherited and wants to pass it along to you, and you don't wear bracelets, you could say, "You're my favorite auntie, and the bracelet is not going to be a good memory for me because I'm not going to wear it and I'll feel bad. May I pass it along to my niece who loves bracelets, or donate it somewhere special in your name?" It is becoming more acceptable to do this in our culture than it has in the past.

In my decluttering classes, the homework assignment is to donate one thing, throw away one thing, and give away one thing every week. The giveaway piece has a caveat: They can't give it away unless they offer it in a way that the receiver can say "Yes, I'd love it," or just as comfortably, "No thank you."