

Module Four, Lesson One

What Does Clutter Do to Your Brain?

Whether it's your closet or office desk, excess stuff in your space can have a negative impact on your ability to focus and process information. This issue has been studied extensively.

In one study, neuroscientists at Princeton University looked at people's task performance in an organized versus disorganized environment. They found that physical clutter competes for your attention, resulting in decreased performance and increased stress.



Why? Because, in the same way that multitasking affects your brain, ... and we will be talking about that in Lesson 2.... physical clutter overloads your senses, makes you feel stressed, increases your anxiety levels, and impairs your ability to think creatively.

Our brains like order, and constant visual reminders of disorganization drain our cognitive resources, reducing our ability to focus. The visual distraction of clutter increases cognitive overload and can reduce our working memory. Your brain is wired to be able to keep track of only a few details at once for a short period, so it can get overloaded when there's too much going on.

In 2011, neuroscience researchers used functional magnetic resonance imaging and other physiological measurements and found that clearing clutter from the home and work environment resulted in a better ability to focus and process information, as well as increased productivity.

Clutter can also make us feel stressed, anxious, and depressed. Research in the United States in 2009 found that levels of the stress hormone cortisol were higher in mothers whose home environment was cluttered.

A chronically cluttered home environment has also been shown to lead to a constant, low-grade fight-or-flight response – remember that sympathetic nervous state? That taxes the resources we have that are designed for survival.

This response can trigger physical and psychological changes that affect how we fight infections and digest food, as well as leaving us at greater risk of Type 2 diabetes and heart disease, both of which are major risk factors for dementia.

Clutter might also have implications for our relationships with those around us. A 2016 U.S. study found that background clutter resulted in participants being less able to correctly interpret the emotional expressions on the faces of characters in a movie. In real life, that can impact our relationships with others.

This disruption doesn't stop when we get to bed, though. If your bedroom is cluttered, you are more likely to have sleep problems, including difficulty falling asleep and being disturbed during the night.



Tidy homes have been found to be a predictor of physical health. Participants whose houses were cleaner were more active and had better physical health, according to one major study.

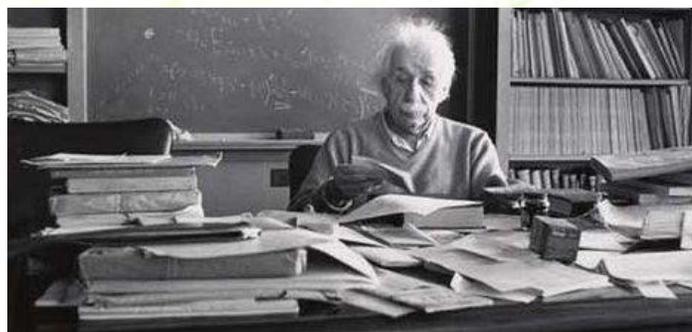
And multiple other studies have found a link between clutter and poor eating choices. Messy environments led participants in one study to consume twice as many snacks as people in a tidy room, while in another study it was

shown that being in a messy room will make you twice as likely to eat a chocolate bar than an apple. Finally, people with extremely cluttered homes are 77 percent more likely to be overweight. Since that is a huge predictor of the likelihood of developing dementia, this alone would be a reason to keep clutter at a minimum!

A neat, tidy house feels inviting, both for the people who live there as well as guests, but a cluttered home often feels exactly the opposite. People whose homes are knee-deep in clutter are often called “hoarders”, but it's not just hoarders who suffer from lack of social contact as a result of a messy house.

Many people whose houses are simply cluttered often shut people out of the house due to embarrassment, but that can take a toll on relationships and make you feel sad and lonely. Since social interaction is essential for a healthy brain, this is a serious issue.

It's important to note, though, that clutter isn't always bad. One study showed messy desks can make us more creative.



The findings suggest that neat, ordered environments make us more likely to conform to expectations and play it safe, while messy ones move us to break with the norm and look at things in a new way. I think Einstein would agree!