



WORK.
LIFE.
SMARTS.

CLEARING SPACE

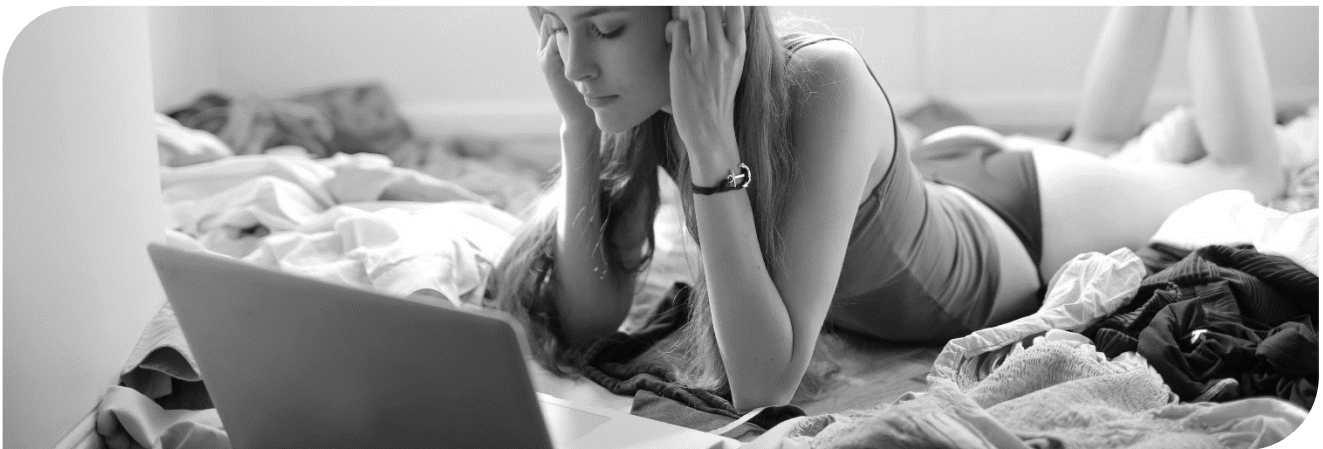
What does clutter look like in your life?



If you hear the word clutter, what immediately springs to mind? You might think of physical clutter, but there are other types of clutter that might feature in your life too. We live in a world where many things that used to take up physical space now take up virtual space. Our phones and computers might be cluttered with all sorts of apps or documents or emails or disorganized virtual stuff. Our brains too, can be full to bursting with mental clutter – to-do lists and obligations and responsibilities and worries, filling our heads and making it hard to think clearly, calmly or creatively.

I want to preface this topic with something important. I'm not here to tell you to live a minimalist life or get rid of anything that doesn't give you joy. I have plenty of clutter in my life, and [this link contains information](#) on a study that suggests clutter may stimulate creativity. It's worth a read – not all clutter is “bad”!

However, clutter, whether physical or technological or mental, can get in the way of us feeling our best or showing up as our best selves. It may also get in the way of us turning those creative ideas into action. This topic is about recognizing where and how clutter is not serving us, and devising ways to best deal with it – habits that allow you to retain a sense of control.



How does clutter affect you?

Everyone's experience and situation will be different. You might be someone for whom clutter features heavily, in many areas of your life. You might be a normally super organized person, who has become overwhelmed by mental or emotional responsibility and carries an enormous mental load around with you. You might be someone with a house full of messy kids, who craves a tidy corner of their own. You might be well advanced but can identify some marginal gains you can make to improve even more.

