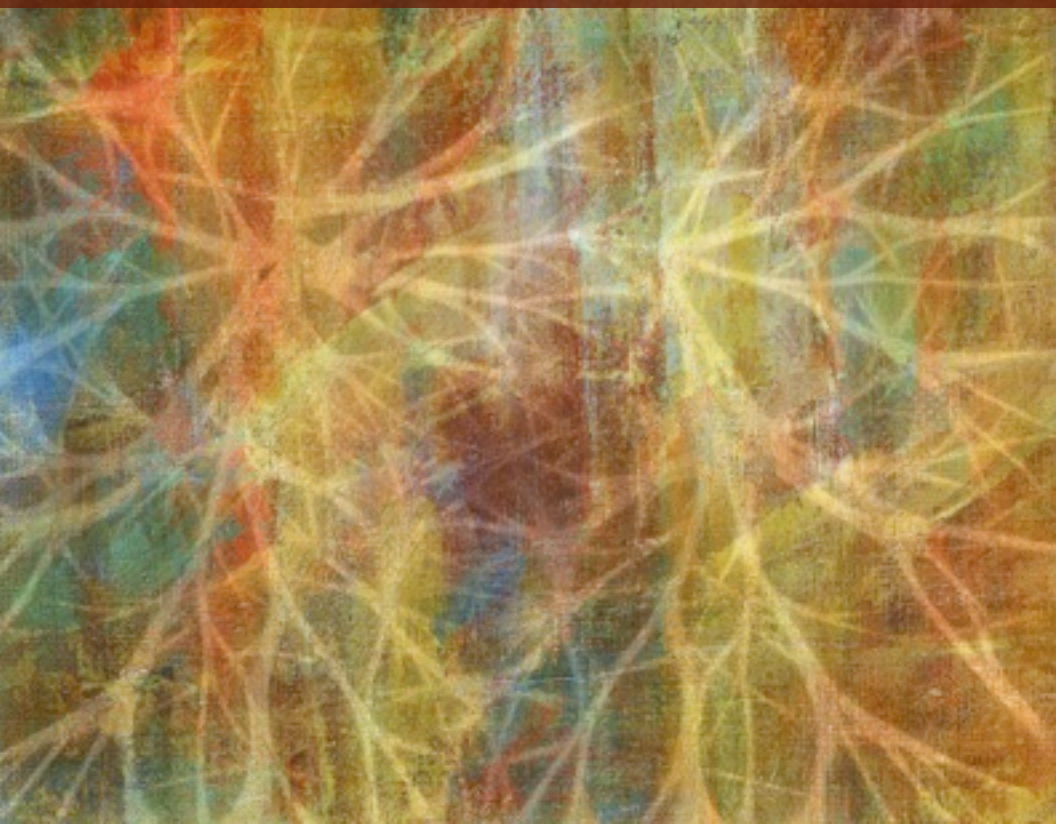




Declutter
YOUR **MIND**



Declutter Your Mind

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Introduction

The word decluttering doesn't just apply to housekeeping. In a household setting, decluttering refers to cleaning, general tidying, and eliminating things from the home that have become useless or obsolete.

The same concept can be applied to your mind. ***It's the process of lowering the burden on your mind by eliminating unnecessary worry and thoughts.***

This can be accomplished by making changes to your life and your thought processes. Although clutter is always caused by your mental processes, external events can serve as triggers.

Eliminating the triggers is a powerful way to declutter your mind.

But you can also have ineffective habits for dealing with stress, boredom, and uncertainty. Excessive thinking can be another form of mental clutter. It uses valuable resources and drains your ability to focus.

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Your environment is another possible source of mental clutter. A cluttered environment isn't conducive to a calm and relaxed attitude. The people in your life can also clutter your mind.

It's important to address every possible cause.

*"When we clear the physical clutter from our lives,
we literally make way for inspiration and good,
orderly direction to enter."*

- Julia Cameron

The Primary Causes of Mental Clutter

Environment

Your environment includes your home and work environments. You spend most of your time in one of

these two places. ***Avoid underestimating the impact your environment can have on your mental clutter.*** Removing environmental clutter can have a positive effect on the clutter between your ears.

Cleaning your office won't trigger feelings of sentimentality, but decluttering your home will. The most important criteria when deciding whether or not to keep an item are:

- Do I love it?
- Do I need it?

