

Introduction

The Extra Weight

A culture of fat

The easiest thing to be in America is fat. It's easier than working, easier than raising a family, easier than making money, and definitely easier than getting up and switching off the TV. Being fat has become the national pastime.

When it comes to body size and image, we live in a confused and contradictory world. For all the concern the social commentators, the psychologists, and the politically correct have about the unhealthy influence of those slick fashion and celebrity magazines featuring too-thin models and rapidly reducing stars, that's not where the real problem lies. Yes, the culture of thin that appears in magazines, in movies, and on television is ubiquitous, selling everything from cars to new dentures. But thin's not the story on the street.

The reality is that we worship large. Our cars are the biggest and the fattest—we drive vehicles that consume a gallon of gas every ten miles. Our houses are huge—the average home size

is steadily increasing while the average family size is decreasing. Our homes are overflowing with the fat of the things we consume—we spend more time shopping than any other people on earth. Our meals are gargantuan—portion sizes have tripled in the United States over the last twenty-five years. Boeing has increased the assumed weight for each passenger by more than twenty pounds. Office chairs are being made larger to accommodate our bigger butts. Even Disneyland, the happiest—but obviously not the thinnest—place on earth, is redesigning some of its costumes and uniforms to accommodate ever-increasing waist sizes. You'll be happy to know that even if you have a fifty-eight-inch waist and want to work at Disneyland, they have a pair of pants for you! Everywhere we see the effects of an increasingly heavy population—from office chairs to bra sizes, everything is getting bigger. And, most noticeable of all, our pants no longer fit most of us—no surprise since the average waist size has grown four inches in less than ten years. With two-thirds of Americans overweight or obese, it's impossible to deny that we love, love, love fat.

As a nation we are reveling in an orgy of consumption and it shows no sign of letting up. We can't get enough of anything. The American mantra has become “more is better” and we are applying that motto with gusto to almost every aspect of our lives. If consuming is good, then consuming more is better.

When did buying stuff become a national obsession? When did we become such crazy consumers? When did we get so fat? It all seems to have happened quickly and with little warning. Yesterday you had no trouble fitting into your jeans and today you feel like you're being strangled—at the waistline. America and the world have changed dramatically in our own lifetime. Everything moves more quickly—fast travel, fast mail, fast food. We are all drawn into this ever-quickening pace. “I want it and I want it now” seems almost reasonable. If others can have it, why can't I?

Amazingly, we have come close to achieving instant gratification. The 1.3 billion credit cards in circulation in America are one indication that we can buy things the moment the

urge strikes us, whether we can afford them or not. We can pay for it later. And plenty of stuff is cheap anyway. We buy things with little thought of the consequences and, even when buried in debt, our purchases continue. We can afford a lot and get it fast. So what do we do? We fill our houses and our lives with it.

Similarly, food is cheap and immediately available. We now buy half the food we consume outside our homes. Takeout is quick, efficient, and cheap. It suits our fast-paced lives. You don't have to think about what you're eating—or how much. You'll deal with it later. Or not. We seem to be genuinely unaware of the connection between what we put into our mouths and the size of our waists. We can even ignore reality by purchasing one of the new digital cameras with a “slim down” function. Hewlett-Packard's website promises “the slimming feature, available on select HP digital camera models, is a subtle effect that can instantly trim off pounds from the subjects in your photos!” Now you can go down in skinny history. But in the here and now, this convenience comes at a cost. Pig out today, but strip down to your underwear tomorrow, stand in front of a mirror, and you'll see the cost I'm talking about!

When it comes to losing weight, we are promised the same instant weight loss that those digital cameras offer. A house can be built on television in a week. An ugly duckling can get a new face and a new body in a mere sixty minutes on prime time. A celebrity can lose the baby weight in three weeks. Who can blame us for expecting the instant fix? But it's all an illusion. Paying with a credit card seems painless, but we all know the bill comes later and has to be paid off with hours of hard work.

The same is true when you overeat on a regular basis. Only hard work will get rid of the excess. Our choices today have consequences we have to deal with tomorrow—there's no way around it.

It's All Too Much:

Living a Richer Life with Less Stuff

Four years ago I became the organizational expert on a television show called Clean Sweep. The premise of the show was very simple. A team of experts—including me, a designer, a carpenter, and a crew that assisted in the painting and redesign plans—was given two days to help a family dig out from under their overwhelming clutter. In two days, with a budget of two thousand dollars, we tackled two rooms and really managed to work some miracles. These were not homes with a little clutter here and there. I vividly remember walking into a home where the homeowner said, without flinching, while standing in three-foot-deep clutter, “There is a piano in there somewhere, but I haven't seen it in seventeen years.” We found a dining room where the family had not seen the surface of the dining table—much less managed to eat there—for more than six years. And then there was the guy with more than three hundred pairs of shoes—and that wasn't counting what he'd hidden in the garage before I got there! This was clutter that had a life of its own, taking over whole homes and suffocating any chance that the family might have had to live an organized, stress-free life.