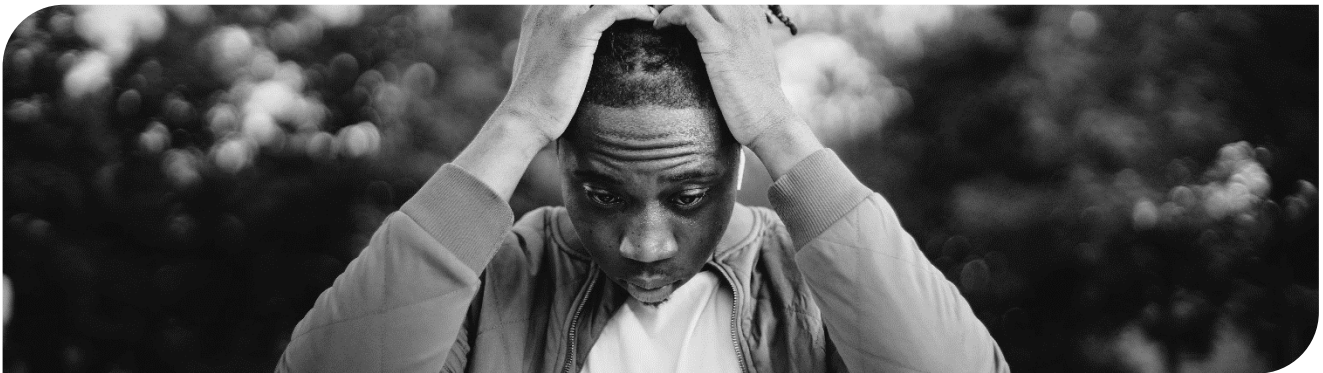
Wherever you are at right now, remember, *there is no right or wrong*, and no need to judge yourself or anyone else. Start where you are, and take it, one step at a time, from there.

DISCOVERY 1

There are many ways in which clutter can affect us adversely.

Inefficiency

If a space is cluttered, it can be difficult to find things you need. A disorganized room or physical clutter might mean you can't find your keys or wallet when you're in a hurry. It also means it takes longer to clean (and who needs that in their life?) Technological clutter might make it hard to find an important document. Mental clutter might cause you to forget an appointment. Not only does that make you less efficient, but it can also cause stress.



Stress

On top of the stress brought on by lack of efficiency, being in a disorganized space is likely to affect your cortisol levels. Cortisol is a stress hormone – and when your levels are raised, you tend to feel stressed out or agitated. I have a friend who describes clutter as making her feel 'itchy' – a physical sensation. If clutter is your norm, you might find that you notice a difference when you go away on vacation. You know that feeling of relaxation you arrive in the clear, open space of your hotel room or vacation cottage, not surrounded by stuff...?

Even if your physical space is tidy, your phone might be cluttered with notifications or your email inbox might have a few thousand unread... You may have become

accustomed to it, but every so often you have to find something specific and it's harder than it should be...

And your brain may be teeming with a soup of tasks or responsibilities or ideas that you're trying not to forget. That can get pretty exhausting, particularly if the list starts reviewing itself repeatedly at 3am...)

Distraction

Clutter of any sort can make it hard for you to focus. That can affect productivity, stress levels, or relationships if it makes it hard for you to focus 100% on another person.



Shame And Embarrassment

If you've ever looked at your living room and thought 'I hope no one shows up at the door' or you've been embarrassed to let someone see the state of your computer desktop, you'll know what I am talking about. Shame is an emotion that feels uncomfortable and gets in the way of all sorts of things. Definitely one worth being aware of, especially if it causes social isolation.

Memory Issues

It makes sense that mental clutter taking up brainspace can affect your memory. But *physical* clutter can actually do the same thing. Your brain is wired to keep track of only a few things at once so it can get overloaded when there is too much going on.

Letting Go

Whether it's physical clutter, or mental clutter, sometimes we hold on to things when letting them go would be more beneficial.

Letting go might mean getting rid of physical stuff from your home or your office that you have been hanging on to 'just in case you need it one day'.

It might mean letting go of responsibilities – delegating a task to someone else.

It might mean deciding that something on your to-do list isn't actually that important, and you can take it off.



It might mean noticing things you could add to a Stop Doing list.

It might mean letting go of a few “shoulds” and “ought tos” from your self talk. Letting go of an idea of what you are “supposed” to be as an entrepreneur or a parent or whatever other role you are in.

Try noticing what things you might let go of in your life and explore what it feels like to actually let go of them.

You may experience resistance to it, you may find it difficult. On the other hand, you may find it liberating, freeing – you may find that letting go of just a few things creates the space for you to thrive in other ways.

