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222 — Make Space for Happiness with Decluttering Expert Tracy McCubbin

Amy Morin:

Welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*! I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength. Every Monday I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life.

And the fun part is, we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to the show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week. Now let's dive in today's episode!

Do you have a lot of clutter around your house? Do you feel overwhelmed by the amount of stuff that you own? Do you feel like your home is disorganized and chaotic? If you answered yes to any of those questions, today's episode is for you.

And trust that you're not alone. I ran an Instagram poll asking whether you feel overwhelmed by all the stuff that you have, and a whopping 91% of you said yes.

Today, I'm talking to Tracy McCubbin, the owner of a popular organizing and decluttering company.

Her years of helping people get organized have shown her that there's a clear link between our emotional well-being and how well-organized and clutter-free our spaces are. She's the author of a new book too. It's called *Make Space for Happiness*. Some of the things she talks about today are how clutter affects our happiness, how to get rid of the things you don't need, and how to create healthier environments for yourself.

Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist's Take. It's the part of the show where I'll give you my take on Tracy's strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life. So here's Tracy McCubbin on how to make space for happiness.

Amy Morin:

Tracy McCubbin, welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!*

Tracy McCubbin:

Thank you, Amy. I'm so happy to be here.

Amy Morin:

So I thoroughly enjoyed your book, *Make Space for Happiness*, and I think it's a topic that we don't talk enough about, yet it affects our lives in so many different ways. And I'm a therapist so I know a lot of people will come into my office and sometimes it's like their mental health becomes a problem first and then the clutter becomes an issue later. But I see it happen the other way around too.

Sometimes people live in a really cluttered space and then they don't invite people over because they're embarrassed about how their home looks. Or whenever they're doing something they feel guilty because they feel like they should be cleaning. And it's this vicious cycle that's tough to break out of. What made you decide to get into this space where you talk so much about clutter and the importance of making room for happiness?

Tracy McCubbin:

I had a very circuitous route. I own a professional decluttering business called dClutterfly. And I started about 15 years ago. And I had been a personal assistant and I just had a knack like it. I was organized and I was a get her done, but I had this ability to see this, the hold that our stuff has on us. And I think part of the story is I'm a child of a hoarder.

My dad is an extreme hoarder and I've lived with it my whole life. And so I think I had an empathy that I feel like people who deal with clutter for a lot of them their whole life, they've really been shamed around it, "You're a bad housekeeper. You're lazy. Go clean your room." None of that is positive and that's not an impetus for change.

And what I started to see is there's this emotional component to why we're so attached to our stuff, which makes it hard to let go. And it's not about being lazy, it's a real... you know? It's so tied together. So after 15 years of decluttering people, I realize like this is emotional and we've got to start talking about this. And my point of view is always, I want you to be happy, I want you to be successful, I want your home to support you.

It's never about you're bad, you're wrong. And I don't, I'm sure you've had this conversation about many components, but this is where social media can actually work against us. Because everyone feels like, "I have to have a perfect pantry and it has to be in matching jars with perfect labels." And I'm like, "That is so much work. What?" So my conversation is about understanding the emotional component so that you can take control.

Amy Morin:

And seems to be our solution is we take all of these bins and boxes and storage things, and there's companies that try to convince us, it's just that we're disorganized, but sometimes the problem is we just own way too much stuff and there's literally no way to organize it. Would you agree?

Tracy McCubbin:

Absolutely. The number one question I get, "Well, how do I..." everybody DMs me, "How do I be more organized?" It's like, well, have less stuff. That's the simplest way. I do a lot of senior downsizing.

I help people move from lifelong homes, and one of the first components. One of the couples say to me, "My husband's starting to have some cognitive decline and some neurological stuff. And every doctor's like, 'Have less clutter, have less clutter.'"

