

CLEAN HOUSE CALM MIND



A spring clean doesn't just spruce up and bring order to your physical surroundings - it can help clear negative thoughts and stress, too. **Melanie Leyshon** discovers why outer order equals inner calm

Fifty per cent of Britons don't partake in the annual spring clean, according to a recent survey. Are you one of them? Then it might be time for a rethink. The benefits of tidying up for our wellbeing far outshine gleaming taps, sparkling surfaces and slimmed-down bookshelves. If you want to raise your mood - and who doesn't in this climate? - it's time to grab a duster and bin liners, say the experts. Over the past year, our homes - and with them, our anxiety levels - have been stretched to their limit. Living rooms have become makeshift offices, classrooms, nurseries and gyms, and for many of us, clutter and disorder have reigned. Delivery boxes have piled up in hallways, stacks of printouts and papers have grown on dining and kitchen tables; cleaning and sorting - quite naturally - have taken second place to homeschooling and working.

That's why, according to Gretchen Rubin, America's happiness guru and bestselling decluttering author, 2021 is the year to embrace the spring clean. 'When we're all spending so much time at home, more orderly surroundings can help us stay focused, productive and cheerful. By getting rid of things we don't need, don't use and don't love, we give ourselves more elbow room. For most people, outer order contributes to inner calm - which we all really need these days.'

For Gretchen, managing her possessions improves her emotional attitude, physical health, intellectual vigour and even her social life. She says: 'When clutter is gone, I have more choices about the future: what to buy, what to do, where and how to live. Because I'm no longer hemmed in by possessions, I feel a sense of renewal.' Her book *Outer Order, Inner Calm: Declutter and Organize to Make More Room for Happiness* (John Murray Press, £9.99) covers the positives and practicalities of how to regain a sense of order.

Setting a date is a good way to kickstart a cleaning project, says Gretchen, but she also thinks that right now is always the best time. 'No matter how busy I am, I force myself to take at least a few minutes each day to impose some order,' she says. 'If I'm feeling overwhelmed by multiple writing deadlines, I spend 20 minutes cleaning my office, because I know that clearing my papers clears my mind.'

Sophie Scott, cognitive neuroscientist at University College London, sees tidying as one of the simplest ways to lift our mood. She suggests using the spring clean as a bit of theatre, like new year resolutions, to get things done. 'A good way to overcome procrastinating about cleaning is to set a realistic to-do list,' says Sophie. 'Don't say you'll do it all at once, because you won't, and then you won't get the mood lift if you fail. But get stuck into small tasks and it's a double whammy. You'll have achieved a goal and released feel-good endorphins and endocannabinoids that reduce anxiety and calm you.'

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

GETTING STARTED

The hurdle for many is decluttering before we even start cleaning. That's where an expert can help. Helen Sanderson, professional organiser, interior designer and psychotherapist (helensanderson.com), has been helping people clear their homes for 15 years. 'We've got better at seeking advice, she says, especially women, who want to enjoy their time with their family rather than declutter at weekends.'

She thinks of professional declutterers as personal trainers. 'You know that when they turn up, you're going to do those press-ups. But if you're left on your own, you're just going to think about doing them.' If you can't afford one, enlist your own partner in grime - a friend or family member. Helen has devised a systematic Home Declutter Kit (£36.99), which is a set of cards that takes you through six stages of decluttering. First you set goals before working through rooms and cupboards, making those keep, recycle and donate decisions. 'Clutter is a set of decisions

CLEANING AS THERAPY

Cleaning is a mindful activity, which involves focusing on the here and now rather than worrying about the future. It also helps provide us with a sense of control over our environment and as such, says US-based psychotherapist Maggie Vaughan, it can help ease anxiety. For maximum impact, she recommends setting aside a distinct time for cleaning, such as first thing in the morning. 'This sets the stage for a literal new beginning, will make you feel hopeful and boost feelings of wellbeing,' she says. 'And by clearing away environmental distractions, the mind feels more settled, freer to focus on other tasks.'

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that haven't been made. The kit supports you through that decision-making process,' she explains. Thinking of your home as an overgrown garden that needs weeding is a helpful metaphor: once it's cleared, you'll find the treasures you want to keep. It's not all about getting rid of things. It's about visualising how to make the best of what you have once you can see beyond the clutter.

BEYOND CLEANING

For clutter psychotherapist Julieanne Steel (unclutteryourlife.co.uk) the spring clean should also be seen as a cleansing, holistic process; a way of clearing stagnant energy in the home and in the heart. While she advocates zero tolerance to surface and floor clutter, she doesn't think we should get so rigid that everything needs to be perfect before we can relax. For her it's about getting your home shipshape, then ►

setting daily habits so things don't become unmanageable.