Clutter is Delayed Decisions

The theory that clutter is just delayed decisions is an interesting one to explore.



Whether it's physical, technological or mental clutter, it may be a symptom of decisions you're procrastinating. That can come from a place of fear, or a place of perfectionism. You may be afraid of making the wrong decision about something. You may find yourself thinking 'I might need this some day'. You might be mentally weighing up all the pros and cons, trying to find the perfect choice, or waiting for a sign to help you make a decision.

The Only Wrong Decision Is No Decision

Think of a time when you were decisive. Think about the relief or satisfaction you felt when that decision was made, and an action was taken. Think about how good it might feel to get some of those pending decisions off your plate. What would it feel like just to decide?

It's good to be aware of decision fatigue. There are theories that we are only capable of a certain number of decisions each day. Take this into account when you design your plan for this month. If you know you have a hard time deciding whether to get rid of things, you might want to commit to only 10 minutes a day of sorting through your stuff. If your brain is full of unmade decisions, you might want to prioritize them and commit to making only one of those important decisions each day.

“Imperfect Action Beats Perfect Inaction”

If perfectionism is one of your tendencies, print out or write down this phrase and pin it up somewhere you will see it regularly.



Imperfect Action

Beats

Perfect Inaction

Perfectionism can show up in lots of ways. It might be about decisions, it might be in the form of waiting to take action until you can do an entire room or file thousands of emails in one sitting.

Let me gently remind you that you're a busy person, and that time is very unlikely to present itself (and even if it did, you might choose to spend it doing something more fun). Start small, do a tiny bit – a single drawer, a single shelf, a 10 minute time slot, and use Regular Consistent Action to help you make progress in small increments.

Make It Simple

I can't stress this enough. The simpler you make your process or your options, the easier it is to make decisions.



With physical clutter, try this:

- Give yourself only three options with items – KEEP, DONATE, THROW OUT
- For stuff you are throwing out – put it straight into a garbage bag. Let it go. If you find this hard, you might even write 'let it go' on the bag.
- For donations, have a place already lined up in your mind to donate to. If possible, make it somewhere nearby, that you go past regularly so it's convenient to drop them off. If they will collect from you, even better. Have their phone number handy to make the call. If you find yourself wondering if you might use this thing one day – it's worth remembering that this item might be of immediate use to someone else, rather than taking up space in your home.
- For anything you decide to keep, find a place for it as soon as you can. Keep any filing systems simple too, so it makes it easy to put future things away! Avoid colour coding or complex categorization – anything that's more complicated than it needs to be could be an obstacle to you staying on top of your stuff and keeping it organized.

With **technological clutter**, try this:

- For existing clutter, such as emails, apps and documents, give yourself only a couple of options: KEEP, DELETE
- If you don't need it, or don't use it, delete it or cancel your subscription.
- If you are going to need it in the future, file it in a simple filing system that makes it obvious where to look for it in the future. You can refine your filing system as you go along if you need to, so don't overthink it.
- For clutter that keeps coming (like emails and notifications) – think about what you can prevent. Unsubscribe from email newsletters you never read. Turn off app notifications. Remember that these things can also clutter your brain as they distract and divert your attention.

Ask for Help

Lots of people struggle to ask for help – and there can be many reasons for this. If you recognize this in yourself, it can be helpful to remind yourself that you don't have to handle everything alone.

If you're going to work on physical clutter, you might want to have some help with decisions on what to keep and what to get rid of. You might benefit from help with taking donations to the thrift store. If you're working on mental clutter, the simple delegation, maybe to other members of your family, of some of the tasks and responsibilities you're carrying around in your head, can lighten the load.

If you find yourself resistant to asking for help, do a little digging and notice without judgement – what habitual thought patterns are making this uncomfortable? Are you feeling shame about not being able to do it all yourself? Or do you feel you "shouldn't" have allowed things to get so bad? Are you feeling the need to control the activity so it's done to your 'standards'? Do you feel in some way that you are not deserving of help? Humans need each other, and asking for help is ok. If it feels uncomfortable start small – remember, marginal gains are gains.