You don't have to focus, you don't have to... It takes so much energy, our stuff. Where does it live? Where do I put it? Am I moving it back and forth across the house? So it's a real understanding that this isn't about, I want your house to look perfect, I want it to work for you.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. What are some of the, I guess, you just mentioned some of the downsides, but what are the other downsides too, to having too much stuff? We know it distracts us, it can get in our way physically, but what are those emotional things that take a toll on us?

Tracy McCubbin:

Well, first of all, they've done, they, those people that do it, but they've done so many studies about the effects of the increase in cortisol. Your stress level goes up, especially in women. So you're dealing with more stress. It's a time suck. Clutter is a time suck. You're constantly dealing with it. You're constantly moving it around.

It's also a money suck. You're paying for offsite storage. You gave the example of you, if your house is very cluttered and you're embarrassed of it, you're not going to have friends over. And so you're ridding yourself of an amazing experience that you need. We need human connection. We all learn that.

And if you can't invite people over, you're not going to get that. It's with, in terms of kids and parenting, that fight over stuff, put your toys away, do... It's so stressful. So there's so many time, money, stress. And I'm sure you've probably, your listeners are aware of something called decision fatigue.

I always say that clutter, every piece of clutter you have is a decision you have to make. Do I want this? Do I keep this? Where do I put it? Did I pay too much for it? Da da. So if you have a lot of clutter, you're putting yourself into decision fatigue before you even get out the door in the morning.

Amy Morin:

Right. And there's a study that I read too, and I forget the exact statistic, but about how many bills go unpaid because people can't find them because there's a stack of papers and we literally lose the bills. And then you get behind on your bills and you just feel so disorganized. And it's hard to feel good when you can't...

Tracy McCubbin:

Yeah.

Amy Morin:

Figure out where your bills are, what to pay and...

Tracy McCubbin:

Yeah. And that...

Amy Morin:

Stuff is everywhere.

Tracy McCubbin:

And that sort of feeds into that shame spiral, right? That because of the clutter, you can't find the bill. So it's not financial. And then you're like, "I should be doing better than this," and then you just start beating yourself up. And so my approach is always let's not, we're not beating ourselves up. We are here and you called me, you picked up the book, you're ready to make a change. So let's look forward. This is so exciting. I'm, always excited when a client wants to start because change is possible and they've taken the first step.

Amy Morin:

But what makes it hard for a lot of people to get rid of the clutter?

Tracy McCubbin:

So what has happened, what happens is this stuff comes to us with no meaning, right? Just comes. It's a lamp. A lamp is in your house. But then you find out, well, my mom gave me that lamp when my grandma died because it was my grandma's lamp and my great grandma had it before it. And I hate the lamp, but how could I possibly get rid of it?

Because if my great grandma knew that I got rid of it, she'd hate me even though she's dead. Right? So that you become this steward of the family history or you feel bad that you paid for something that you're not using or I might need it someday. Oh, my other favorite one is, I call it my fantasy stuff for my fantasy life that there's this, I should be a knitter, I should learn how to knit.

So I go out and I buy all the stuff for knitting without even trying it. And then I'm like, "I hate to knit." So it's we create these emotional stories. And a lot of times too, Amy, I think people don't realize how much having a house full of sort of sentimental stuff keeps us stuck in the past. It's very...

One of the things I see when people have their closets full of clothes that they can't fit into anymore, that it's sort of reminding them that like, oh, your best days are behind you. And I don't know, I'm 57, gravity has changed things. I'm not going to be able to wear what I wore at 22, it's just not going to happen. So and I just see people like, "Oh, I want to get back to my goal weight and my perfect pants." And it's like, be where you are today, be where you are today.

Amy Morin:

And I can attest to the difficulties with getting rid of somebody else's stuff. So when I was 23, my mom passed away. And about two weeks after she passed away, my dad's house caught on fire. And so it didn't burn flat, but they had to clean it to the extent that professionals cleaners had to come in and there was smoke damage and water damage and that sort of a thing.

