



Messy is the New Neat?!?

Prevention magazine used that title for a recent article. That got me curious, so of course I had to buy a copy! The article talked about a new book that's getting a lot of press these days. The book is called *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder* by Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freeman. I'll admit that I haven't read the whole book, but I've read excerpts plus two articles and feel compelled to respond to some of the hype. First of all if you just read the title you may think they are offering blanket approval to all degrees of disorganization. They aren't. David Freeman¹ was quoted as saying that "If you're messy to the point of problems, straighten up. If you're messiness is not causing problems, relax." I have to agree.

However, there's a myth swirling around that organization means perfection. Your home doesn't need to be stark, perfectly ordered and pristine to be organized, it just needs to function. Organization means arranging your possessions in a systematic fashion so that you can put things away with ease and find them when you need them. It means that your life is running smoothly, laundry is getting done, everyone is fed and you aren't afraid to let your neighbor walk in the back door.

The Minneapolis paper, also mentioned this book in an article and labeled this new phenomenon, "the mess-is-more movement." (It's a great name for it.) Clearly this book is addressed to the perfectionists out there that are feeling stressed about a little surface clutter. The authors feel that too much pressure, shame and stress have been placed on people who struggle with mess. I agree that no one should be made to feel ashamed. However, they *should* be encouraged to change a difficult and troublesome situation. This book is not speaking to the overwhelmed who are trying to work their way out of chaos.

My concern is that there's a danger in telling all people to embrace their mess. Many clients already struggle with motivation, procrastination and other mental discipline issues. The idea of having a free pass would certainly appeal to them, but it wouldn't fix the problem. They might think, "Mess-is-more-- great--I'm off the hook." Excuses and rationalizations are counter-productive. We have to avoid the temptation to think that the clutter isn't that big of a problem. *Once you start to ignore the clutter it takes on a life of its own.* The longer you wait to straighten up, the bigger the chore becomes and if you're already struggling to stay motivated this is a lethal combination. Eric Abrahamson suggested tidying up "slightly" once a week. He feels it's easier to do it in one shot.² I disagree, I would suggest a few minutes each day will keep the mess more manageable.

There are a lot of people who embrace their mess for the sake of creativity. I'm one of them. It *is* true that having things spread out in front of you can spark ideas and create unusual combinations. I've used this technique with card making, scrapbooking and jewelry making for years. But once the project is complete, I have systems in place so that I can put things away quickly.

¹ Minneapolis Star Tribune. Home+Garden. *Good mess, Bad mess.* 5-16-07

² Prevention magazine. June 07

Freedman cautions people from purging everything they haven't used in a year. "You might regret discarding family heirlooms or personal keepsakes." The toss-after-one-year rule is generally reserved for clothing, children's toys, media and books. It's common sense people, if you haven't used Grandma's china this year, you *don't* need to discard it. I don't know of one organizer who would recommend that. I encourage people to save family heirlooms or at least put them in the hands of a family member who would appreciate them. Personal memorabilia is also important but should be limited to the most important memories. Saving too much lessens the value of everything else.

In their book, they asked the question, "What's the evidence that being neat and organized is worth the trouble?" My answer is that order makes your life run more smoothly. It lowers your stress and allows you to relax and concentrate on things that are really important. And isn't that what everyone is searching for?

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