

## **A PERFECTIONIST WHO LIVES WITH CLUTTER?**

It's commonly assumed that if someone is a perfectionist, his/her house must be the epitome of neatness. Not necessarily. Speaking for myself, I'm a pack rat and, as a result, there tends to be a fair amount of clutter in my home.

I used to think I was an exception; no one else could be so focused on details and doing things "right" yet allow themselves to accumulate so much of everything (especially paper and emails). But it turns out that perfectionism and hoarding are related.

This was clearly demonstrated in a workshop I taught recently. Asked how many of them hold onto things/information, almost all participants raised their hands. Their reactions showed they were as surprised by this as I had been. And it was evident that each person experienced some relief knowing s/he was not unique in this way.

What's the connection? There are two patterns of behavior in which perfectionism usually shows up in someone's life. The reasons for hoarding ultimately boil down to those two:

1. Contingency planning/extra effort: allowing extra time or space, keeping surplus inventory (e.g., over-stocking supplies)
2. Avoidance: not taking or delaying action lest a mistake be made (e.g., I may make a mistake and throw out something I'll need later on). In this case, the untaken action is making a decision about what to discard.

Not all perfectionists are prone to be clutterbugs and not all pack rats are perfectionists. But for many, there is a connection -one that is totally unexpected.

## **EXPERIMENTING WITH REDUCTION OF CLUTTER**

Pick one room in the house you want to work on. Better yet- pick one drawer, one table, one closet.

### PART I

Each day, for at least 2 weeks:

- Decide on 5 items that you want to discard.
- Notice what sensations you experience as you set each thing aside, for example:
  - Feeling lighter
  - Tightness in the chest
  - Easier breathing
  - Clenched jaw
  - Relaxed jaw
  - Sweating
  - Tingling in your fingers
- Jot down these self-observations each day.
- Instead of disposing of the items, place them in a bag or box and put that container in a storage area (other than the room it came from) where you won't normally see it.

## PART II

After waiting at least one week after you've finished PART I, retrieve the container.

- Do whatever feels right to you:
  - Throw everything out without checking what's there OR
  - Go through the collection and decide what to keep, what to toss
  - (Here's an added challenge:) Do NOT judge yourself while doing this.
  
- Notice your sensations regardless of which action you choose to take (i.e., toss or revisit)
  - How strong a reaction is there this time compared to the first time you went through things?
  - In what way(s) are they the same or different than when you first set them aside?
  
- What have you learned about the experience of holding onto things?

The intent is not to clear the space but rather to learn about how holding on and letting go affects you. Whatever you do- it will be perfect for you.

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### **ABOUT FRANCINE GORDON:**

Francine is an executive coach who focuses on helping people overcome the negative consequences of perfectionism. She also supports managers and executives who are working through transition (e.g., promotion, integration into a new company, new assignment).

Immediately after earning her Ph.D. from Yale University, Francine joined the faculty of Stanford GSB as Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior. Since leaving academia, she's held a variety of positions including director of marketing at Pacific Bell, general manager of California Actors Theatre (professional repertory company), director of human resources at UB Networks (a subsidiary of Tandem Computers), and manager in the Organization Practice Group at Boston Consulting Group. She is a certified integral coach (and a recovering perfectionist).