So we had to empty out all of her closets, take everything literally out of the house. And so a lot of the stuff that my dad knew, "Well, I don't need her clothes back," he would just basically gave it all to my sister and I for us to go through someday. And you know how that happens. And so a lot of it just got boxed up and moved. And so I hung onto it and with that idea of yes, I will go through it when I'm ready or someday.

And then a few years down the road, it was three years actually after my mom died, my husband died. He had a lot of his childhood possessions in our house. So these are things that don't necessarily mean a lot to me, but yet his baseball cards from when he was eight, what am I going to do with those?

I should save them because someday one of his nephews or somebody else in the family may want them. So I end up with all of this sentimental stuff that I feel guilty about getting rid of yet at the same time I'm not taking care of. And then fast forward the story, a few years after that, I now live on a boat.

I came here with a bag of, I don't know, five outfits and a laptop computer. Realized I don't really need a lot of stuff to be a happy person, but I still have this house that has a lot of stuff in it. I just don't live in it anymore. But it's tough to get rid of items like that. How do you help people figure out what do you save and what do you get rid of when it has sentimental value?

Tracy McCubbin:

Yeah. That's a great question. So a big part of my business is I help people after someone's passed away. So my company comes in. And really, the key thing is really understanding is this your memory? Is this your memory of the person or is it someone else's memory? And also at the end of the day, is this stuff that someone will want, maybe someday his nephews will want the baseball cards, maybe, maybe not.

And I think what happens in those situations, Amy too, is that people are so understandably in the grief, right? Where they're grieving and they're processing and it's like, "I can't possibly get rid of it." I helped a young guy, his wife passed. They were young, they've been high school sweethearts, they got married really young and she died cancer really fast.

And he immediately put their house, it was their first house they bought together, they were going to have their first kid in it. He just called me up and said, "I want to get this house on the market, I want to get out of here." And he got so much blow back from her parents, everybody, "How can you do that? How can you disrespect her memory?" And I was like, "But it's not about her memory.

It's about you can't live here. You're not happy. This isn't what it was anymore." I think what it's really about Amy, is that we don't want the stuff, we want to know that the connection's there.

Amy Morin:

Right.

Tracy McCubbin:

We want to know that we still have a piece of that person. And sometimes we feel like, "Oh, the more stuff I keep, the more I'm connected to them." But then there's this tipping point where the stuff becomes a huge burden and you're paying \$600 a month for a storage unit or you're going through it. So I would say that, and sometimes you have to declutter that stuff in stages. Maybe you're not ready right away. But I often point out to people that it's not about the stuff, it's about the loss.

Amy Morin:

Right. Right. Absolutely. And because there's a feeling of guilt if you're not taking care of something when you have a box and it's in the basement and something could happen to it anyway, it might get water damage or whatever. But knowing that you have stuff in a box doesn't really feel that good. But on the other hand, you don't want to just, what are you going to do with it? What are you, you can't use it all.

Tracy McCubbin:

Yeah. You have this funny sort of like, well, we get in our heads like, I'm honoring this person. You're like, but if you have a box in a basement that's just getting moldy, is that honoring them?

Amy Morin:

Right.

Tracy McCubbin:

I had a client call me this, I love this. She called me, she had to move her mom into assisted living pronto. Mom took a fall, had to fly to St. Louis, had to do it. And she called me up and she said, she's got all this beautiful furniture. I don't really want to just dump it at a donation place. "I don't know. I'm just..." She was just running around in circles. And I said, "Put it up on Facebook, you're back in your hometown, just put it up." And she put it up on Facebook and said, "Look, I'm in..." Wherever she was, "And this is what we have." And her first cousin called and said, "Oh, my daughter just moved into a new apartment, she's going to show up with a U-haul." And for her, it felt so good to let it go to someone she knew, a young woman who was starting out in her first apartment. Sometimes that in the letting go process, if you can maybe just do a little bit of work, not just put it on the curb, but put it up in the buy nothing group or know where it's going, it's so, makes it so much easier to let go.