Mind Dump

One of my go-to techniques for dealing with an overwhelming amount of mental clutter is to do a mind dump. This is where you sit with a sheet of paper, and write down all the different things you need to do. You literally just list everything, in one place – effectively taking it out of your head, because now you have a solid record of it on your paper.

It might be a loooong list – but don't worry, here's where you break it down.

You're going to prioritize based when things need to get done *as of right now*.

- Anything that **must be done today** – give it a P1 priority.
- **Could do tomorrow** is P2
- **Anything else** is P3.

Highlight the P1s, and ignore everything else. You may find there aren't too many of these. Focus on these must do today things and check them off as you go.

If you get through these, you can start on P2s if you like – and celebrate the fact that you're getting a few things done a day earlier than they had to be done!

Tomorrow, you write your list up again, only with the tasks that remain (or anything new that has come up) – prioritize again as of right now that minute.

I've included a template for doing this in this month's materials, so feel free to print some off to try this technique.

Ideas Jar

If you find you are easily filling up your brain with creative ideas and are therefore getting overwhelmed or are easily distracted from the task in hand by “bright shiny objects”, try using an Ideas Jar.



You write down these ideas so you can come back to them in the future without having to hold them in your head, and put them in an actual jar or binder or notebook. This can be a great way to create brainspace when you have other priorities for the time being.

It has the added benefit of giving you a bank of ideas if you ever run short of them and require inspiration in the future.

Tidying Away

Tidying away as you go along is perhaps an obvious way to deal with physical clutter. I'm not a natural at this, I will admit. It takes work! But it does feature in my daily activity in a few simple areas – I make sure the kitchen is left tidy before I go to bed, because if I get up to an untidy kitchen in the morning it really affects my stress levels and my mood starting the day.

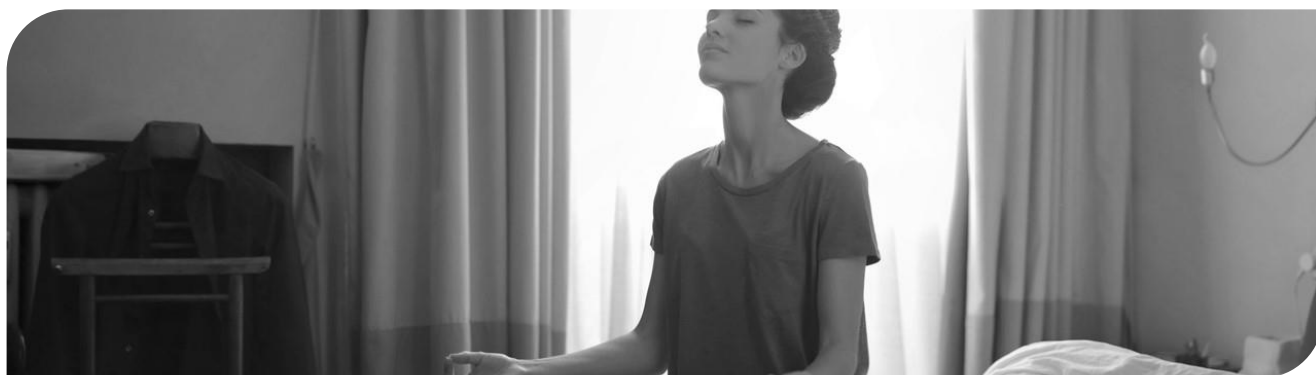


Do something today that your future self will thank you for

You might decide to implement a Regular consistent Action this month that is about Tidying Away. For example, you might want to spend 5 minutes at the end of your work day clearing your desk, or filing emails so you start fresh the next day.



You can also use the tidying away concept with mental clutter. If your brain gets really full and busy, and you need to create “brainspace”, you may wish to try one of these ideas:



Start your day with a meditation to focus and connect your mind with your body or surroundings, before you begin on ‘busy’ tasks for the day. This can have a similar effect as tidying your work desk or clearing the toys off the floor. It creates space in your brain so it can work more effectively. Try the Active Stillness guided meditation in the Core Principles of Work.Life.Smarts as a start point. Or download the Insight Timer app – this contains thousands of guided meditations you can explore.