The people on Clean Sweep may be extreme cases, but this situation is far more common than any of the Clean Sweep team had expected. It was not unusual for our production office to receive two hundred and fifty applications a day, all begging to be on the show. Like the clutter we saw every day, we were inundated with people needing our help. The sheer weight and volume of what people own is truly overwhelming many homes across

America. It's hard to find a home today that has a garage in which there's room left to park a car. There are the houses so full of "stuff" that families are reduced to navigating narrow paths through their clutter. We saw spaces so full of collectibles, furniture, paper, clothes, books, and shoes that even the homeowners themselves seemed mystified by what their lives had become.

What started out as a program to help people deal with clutter quickly morphed into something very different. It became obvious that the clutter represented something much deeper going on in many of the people's lives and relationships. For those people, and many of the clients I work with, a shift had taken place—almost without them realizing it. They no longer owned their stuff; their stuff owned them. For some, it went even further. Their "stuff" was the way they defined themselves—"I am what I own." They were unable or unwilling to separate themselves from what they owned to the point that their living spaces became partially—or in some cases totally—unusable. To break this pattern is an intense challenge. It's not just about putting things in garbage bags or finding the right photo boxes. I help people confront and redefine their relationships with what they own.

The letters that appear throughout this book are a sampling of the many e-mails and notes I receive almost every day. I've removed names and/or stripped away identifying details, but the sentiments are genuine and the people who have expressed them are real.

Each of us has one life. You. Me. Our friends and family. But I have to ask: Is it the life you want? It may be unexpected, but this is the question I always start with when helping people declutter and organize their homes—and ultimately their lives. What is the vision you have of the life you want to live? Are you living the life you want?

This is where many of my clients have lost their way. Somehow they've lost sight of what it is they want from the life they have. Almost imperceptibly their stuff infiltrates. Eventually the clutter fills their space and their life. A sense of frustration and impotence takes over and they feel powerless to turn things around.

Creating a vision for the life you want to live forces you to make decisions based on the real priorities that should drive your life. Do you want to keep the last three years of magazine subscriptions, or do you want to use that dining table for dinner with your family? Do you want to fill the garage with boxes containing your grandmother's moth-eaten tablecloths, or do you want to preserve your investment in your car? Do you want your children's laundry piled on your bed, or do you want your bedroom to be a place of peace and intimacy? Your home shouldn't overwhelm you. It should give you shelter from the storm. And it should be more than a roof over your head. It's up to you to make your home support you in your quest for happiness.

The transformations I have seen are speedy and amazing. As soon as people have space to breathe, their spirits lift. They have new energy and hope. At the end of the process, almost without exception, people tell me, "This has changed my life." Those are amazing and gratifying words to hear. By helping my readers and viewers and clients redefine their relationships to what they own, I have some small part in helping them look differently at their lives. Not in a superficial way, but at a level that has altered their relationships with everyone and to everything around them.

With all my work decluttering homes and watching the resulting transformations came two critical revelations:

It's Not About the Stuff

The first step in helping people deal with clutter is to get them to look at things other than the clutter itself. I know this sounds strange, but if you are struggling with the things you own, and focus exclusively on these things, you will never tame them. Believe me, it's rarely about "the stuff." Clutter is about fear of losing memories, or worry about the future, or a sense that something bad is going to happen. It's a way of dealing with loss, or even a way of masking the pain of some past trauma. The woman who couldn't let go of family memorabilia because of the sudden and tragic death of her brother, the father who hoarded all of his children's schoolwork because it represented what he felt were the years he was closest to his sons and daughter, or the couple whose home was overflowing with personal paperwork because they were so fearful of identity theft.

Looking beyond the clutter for answers means addressing the underlying issues. I learned long ago that if you focus on the stuff, you will never conquer the clutter and deal with the fat and excess that fills your home. This revelation is the key to the success I've had in helping people reframe the way they look at what they own. It is fundamental to helping people overcome years of clutter and disorganization in their lives.

2. Your Home Reflects Your Life

Your home is a reflection of you. Not in some airy-fairy way, but in a real and tangible sense. It's no accident that at the same time we are struggling with the national "epidemic of obesity," we are also living in homes weighted down with clutter and filled with "stuff."

Dealing with clutter and regaining a sense of harmony and organization in their homes touched many people I worked with in ways that I don't think anyone foresaw. Suddenly "clutter" meant so much more than an overstuffed closet or garage. For most, changing their relationship to their stuff became the first step in a larger process of adjusting the other relationships in their lives. Couples reassessed their relationships and removed the hurdles that had cluttered up their emotional lives. A few couples went their separate ways. Others realized that major changes were needed if the relationships were to continue. People lost weight, changed careers, reassessed the way they spent their time, and reorganized their priorities. Removing the clutter from people's lives was more than just clearing a desk of unwanted paperwork or getting all that junk out of the garage. Decluttering and organizing had an impact on every aspect of the lives of the people I worked with.