Amy Morin:

Oh yeah, that's a really good point because sometimes if we don't want, just want to take all of these items, drop them off at the goodwill and let somebody else buy them for next to nothing. But to know it is going to a good home somehow feels better. What steps do you recommend for people that are listening and they're like, "Yeah, my house has way too much clutter." Where do you even start?

Tracy McCubbin:

Oh, it's my favorite question. So the first, the absolute first step is to get clear on why you want to declutter. Just get clear. And I don't want your why to be, "I'm lazy, I'm a bad..." Don't beat yourself up. It's, "I want to be able to have friends over. I want to clear out the back bedroom so that my mom can come spend the weekend.

I want to stop paying for the outside storage unit." Pick a positive outcome because that why is what's going to keep you motivated. Right? We all know beating ourselves up

isn't a motivator. It's like... you know? So keep that why. And then start small. I think the big mistake a lot of people who are starting their decluttering journey is they're like, "I'm going to do my whole house."

And it's like, well, your whole house, I joke Rome didn't get cluttered in a day, it took a while. So start small, one shelf, one drawer, one category in your closet and do it. Complete the task, get it finished. Go through, get rid of what you want to get rid of. I have a great, by the way, I have a great PDF on my website for the five questions you can ask yourself about any item in your house to help you decide if you want to let it go or not. So if your listeners want to hop over, it's really helpful. But...

Amy Morin:

Absolutely. We'll link to it in our show notes so everybody can find it.

Tracy McCubbin:

Great. But so start small and celebrate your success. If you get, let's just say you get your utensil drawer in the kitchen. Take a moment the next time you're setting the table and be like, this is so much easier to deal with. Right? Really build on your success. And I have this woman DM me and it just, it made me so sad.

She's like, "I worked so hard and I did my whole main floor and all my husband can do is yell at me that I haven't done the basement yet." And I'm like, "Aw." Sit in your success and see how good it feels and understand that you're implementing a change in your behavior. I mean, what is it? It's 21 days of doing something for something to become a habit. You're making a big change.

So start small, set yourself up for success, celebrate your success. The other big part, this is so important is that for most people, most people don't wake up in the morning and be like, "I want to declutter today." I do, but that's because of what I love to do. But if you are not inclined towards that, make a date with yourself.

Put it on your calendar, Saturday from 11 to 12. Respect your time, be honest about how much time you have and book it. Make a commitment to yourself. Call a friend and say, "Hey, I'm going to start decluttering. Might be a little difficult, I just want to check in

with you about it." Set it up so that you just put these things into place that set you up for success.

Amy Morin:

I like the idea of doing those little chunks of time. Sometimes I'll work with people, we'll just start with 10 minutes.

Tracy McCubbin:

Yeah.

Amy Morin:

And we underestimate how much you could do if you were to just be in one room and you say, "For 10 minutes I'm just going to work on getting rid of some stuff that I don't necessarily need." They are usually floored at how much stuff they can do in just 10 minutes.

Or I've worked with other people who say, "In the next month, I want to get my entire house organized." Well, how are you going to do that? Well, sometimes they'll do a trash bag a day challenge. You're just going to fill up one bag a day and when the bag's full, move on. And you'll find that in 30 days you've gotten rid of a lot of stuff and it hasn't been nearly as difficult as you anticipated.

Tracy McCubbin:

It's amazing. I do on Instagram, I do, I post these five minute decluttering challenges where I just pick a category. And the amount of DMs I get from people that are like, "I've now gone through my whole house and I didn't real." And it's like I just did bathing suits and shorts after summer and coffee mugs and just the simplest thing. And it's like, oh, I can do this.

I can do my shelf of coffee mugs. And then all of a sudden you're like, I've done 10 categories, that's half my house. And so I think that people, I think breaking it down like that is, I want people to be successful. I know that this is difficult for a lot of people. I don't want to make it harder.