If the answer is “no” to both questions, get rid of it. Sentimentality is a trap. There's no reason to keep your plastic prom corsage from 1986 if it spends its entire life in a box in the garage.

However, there are worse offenses in the universe. Just be aware of the tendency of sentimentality to contribute to your environmental and mental clutter.

Declutter your home and work environments first:

1. **Tackle one room at a time.** Attempting to take on too much at once will not only lead to failure, but you'll also increase your level of mental clutter. Let's not lose ground before we even get started!

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- A quick declutter is enough. Assuming you're not a hoarder, each room shouldn't take more than 30 minutes to clear away the visual clutter.
2. **Start at the top and work your way down.** Look at anything hanging on the walls. ***Do you love it? Do you need it?*** If the answer to both questions is "no", sell it, throw it away, or give it away. Regardless of which option you choose, do it quickly.
 3. **Go through any closets, drawers, and shelves.** Repeat the same process. If you don't need it or love it, get rid of it.
 4. **Finish the room.** Consider the furniture, books, items under the bed, your clothes, and so on. Every single item should be considered for elimination. Be ruthless. ***You don't use 90% of your possessions. You won't miss them.***
 5. **Complete the rest of the house.** Include the garage, refrigerator, under the sinks, and every other location. Do you have more towels than you need? Do you have towels that are so threadbare that you avoid using them? Shoes that hurt your feet? Get rid of it all. Anything that stays in the house should be important to you or your life.
 - **Focus on one room per day.** It's not necessary to spend a lot of time on each room if you move quickly and don't spend 10 minutes on each item. If you're not positive about keeping it, let it go.

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- **Remember your car.** In fact, you can declutter your car every time you fill your gas tank. Don't just stand there watching the numbers increase on the gas pump! Declutter your car while you wait.
6. **Address your work environment.** Your work environment might consist of a desk and cubicle or an office. Or you might be responsible for an entire facility. Declutter whatever falls under your responsibility. Pay special attention to your desk and old files. Take the appropriate actions.
 7. **Remember your digital environment.** This can be the most tedious part of your decluttering efforts. It might take the better part of a Saturday to complete.
 - **Computer.** This includes your computer desktop and all your files. Eliminate everything you don't need. Organize files and icons as necessary. Consider defragmenting your hard drive after you're done. Declutter your work computer, too.
 - **Email.** How many emails do you have that you don't need? Remember to spend time on all your email accounts.
 - **Phone.** Delete old text messages. Delete apps you no longer use. Update your apps as necessary.
 8. **Evaluate how you feel.** After all of these unnecessary items are out of your house and workspace, notice how you feel. ***You likely feel happier, lighter, and less burdened.*** It's a good feeling. Remember it. And

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remember what caused it – less things in your life, not more.

It might seem counterintuitive to address your environment when your challenge is more psychological in nature.

However, your environment can influence the amount of stress and anxiety you experience. This can trigger mental habits that create the mental clutter you're trying to relieve.

"I'm quite an untidy person in a lot of ways. But order makes me happy. I have to have a clear desk and a tidy desktop, with as few visual distractions as possible. I don't mind sound distractions, but visual ones freak me out."

- Joanne Harris

People

There are certain people that are hard to eliminate from your life. Your children are one example. No matter how old your children may be, the bond between parent and child is strong. However, there are situations that can justify eliminating adult children or your parents from your life. ***Not everyone has a place in your life.***

Your life is sacred. Be careful whom you choose to include.

Consider how much the people in your life add and detract from it:

1. **Which people are a source of negativity?** These people aren't negative about your life. They're negative about life in general. These are the people that are pessimistic, complain about everything, and suck the life out of you every time you see them. Ask yourself why you keep them around.
2. **Consider the toxic people in your life.** Toxic people get in your way. They're the people that get in the way of you reaching your goals. They're discouraging and sabotaging. For some reason, they feel better if you don't better yourself.