The payback for the mental effort and elbow grease is less stress. 'Being able to easily find something and move unencumbered through your house without vaulting over piles of clothes makes us calmer,' says Dr Chris Stiff, senior lecturer in psychology at Keele University. 'A tidy environment means we know where things are, and also that we know where to put things back, which allows us to get things done quickly.'

It also boosts our confidence. 'When we accomplish a task – especially a difficult one – it can increase our feelings of self-efficacy, our belief in our own abilities. This can then transfer to other challenging tasks which we might encounter outside of tidying,' says Chris. He says one study concluded that people were better at tasks when they did them in a tidy environment compared to a cluttered one.

In worrying times, it can feel like cleaning and decluttering is just a superficial distraction, and that our time is better spent elsewhere. 'We may be deeply worried about the problems of the world, and we're right to be worried,' says Gretchen Rubin. 'Yet the promise of outer order is something that we can tackle on our own, right now. By doing so, we help restore our equanimity – and this isn't a futile or selfish gesture, because that equanimity makes us more effective when we seek to address the problems of the world.' ■

CLEAN UP WITH COOK'S INGREDIENTS

BINS AND DRAINS

Use a solution of 2 tsp bicarbonate of soda to 1 pint of warm water to clean them.

KITCHEN KETTLES

Add a shot of concentrated lime juice to a full kettle and leave for an hour. Discard, then boil 3 times to banish the lime flavour and limescale.

MICROWAVE

Add lemon juice to a bowl of water and microwave for 5 mins. Leave unopened for 5 minutes before cleaning burnt-on gunk.

DISHWASHERS AND WASHING MACHINES

For dishwashers, fill the detergent drawer with clear vinegar and run it empty. For washing machines, put a plastic cup of clear vinegar in the drum and run it at the hottest wash.

YOUR SPRING CLEAN ACTION PLAN

Decluttering psychotherapist Julieanne Steel shares her advice for a successful spring clean – remember, decluttering first will make cleaning easier.

● **START IN THE HALL** It's the threshold to other rooms and the first thing people see when they come into your home. Next, choose one room or a cupboard or wardrobe. Take everything out, and put items onto a sheet on a piece of furniture you will need later, such as your bed or dining table – that way, you'll have to finish the task. Set designated places; have hooks for coats, baskets for shoes, boxes and drawers for essentials – especially keys, DIY items, stationery and cosmetics.

● CLEAR SURFACES SO YOU CAN DUST AND WIPE THEM DAILY

Only keep out items that you use often, such as the kettle and other appliances you use every day. In the bathroom, keep caddies of toiletries in the bath and shower, so you can move them easily for cleaning.

● MAKE THINGS ACCESSIBLE

Don't make it difficult to get to your cleaning kit, or it won't get used by you or others.

● **ESTABLISH A DAILY ROUTINE** Start a 15-minute ritual that always encompasses: making the bed, taking the rubbish out, putting on a wash and wiping down surfaces. Stack and unstack the dishwasher throughout the day.

● **FACTOR IN MONTHLY TASKS** Tackle one key area at a time: under the sink, under the stairs, your wardrobe or home office.

● **CREATE SMART PLACES** Keep prime space free for your most-used items, so you can grab them quickly – keys, umbrellas, pens, scissors. It will save time and lower stress.

KEEP IT GREEN: THE BEST ECO-CLEANING PRODUCTS

- 1. Method Multi-Surface Cleaner, French Lavender (£3)** Julieanne Steel's go-to for clean surfaces; the scent adds freshness.
- 2. E-cloth Wash & Wipe Kitchen Cloths x 2 (£3)** A reusable tough-on-dirt cloth that works with water or diluted Fairy liquid.
- 3. Ecover Non-Bio Washing Powder (3kg, £12.50)** Plant-based ingredients; works well at lower temperatures.
- 4. Cif Cream Multi-Purpose in Lemon (500ml, £1)** Loved by professional cleaners who don't want a chemical overload.
- 5. Cif Ecorefill for Power and Shine (70ml, £1.50)** Impressive results and minimal recycling as you can refill the original bottle.
- 6. Method Wood Floor Cleaner, Almond (739ml, £4)** Squirt straight on to wooden floors, then mop.
- 7. Seventh Generation Bathroom Spray (500ml, £2.50)** 97% plant-based, but can tackle hardcore limescale.
- 8. The Pink Stuff Paste (500g, £1)** A veg-based cleaning paste that tackles stubborn stains. (All products sainsburys.co.uk)

