

Clear your mind by clearing out your cupboards

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Decluttering is not only good for your home, it's good for you on an emotional and psychological level, writes **ALANA KIRK GILLHAM**

GONE ARE the days when everything we owned was either new or disposable. While the Celtic Tiger mantra was “spend, spend, spend”, we are now in an era of “re-use, swap, sell”.

With a huge increase in the popularity of car boot sales, vintage markets, websites such as eBay and Gumtree, it seems the new fashion is to re-fashion, and make better use of the things we no longer need or want.

But apart from the financial benefit of finding assets in our attic, it seems the act of decluttering in itself has emotional and psychological benefits.

Francine Jay, author of *The Joy of Less, A Minimalist Living Guide*, recommends decluttering for a simpler, happier life. “The top three benefits are less stress, more freedom and more joy. Possessions can be like anchors,” she says.

“Even those who have pared down for financial reasons have fallen in love with a ‘lighter’ lifestyle. They feel less pressure to consume and keep up with the neighbours, and feel more satisfied and content with what they have. With this change in outlook, they generally experience less anxiety over their financial restraints.”

Clutter is a recognised symptom and cause of stress and can be overwhelming. You only have to Google “decluttering” for a plethora of companies dedicated to organising your life, and articles extolling its benefits and giving you tips. Bookshop shelves are laden with self-help books on the benefits of simplicity, and minimalism has become the new materialism.

“Many of the clients who come to us are literally overwhelmed by their clutter and just don’t know what to do. They avoid their home, eat out and their stuff owns them rather than them owning their stuff,” says Sarah Reynolds, founder of Organised Chaos, a Dublin-based decluttering service.

While there has always been a need for this sort of service, Reynolds has seen an increase in recent years. From the couple who bought an apartment intending to buy a house when their children were born but can no longer afford to, to busy professionals who procrastinate until their accumulation of Celtic Tiger trophies reaches tipping point, Reynolds admits they start to feel relieved from the minute the first session is over and they know there is a plan in place to deal with the mess.

“They think that the clutter is clogging up the home, but they don’t realise it is also cluttering up their mind. Once their home is decluttered and organised, they have space to think,” she says.

“Clients often tell me they take up hobbies afterwards because they suddenly feel more free. It has a transformative effect on them and they literally feel lighter and happier with themselves.”

But there is another benefit to de-cluttering. It can also make us a few euro. The traditional route of taking things to the charity shops seems to have faltered – instead more and more of us are going there for a bargain ourselves.

“We have definitely seen an increase in customers, but less stock coming in as the public aren’t spending as much and holding onto their items longer,” says Bernadette Harrington, who manages the Barnardos shops.

Many charity shops such as Barnardos and Oxfam no longer provoke images of old dark cluttered premises, but have a recognisable retail environment, with many specialising in particular areas such as book, furniture and bridal wear. The stigma of shopping in charity shops is long gone, and they are now seen as cool places to hunt out bargains.

“It has become more and more trendy to be frugal and a savvy shopper since the more difficult times, hence the term ‘Recessionista’. People are definitely looking for a bargain or that retro designer Chanel or Prada!” says Harrington.

“Vintage is very en vogue and charity shops are an Aladdin’s cave to find something wonderful from a bygone era without the high-end price tag!”

But if charity starts at home, then the growing trend to sell on our goods looks set to continue. eBay has recorded a 40 per cent increase in Irish users selling between 2008 and 2010, with more than 24,000 Irish households making an average of €500 a year by turning their unwanted items into extra income.

Although the goods sold range from electrical to jewellery, clothes, shoes and accessories are the most popular. A pair of shoes is sold on ebay.ie every 38 seconds, while it seems the people of Westmeath are the canniest shoppers selling more than any other Irish county.

Fiona Mullen of eBay thinks Irish shoppers are very savvy. “A recent study we did reveals Ireland is the latest country to embrace the global trend of ‘shopping neutral’ – offsetting the cost of spending by selling unwanted goods online.”

Joanna Canney from Galway is a keen buyer and seller on sites such as eBay. “We’ve bought everything from bathroom

radiators to Fired Earth tiles, Bugaboo prams, Chloe handbags, paintings and silver coins. We've sold a bass guitar, albums, handbags, jeans and bodhráns and those silver coins when their value had gone up."

Canney started buying on eBay because she would often see things in magazines that wouldn't be easy to get in Galway, and her buying has evolved from there.

"We now buy a lot of second-hand goods within Ireland and it feels good to be buying quality second-hand goods that give the seller cash, recycles a perfectly good item and saves us a lot of money right now. It can also be very thrilling."

They even found a market for unusual things. "The most surprising was the interest in our little miniature wooden Gypsy caravan, but it's a worldwide market with all sorts of people looking for all sorts of things."

So paring down for emotional, financial or pure logistics of space reasons can have a lasting benefit on our lifestyle and our pockets.

Francine Jay explains: "I think people are embracing a 'share and reuse' approach worldwide. The benefits are threefold: it keeps money in your pocket, keeps clutter out of your house, and conserves the resources of the planet. It's a wonderful step forward in creating a more sustainable economy."

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