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- It's rare to have people that truly want to see you excel. However, that's no reason to tolerate those who intentionally become obstacles in your life.
 - ***If it's a close friend or family member, first have a frank discussion.*** If that fails to have an effect, then show them the door.
3. **Friends from another time.** It might be an old college friend or a co-worker from 20 years ago. Do you have anything in common besides a past? How much enjoyment do you receive from them? Think about it and make the necessary adjustments.
 4. **Unfamiliar social media pals.** You know these people. They're Facebook "friends" that are actually friends of friends of friends. Do you need to see the birthday pictures of their grandchildren?
 - If you're using social media to promote your business, the more the merrier. Otherwise, make the necessary cuts.
 5. **Think about the people at work.** You have fewer options here. You might be able to eliminate those troubling people that work for you, but even that's not easy in today's day and age. You can find another position within the same company or at another company. You might have to fire your boss and find another opportunity.

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Not everyone deserves to be part of your life. As far as anyone knows for certain, you only get one chance.

Ensure you're not allowing the people around you to lower the quality of your experience. Eliminate those people that are unnecessary or that you don't love.

Make room for people that will contribute to your life and happiness.

"As important as it is to learn how to deal with different kinds of people, truly toxic people will never be worth your time and energy - and they take a lot of each.

Toxic people create unnecessary complexity, strife, and, worst of all, stress."

- Travis Bradberry

Distractions

Distractions can be clutter in themselves.

Distractions can also be contributors to clutter by diverting your attention from what's important and allowing clutter to grow. Procrastination is a self-created phenomenon that everyone faces.

You never feel good while procrastinating. The work that you're avoiding is still hanging over your head. **No distraction is enough to completely eliminate that nagging feeling.** You continue to check the time and shift your attention back and forth between the distraction and the work you should be doing. The result is mental clutter.

Some distractions aren't all that distracting. They just happen to be a more enjoyable option than the work you should be doing. However, some distractions are highly distracting in their own right.

Evaluate the distractions you face in your life each day:

1. **How do you waste time?** Forget about procrastinating. If you have nothing pressing on your schedule, how do you waste time? Make a list. A few popular culprits include:

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- Internet
 - TV
 - Cell phone-related activities
 - Video games
 - Shopping
 - Mindless chatting with friends
 - These are likely the same ways you spend your time while procrastinating.
2. **Consider the cost of losing that time.** Even if you only waste one hour per day, and it's likely much more than that, that's 365 hours per year. That's over nine 40-hour work weeks. That's over two months! What else could you do with that hour?
- Exercise
 - Build a blog
 - Take a college course
 - Make new friends
 - Write a book
 - Learn a language
 - Learn an instrument
 - Remember that you likely waste a lot more than 60 minutes each day!

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3. **Make a list before bed.** Prepare a list of the most important 3-5 tasks you have to do the following day. Ensure that at least half of your list are items that will move your life forward in some way.
4. **Understand why those items are important.** Understand the benefit you're gaining by taking these actions.
5. **Reduce each task to the necessary steps.** Tasks that are too big or too poorly defined encourage procrastination.
6. **Reduce your distractions.** Remove any distractions from your environment. Turn off your phone. Turn off the internet. Unplug the television. Shut the door to your office. Lock yourself in a bare closet if you must.
7. **Set a timer.** Unless you've been meditating in a cave for the last ten years, you can't expect yourself to be able to concentrate for 8 hours straight. Use a timer to create time boundaries. ***Most of us can concentrate for 30-60 minutes at a time.*** Then take a break for 5-10 minutes and get back after it.

Distractions are everywhere. Some of us are naturally better at ignoring distractions than others. ***Use your time to the best of your ability by reducing the distractions in your life.*** You're then in a stronger position to avoid procrastination.

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Consider that the worst procrastinators you know are struggling the most with life. Procrastination is perhaps the greatest fertilizer for mental clutter.

“Elegance is achieved when all that is superfluous has been discarded and the human being discovers simplicity and concentration: the simpler and more sober the posture, the more beautiful it will be.”

- Paulo Coelho

Thoughts

Your thoughts are the genesis of mental clutter. This is where it all starts. ***Get control of your thoughts, and your mental clutter will be tamed.*** This is a major task, and not for the faint-hearted! It can be done, though.

There are several things that affect your thoughts, including:

- Mental habits
- Everyday stress
- Making decisions, especially when there are too many options
- Unfinished business

Mental Habits

Like your actions, many of your thoughts are habitual.