Switch up your activity – if you find your mental clutter is building up during the day, reset your focus by stepping away from the ‘busy brain’ activity – perhaps by taking a short walk outside. Engage your senses – breathe the air, notice the smells and sights. Alternatively, switch to a work activity that requires less processing power – a bit of filing or copying, or cleaning. You can even set a timer to remind you to take regular short brain breaks through the day.

There might be other strategies or ideas that spring to mind. Whatever they are, I'd love to know about them! Make it meaningful for you.



Now you're ready to move to the Design Phase of this topic. Download the worksheets, and work through the questions to connect it to your work and your life, and to design your plan.

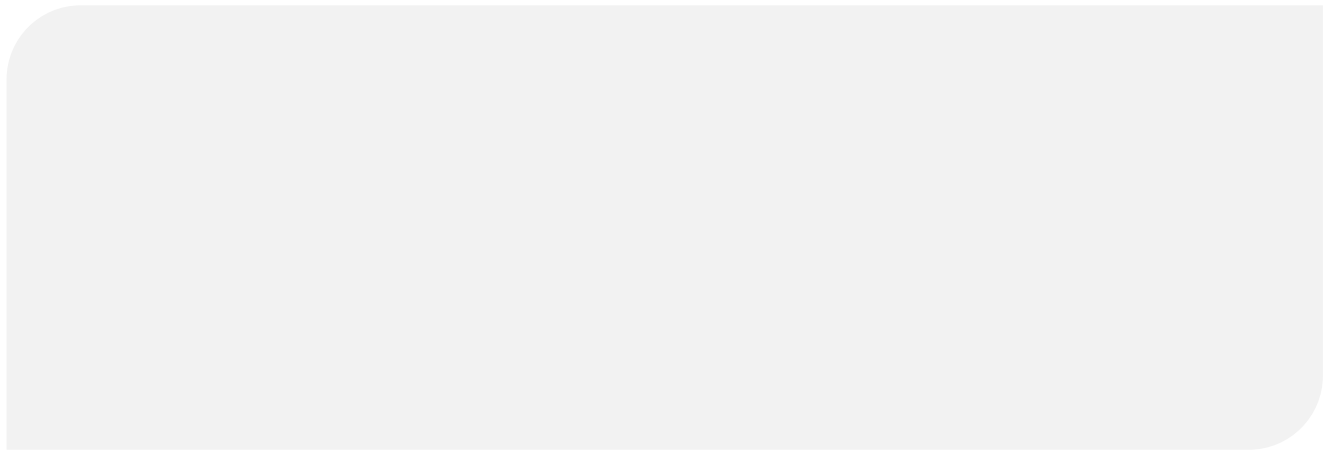
DESIGN

It's time to think about how you'd like to clear space in work or life (or both). Work through the questions to help you build your plan for this topic.