I don't want you to... There's some organizers out there that you have to pull everything out and dump it in the center of the room and... I mean, I can do that because this is my skill, but most people can't do that. I get so many calls and people are like, "So I pulled everything out of every closet and now it's just living in the floor in my house."

Amy Morin:

Right. Right. Yeah. I know a lot of people that will say that, "I've turned it into a bigger mess and now I don't know what to do with it. And it's hard to put everything back." But do you recommend that people have a home or an idea of what they're going to do with their stuff before they start this? So if they already know, "I'm going to have a garage sale, I'm going to donate it." Or what do you do with it once you start finding these items you don't need anymore?

Tracy McCubbin:

Absolutely. Couple things. I either end of the day of decluttering, either have a donation pickup scheduled, have them come load it in your car and know that, okay, the donation place is on my way, right? To, on my way to the grocery store, I'm going to drop it off. Clutter is insidious.

So even if you get it bagged up and you leave it in the corner of your house, it's going to stay there. You've got to get it out. I am such a huge fan of buy nothing groups. They're unbelievable. We got, the other day, a client got rid of 30 brand new black three ring binders. I was like, well, I don't want to throw these away. [inaudible 00:20:49] we put up on the buy nothing group.

Three different teachers were like, "I'm starting my new fall schedule. Oh my gosh, this is perfect." Came and got them. So set up a buy nothing group, arrange for a donation, have the end game in place. Because also if you know that the donation place is coming to pick up Monday morning, you're like, "Oh, I got to have this stuff ready." So that is a huge component.

Amy Morin:

And what about the fear of regret? Like, "I'm going to get rid of this item and then two weeks from now I'm going to wish I still had it or somebody's going to ask me for it or I'll need it and I won't be able to find another one." I see so many people that won't get rid of something because they're afraid I'm going to regret this next week.

Tracy McCubbin:

So this is part of my five questions, which is great. One of the questions is, if you got rid of this thing and for... There's two [inaudible 00:21:37] if you got rid of this thing, could you reasonably buy it again? So is it actually costing you more to store it then you could get it again? Or could you borrow it from someone else? That's the other thing.

Camping equipment is a great example. They're like, "Well, we might go camping when the kids are older." And I'm like, every neighbor on your street has all that camping equipment. So that's a really great way. And then also I had to ask people historically, have you ever used this thing? Have you ever used it?

Because chances are, and look, of course there are one-offs and of course there's going to be something. But the majority of things that's just a loop. And you're like you can, you know this, as humans, we are meaning making machines. Right? We make meaning out of everything.

So we're going to concoct some story that, "I need this thing because of X, Y, and Z." And for those events to happen is so farfetched. So I just tell people historically, look at it. And a lot of people I'm like, look, if you need it, call me. Because chances are someone else's decluttered it and I have it in my warehouse and I can bring it over to you.

Amy Morin:

But you're right, there's a story behind certain things. If somebody buys a sparkly dress because they think someday I might get invited to an event where I get to wear this fancy dress, it means I am, I don't know, important or it means something about me. How do we get rid of those items that were attached to a story about who we are?

Tracy McCubbin:

So this is one of the great things about Make Space for Happiness is I turn the decluttering conversation kind of on its end and we talk about why we shop. Right? So why are we buying the thing? So this sparkly dress is a perfect example. Well, I'm going to buy this sparkly dress because maybe someday I'll get invited to this event and maybe I'll meet my future partner there.

And all of a sudden you're down this magical thinking and you bought a dress that you can't afford and you may never wear. And so it's really about putting people in the moment and acknowledging what's really going on with them when they're shopping, right? And when you're decluttering. Is that sparkly dress really about some unhealed love that's missing in your life? Maybe if you're looking for your partner it's not about the sparkly dress, but it's about doing some of the work to kind of get your heart in a place that you're open to it.

Amy Morin:

And what role has social media played in terms of just tempting us to buy more stuff? Because we think that person has this expensive item and I want it too.