You think about the same past experiences over and over. You daydream about the same imagined future over and over. These thoughts may be positive or negative, but they still contribute to mental clutter.

There are other mental habits that provide little benefit:

- Guilt
- Worry
- Regret
- Comparing yourself to others
- Gaining self-esteem by pleasing others
- Mentally checking out when faced with stressful situations
- Worry what others think of you
- Expecting the worst
- Thinking about the past and the future

Contemplate whether you struggle with any of these negative mental habits.

Everyday Stress

This is a big one. ***Your mind fills with clutter as your stress level increases.*** Your thoughts become less controlled and more negative. It's not surprising that many serious mental health issues are often precipitated

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by stressful events. The level of stress that you face each day is relevant to the amount of mental clutter you have.

It's often the accumulation of little things that have a significant impact. It's traffic, late bills, a runny nose, an annoyed spouse, and a broken shoelace that can send your brain into a tailspin. Too many smaller stressors can be just as stressful as large stressors.

"The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another."

- William James

Decisions

Making a lot of decisions can really wear you out and create mental clutter. There's a reason why Steve Jobs, Barack Obama, and Albert Einstein limited their daily wardrobes to just a few items – the elimination of choice.

When you're faced with too many decisions, mental clutter grows.

Studies also show that making decisions decreases your ability to make additional decisions. Eliminate as many possible decisions as you can each day.

This is one good thing about habits. Habits eliminate the need to make a choice. Stick with the same healthy breakfast and take the same route to work each day.

Use habits to your advantage and save your decision-making muscles for important decisions.

Unfinished Business

Often the result of procrastination or indecisiveness, unfinished business takes up valuable mental space. It's the phone call you need to make. It's cleaning out your storage unit. It's finishing your taxes. It's getting the oil changed in your car.

These things can seem trivial in the short-term, but there's a price to be paid each day. Notice how much better you feel when you complete these responsibilities.

“Being in control of your life and having realistic expectations about your day-to-day challenges are the keys to stress management, which is perhaps the most important ingredient to living a happy, healthy and rewarding life.”

- Marilu Henner

Dealing with Thought-Based Clutter

There’s good news. ***All of your mental clutter is ultimately self-induced.*** Fortunately, that means that your mental clutter is under your control. It also means that you don’t have anyone to blame besides yourself.

The Breath is the Key

The process of breathing is pretty amazing. It's the only bodily function that you can consciously control or have done for you automatically. You can breathe more deeply or more shallowly on command. Fast or slower isn't a problem either. On the other hand, you can forget all about breathing and it still happens.

An adult at rest takes roughly 20 breaths per minute. That's over 28,000 breaths per day. Most of those breaths happened without any intention on your part. You weren't even aware of at least 99% of them.

Amazing.

Some might argue this arrangement is necessary for speech to occur. Maybe it's more than that. Maybe it's the secret to managing your thoughts!

There are two ways breathing benefits mental clutter:

1. **Changing your breathing can change your physiology.** Try breathing faster for a minute and notice how you feel. Now breathe very deeply for a minute and notice the changes. Changes to your breathing change your physiology. Changing your physiology can change your thoughts and your focus.

2. **Focusing on your breath can keep your mind in the present moment.** Your breath is your thread to the present. No matter how distracted you are by your thoughts, focusing on your breath can bring you back to reality.

Breathing doesn't seem too exciting, but it's a powerful tool. What could be more simple? However, there is a skill component to using your breath in your clutter-reducing efforts. It will take time and patience to develop fully.

Use your breath to alter your physiology:

1. **Find a quiet place, if possible.** If you're at work, close your office door or head for the bathroom. The more solitude you can find, the better. ***However, the technique will work anywhere, especially with practice.***
2. **Take a comfortable position.** Seated is best. Ideally, you can assume a position that you can maintain for at least five minutes without moving.
3. **Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose.** Allow your stomach to expand. You're not trying to breathe so deeply that you feel pain. Just take a full breath. Feel the air pass by the tips of your nostrils. Then relax and allow the air to expel naturally.
 - **Avoid overcomplicating the technique. Full, slow, and easy breaths are the objective.** Paying attention to your breath for just five to 10 minutes

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can be enough to feel a significant reduction in both your stress level and mental clutter.