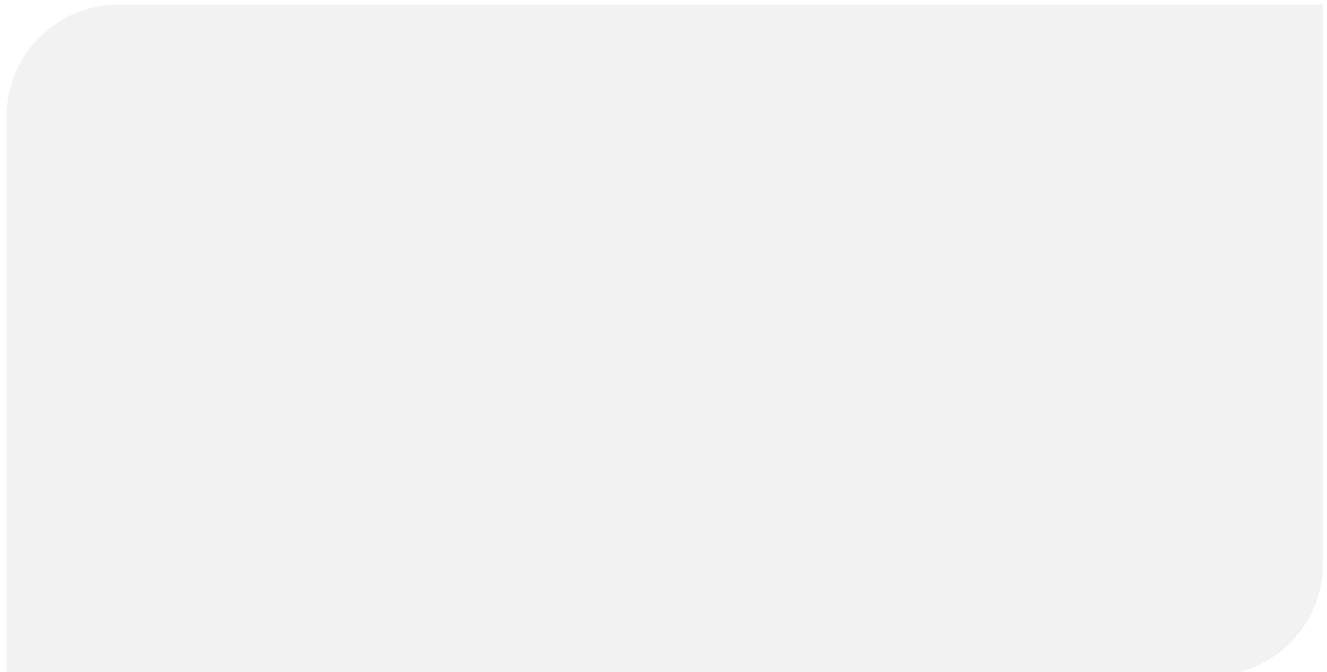
Which parts of the first Discovery phase most resonate with you? How does clutter manifest in your life? Is it physical, technological, mental? In which areas do you feel the most need to clear space?

What effect does cluttered or busy space have on you? How does it make you feel?

What could clearing space look like for you? Visualize it; explore how it might feel. Think about the effects that a clearer space of any kind would have on you – on your stress levels, your body, your emotions, your productivity, or any other aspect of your life. Can you think of a time in the past when you have experienced ‘clear space’? How did that feel?



Ultimately, where would you like to get to? Use this space to explore this idea in a way that feels good to you – with words, photos, drawings, inspiring quotations, a list of goals...



Let's get specific. What could you work on *this month*? How would you like to clear space in your life right now? What is the highest priority to begin with? (Remember, keep it realistic, just choose one small thing!)

Which strategy/strategies will you use to get started with this?

Write out your Regular Consistent Action Plan:

Specific Action I Will Do:

When I Will Do It:

DO!

Now you've made your plan, it's time to take action!

Hopefully you've decided on something simple and realistic to work on, but if you do find that you've bitten off more than you can chew, remember it's ok to flex and adjust. Tiny actions count.

This Doing phase is so important. By taking action we get results, and by *doing* we also give ourselves the opportunity to fall on our faces and *fail* – and failure is a great way to learn.

If you go off track during this phase, and miss your habit building activity for a day or two, notice, if you can, what got in your way. Pick it back up from where you left off just as soon as you can and remember this process is rarely linear!



No failure is truly a failure if we learn from it.

Spend a little time as often as you can reflecting on your journey – I've created Journal and Self-Reflection prompts to help you do this (on the next page).

JOURNAL AND SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

As you work through the Do Phase, self-reflection and 'checking in' with yourself are important parts of the process. A few minutes spent journalling can help you work through your experience and process what you're learning as you build new habits and notice old ones. Use these questions to guide you as you write in your journal, reflect internally, or chat through your experience with an accountability partner.



What is/are my Clearing Space intentions for today/tomorrow?

What small gains am I making? How does that feel?

What stories am I telling myself?

What judgements am I discovering? Am I noticing "should" and "ought to" in my self-talk?
Can I replace "should" with "could"?

What existing habits am I noticing?

What changes or results or successes am I noticing? How could I build on these results?

What have been my biggest challenges?

What am I proudest of?

What frustrations am I experiencing?

Can I give myself permission to be kinder to myself?