This simple technique can be used anytime you're feeling stressed or your mind is cluttered. This falls short of true meditation, but you can receive many of the same benefits.

This focused breathing technique can be used in the car, during a meeting, or any time you need to gain back control of your racing brain.

Meditation is the next logical step. Meditation is like focused breathing on steroids. It's more than just a quick-fix. It can literally transform your life.

There are many scientifically-proven benefits to meditation:

1. **Meditation decreases depression.** Meditation has been shown to reduce obsession on one's discomfort and distress. In other words, you spend less time thinking about your challenges. This leads to a lower incidence of depression.
2. **Meditation increases the ability to regulate your mood.** We have some control over our moods, just not as much as we'd like. You can probably think of someone in your life that regulates their moods very poorly. You never know what you're going to face

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when you see them. Meditation enhances the ability to manage your moods.

3. **It decreases anxiety.** Both emotional and physical stress markers are reduced in those who meditate.
4. **It increases the ability to focus and work under stress.** This can be one of the biggest benefits to those who meditate to declutter their mind.
 - It's not easy to sit still for an extended period of time and maintain your focus. As that ability grows, you can apply it to other areas in your life.
5. **Meditation increases resilience.** You'll be overwhelmed less frequently and find it easier to continue during times of stress.

There is a nearly endless list of the benefits provided by regular meditation. But it's obvious that meditation is a great tool to declutter your mind. ***When you're in a better mood, feel less stress, and are able to focus, your mind is less cluttered!***

Everyone has at least a vague idea of what is involved in meditation, but the details are a little fuzzy for most. This is understandable, as there are many types of meditation.

Mindfulness meditation is an excellent choice for those who want to declutter their thoughts. This type of

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meditation is based on observations. You're not thinking, evaluating, or interpreting your thoughts. There's no judging involved.

You're just paying attention in a particular way.

Since it's just a particular way of paying attention, you can do it during a variety of activities. These include:

- Driving
- Eating
- Cleaning
- Showering
- Mowing the lawn
- Using the phone

While some forms of meditation attempt to limit thoughts, mindfulness meditation simply notices the thoughts that appear. This is great for beginners, because limiting your thoughts is very challenging!

Mindfulness meditation is a simple, yet challenging, process:

1. **Assume a comfortable seated position.** A chair is fine. The floor is also an acceptable option. Comfort and support are key.

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2. **Become aware of your surroundings.** Notice the temperature of the room. Notice the physical sensations of your feet, hands, back, neck and every other part of your body. Notice what you can see in the room. What do you hear?
 - **Avoid judging anything.** Even labeling isn't permitted. For example, you might notice a blue piece of artwork on the wall. It's not appropriate to say to yourself, "Wow, that's kind of ugly." Saying something positive about the artwork isn't any better! Avoid even saying to yourself, "Blue artwork".
 - **Keep your thoughts limited to what you can see, hear, and smell.** If you hear a dog bark and remind yourself that you don't like that dog, you're not being mindful. Just notice the dog barking.
 - It's surprising how relaxing this can be. Just notice and keep your brain's big mouth shut. **Do this for five minutes.**
3. **Turn your attention to your breath.** Feel the breath throughout your body. Start at the nostrils and notice the movement and sensations of your chest and abdomen. Keep your attention on the part of your body where the breath is most easily felt.
 - Continue this until the end of the meditation. Strive for a total time of at least 20 minutes.

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4. **Notice your thoughts.** Invariably, it won't take too long before you realize that you're thinking about your meeting tomorrow or your best friend from third grade. That's okay. Again, avoid labeling your thoughts. The following are unacceptable:

- "That's a weird thought."
- "Why did I think about that?"
- "What's wrong with me?"
- "I must be nuts."
- As with the sights and sounds in your environment, notice the thought without taking the next step of judging or labeling.

5. **Return your awareness to your breath.** It's that simple.

Over time, you'll find that your thoughts, judgments, and tendency to label things will decrease. ***The result is a decrease in your mental clutter.***

Consider how much mental noise you generate each day. Imagine you're walking from your car into work. It's 90 degrees outside. Think about the conversation you might have with yourself.

- "It sure is hot today."
- "I wonder what the news predicted for the high today"

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- “It’s okay. We’ll be in the air conditioning soon.”
- “That’s a nice tree. I wonder how old it is?”

Labeling things in your environment is a habit that accomplishes little. You don’t need to tell yourself it’s hot outside. You already know! You don’t need to comfort yourself by telling yourself that you’ll be in the cool a/c in just a minute. You already know! You can see the tree just fine, too.

Meditation helps to quiet this unnecessary mental noise. ***When you stop generating mental chatter, you can deal with the real clutter in your life much more effectively.*** You’ll be amazed at how capable you really are.

“Meditation is difficult for many people because their thoughts are always on some distant object or place.”

- Wayne Dyer

Overcome Negative Thoughts

Are you plagued by mental negativity? Do you say negative things to yourself? Do you worry about the future? Do you criticize yourself and spend too much time focused on what you lack? That's natural.

Scientists have a theory to explain all this negative thinking.

It was imperative to human survival. Unfortunately, it's not helpful anymore.

There was a time that food was scarce. A member of another tribe might beat you to death with a club just for looking at his mate. There were dangerous animals. Those that were overly cautious and worried survived more often than those with a more relaxed attitude.

Now we have grocery stores, police, and most of the predators aren't an issue. We have armies to fight our wars.

Your negative thinking is something you inherited. However, it no longer serves you.

Deal quickly with your negative thoughts:

1. **Understand that your negative thoughts are hurting you.** Ninety-nine percent of your worries and negative self-talk are harming you. Believe that simple fact and you're halfway to freedom.
2. **Be observant.** Your new meditation skills will be helpful. Notice when you're having a negative thought.
3. **Distance yourself from the thought.** When you think to yourself, "I'm not good enough to do this," change it to "I'm having a thought that I'm not good enough to do this."
 - ***This simple process puts space between you and the thought.*** You realize that it's something separate from you.
4. **Replace the thought.** Reverse the thought. Tell yourself that you're good enough. Tell yourself that things will be okay. Is it true? Well, it's no more of a lie than telling yourself something negative. At least you'll feel better and be in a better position to thrive.
Considering that things usually work out, it's more accurate than your negative thoughts.

“There is a plan and a purpose, a value to every life, no matter what its location, age, gender or disability.”

- Sharron Angle

Clarify Your Purpose

Indecisiveness can be the result of a lack of clarity. ***If you're unclear about your values and your goals, you lack purpose.*** You've been developing your values since childhood. They undergo modification as you age and develop new perspectives on life.

But you've probably never really given your values much thought. Now is the time to take a hard look.

Determine your values and make easier, more congruent decisions:

1. **Determine what's most important to you in life.** Ask yourself the question and see what pops up. A few possibilities include:

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- Beauty
 - Truth
 - Tolerance
 - Success
 - Service
 - Discipline
 - Humility
 - Happiness
 - Family
 - Generosity
 - This is just a small sampling. Make your own list.
2. **Reduce your list to just 6 values.** Which are most important to you? What do those values mean to you? Take your time.
3. **Are you living your life according to these values?** Consider these parts of your life:
- Career
 - Relationships
 - Hobbies
 - Family life
 - Goals

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Do these parts of your life reflect your values? If not, why? How would your mental clutter be affected if you changed your life to reflect your values?

By defining your values, it becomes much easier to make decisions and set appropriate goals. When your life is in alignment with your values, your level of mental clutter will decrease. Adjust your life and activities to match your values.

The next step is to create goals that keep your values in mind. Know your desired outcome and create goals to support that outcome. ***When your values, goals, and life purpose match, the resulting synergy makes everything easier, and your efforts become more effective.***

*“Don't dwell on what went wrong.
Instead, focus on what to do next.
Spend your energies on moving forward
toward finding the answer.”*

- Denis Waitley

Conclusion

Much of your misery is due to mental clutter. You might have a great life by conventional standards. A nice home, good career, happy family, and a lot of great “stuff.”

Your mental clutter can be enough to nullify all of those wonderful things.

Luckily, however, your mental clutter is under your control.

Address all the factors that could be contributing to your mental clutter. Pay attention to your environment, the people in your life, and distractions. These triggers create that mental static.

Ultimately, your thoughts and mental habits are the biggest culprit. Focused breathing, meditation, and addressing negative thoughts are the most powerful tools in your arsenal. Use everything at your disposal to create the mental peace you deserve.