AFFIRMATIONS

Try these affirmations on for size...



I make decisions with ease.

I take joy in my surroundings.

I let go to create space for myself to thrive.

I take action today that my future self will thank me for.

Imperfect action beats perfect inaction.

I am generous in giving help and I gratefully receive it.

I nurture my surroundings so I may grow and thrive.

Add your own affirmations here:

DISCOVERY 2

Once you've been working at the doing phase for a little while, it's time for a bit more Discovery! Time to review your progress, take stock of where you're at in the journey, and look at what you're learning about yourself.



Doing an honest review of how things are going is an important step towards making lasting change. However you have decided to approach your practice of Clearing Space, understanding what works well for you, AND what you find most challenging, will help you to successfully build new habits for the long term.



What's Working Well?

Understanding what is working well will help you to learn what to keep doing, or what you could do more of, to amplify your results. Let's begin by celebrating success, whatever size or shape that takes for you.

What's working well and what have you achieved? Perhaps you set a regular consistent action and you stuck to it 90% of the time. Perhaps you've made a start in some tiny way on a space clearing activity that you've been putting off. Perhaps you tackled a single shelf. Perhaps you identified an expectation that you had of yourself that you're in the process of letting go of. Perhaps you've worked through some mental clutter and made a few decisions. Perhaps you've learned something about yourself or your habits in this process even if the results weren't what you've wanted or hoped for.

Whether you cleared your inbox from five thousand to zero, or you deleted just one day's worth of junk mail, there are successes to celebrate unconditionally. Every marginal gain is a gain. In celebration of whatever achievement you've made there are important questions to ask that will help to inform your next steps.

What worked well for you? How did it feel to achieve that? What ideas, techniques, thoughts or affirmations have helped you to achieve that success? Are there any conditions (environmental, physical, emotional, or support you had in place) that contributed to the times that things went well? What results have been the most pleasing to you? What are you proudest of and why? Have you noticed that clearing space in one area helps success in another? Clearing mental space may help you to feel more calm or in control. Clearing physical space may affect your mood or your productivity. What have you learned about yourself so far?

What's Not Working Well?

Before you begin searching for answers about what is not working so well remember the concept of noticing without judgment. It can be challenging not to give yourself a hard time if you've not met your own expectations but doing an honest appraisal with your own self is actually the best way to address the challenges and the roadblocks that might have gotten in your way. So before you start, give yourself permission to quiet that judgy voice in your head and ask the inner perfectionist that is not satisfied with mistakes to keep their opinions to themselves for a while, so you can make it safe for yourself to be honest about what isn't working and about what's really getting in your way.

What are you finding most difficult or challenging in this process? What have you tried but you're not doing so well at? Is there anything you were expecting to be easy but are finding hard instead? What stories are you telling yourself about this?

You may have decided to spend five minutes clearing away after you finish work or filing emails to keep your inbox as empty as possible. It seems easy enough on paper, right? You did it the first day, you missed the next day, you did it the day after that, but since then you've not gotten to it. It would be great to start your workday with a tidy desk and only fresh emails in your inbox, right? But for some reason you're unable to do this. This is an apparently easy exercise, so the story you're telling yourself is that you have no discipline, you're not good enough, you'll never be like one of those naturally organized people who don't have a problem doing this kind of stuff. Notice without judgement that this is the story you tell yourself and gently remind yourself it's simply old habits surfacing, and changing old habits takes practice, patience, and persistence.

If you've blown off course completely in this process don't panic and don't give up! You can pick up your plan any time. Remember that every day you have the power to choose what you do. Sometimes you'll choose the new habit and sometimes you might choose the old one even if you know it isn't serving you. Progress isn't linear and that's okay. The important thing is to keep revisiting the habits that you want to develop and to keep

practicing. That's grit, and it's not about how many times you fail it's about how many times you get up and try again.



What are you noticing? What unconscious habits are becoming apparent to you what do you think is getting in your way? What's the struggle? What old habits or patterns have you identified while you've been working on building this new one? These might even be habits that have caused clutter of some sort in the first place. These habits may be patterns of behavior thought or mindset.

Maybe you have a behavioral habit of not put away as you go along. Maybe you have a thought habit of ignoring junk emails thinking, "I'll come back to that later, I'll deal with it then," instead of unsubscribing and deleting it when you first see it. (That's a habit of mine, by the way!) Maybe you have a mindset habit of saying yes to all sorts of requests because you believe that you shouldn't say no to anybody and that always ends up eating up the five minutes you had put aside.

Noticing and identifying these behaviors can help you identify alternative desirable behaviors that you'd like to develop instead.

Revisit Your Plan

Revisit your original plan and remind yourself of the goals and intentions that you set for yourself in the design phase. How consistently are you meeting your own expectations?

Are you trying to do too much? If so, you can adjust your plan to make it more simple or more realistic so you increase your chances of doing the activity even if you're lacking in time or motivation.

Do you want to stretch it a bit more? If you're feeling great about how much you're doing and you're building momentum you could actually try adding to your plan, and if you find you've added too much remember you're allowed to dial it back again.

Do you need to adjust the time of day you do your regular consistent action? Is it competing with other tasks? Are your energy levels too low at that time of day?

If you've noticed old habits identify: what would you like to do instead? What is working well that you could repeat or do more off? What adjustments could you make to help you dig through resistance or navigate roadblocks?

Next Steps

Now it's time to refine your plan and adjust it for success! Use the refine worksheets to help you.

REFINE

What's Working Well?

What achievement(s) would you like to celebrate? Any achievement or success, no matter how small, can be celebrated.

How did it feel to achieve these things?

What ideas, techniques, thoughts, or affirmations have helped you to achieve that success?

Are there any other factors or conditions (environmental, physical, emotional, support etc) that have contributed to the times that things went well? What were they?

What results have been the most pleasing or satisfying to you?

What are you proudest of, and why?

What is Not Working So Well?

What are you finding most difficult or challenging in this process? What have you tried but are not doing so well at? Is there anything you were expecting to be easy, but finding hard instead?

What stories are you telling yourself about why it's not happening as you expected? Can you challenge stories where you see judgement or self-criticism?

What do you think is getting in your way? How might you navigate this roadblock?

As you look back at your original plan, are there any adjustments you would like to make?

What steps would you like to take to support yourself better in clearing space?

Do you need to ask for help or support? Who will you ask? How will you ask them?

BECOME

The Become Phase is about consolidating what you have learned, what worked well, and what to take forward with you into the future.

As you notice things about yourself, and choose new, desirable behaviours consistently, the repetition and practice you're doing helps you to build a new habit.

You might choose to continue to practice something you have started, for example you might be experimenting with clearing space at the end of a work day. You might choose to use what you are learning to complete a clearing space 'project' such as getting rid of clutter. You might choose to try something new to support your clearing space practice. Use the Become phase to help you decide what to work on next.

Remember this isn't 'one and done' - habits take time, practice and repetition to change and develop. We want our new habits to become part of us, and this is why the 'Become' Phase is so important. Continual improvement is really about continually noticing, reflecting, and refining as you practice conscious desirable behaviour. The Become Phase helps you equip yourself with something manageable that you can continue to practice and repeat, even as you work through other topics, so your new desirable behaviour can become part of your habitual patterning - and become unconscious desirable behaviour.

How long does that habit development take? Be patient! It doesn't happen overnight, and that's ok. Just keep doing it, and trust that over time, the new behaviour will build.

Print this and work through the questions to help you decide what habits to carry forward with you. Use your journal or notes you have made from self-reflection to help you.

Choose one (or maybe two) small things you'd like to continue with beyond the end of this topic. These might be behaviours, thought patterns or self talk – things you want to build for the long term. (Remember: make them manageable! You probably have a busy life already and overloading yourself is not healthy or sustainable.)

Why is this important or meaningful to you? If you can, identify the value this habit holds for you.

Write your future self a note of encouragement... what would you like to remember if you need a little support in the future? What advice do you want to leave for future you?

Dear Future Me,

Above all, have fun with this topic, and let me know how you got on!

Big love,

Liz