Tracy McCubbin:

It's terrible. So we have lost all media literacy. We, in the olden days when I was a kid, we used to have three TV channels and you knew what time the commercials were and you got off the TV and you did, we're being marketed to 24 hours a day. 24 hours a day. And so that person on Instagram, she looks like our friend, right? She's like, oh, we would hang out with her.

And then she's talking about this. And I know, I'm not saying don't buy things. I'm not saying you're never going to not, I have many things. I have lots of things, things I use, things I love. We have things, but it's about understanding where we are emotionally when we shop. Because when you shop, you get a dopamine hit because we're created as hunters and gatherers.

Right? So we got a reward for finding the pear tree in the middle of the forest. But we still get that. But the problem is it wears off, I think in 17 seconds. I think that's the

amount of time. And so you're like, I just got to buy again to get that hit again. I got to buy again. That doesn't give us the lasting feelings that we want.

We all know it's exercise, it's connecting with friends, it's being of service to someone else. It's having a gratitude practice. Those are the things that are going to give us what we're looking for instead of the shopping. I've had so many people say this about, I don't want to say they're shopping addicts because I'm not the person to make that call, but they have a problem with over shopping.

And so many times they talk about the click, click, click of the hangers when they're looking at clothes, looking for a sale, click, click, click, click. And that they've sort of smooshed this experience and this sound like, "I'm going to feel better if I get this blouse on sale. I'm going to find the deal of a century."

But that evaporates because then the dress is in your car and you get home and you hang it up and it's lost all its shine. And then you still have problems and life and aging parents and all this stuff. So I am asking people to dig deeper and go, why are you buying? Why are you buying? What's missing in your life that you're buying, you're trying to buy?

Amy Morin:

And online shopping has certainly made that a bigger problem, right? Now within...

Tracy McCubbin:

Yeah.

Amy Morin:

Five minutes you can order so much stuff.

Tracy McCubbin:

Yeah. And Amy, think about it, we used to have to put pants on to go shopping. Right?

You used to have to get out.

Amy Morin:

Right.

Tracy McCubbin:

And now it just shows up. And what's really insidious about that is so you get your dopamine hit when you hit buy now, and then the package shows up and you're like, "Oh, someone sent me a present." You don't even tie it to, "Oh, I spent money to get this thing."

Amy Morin:

Right.

Tracy McCubbin:

So you just get in this cycle and we're just buying and buying and buying and it's not working. I mean, it's just not working. We're not happier. The stuff is not making us happier.

Amy Morin:

So how do we decide how much do I actually need in life? How much is too much?

Tracy McCubbin:

Couple things. So one of the great exercises that I have people do is that when you are about to go shopping, I want you to stop saying, "I need. Oh, I need a new pair of jeans. I need a new pair of leggings." I'm going to bet you don't need a new pair of jeans. I'm going to get you have plenty of jeans.

Just start saying, "I want. I want a new pair of jeans." Because you have wants. And, of course. And all of a sudden when you say, I want, it sort of takes the power away.

Right? It's not like, oh, this driving need, I've got to find the perfect jeans. It's like, oh no, I want a new pair. Okay, I'll start looking. That's a great, great actionable item. Another thing is, for every \$50 something costs, wait 24 hours before you buy it.

Amy Morin:

Oh, I like that one too.

Tracy McCubbin:

Right? Because oftentimes you sort of forget about it.

Amy Morin:

Right.

Tracy McCubbin:

You're up late at night on Instagram like, "I'm going to buy this eyelash serum and it's \$112." You wait two days, you forget all about it. So those are very, very actionable things that people can do. And in the book I talk about the kind of components that are missing that make us, drive us to shop and really where else you can fill them.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. And that's so important, right? Because sometimes we just take away a coping skill, but we forget you have to replace it with something, right?

Tracy McCubbin:

Exactly.

Amy Morin:

If you are used to exactly sitting on the couch and shopping on the weekends, what else are you going to do instead? Because you have to find something healthier to replace that with.

Tracy McCubbin:

Exactly. I think that's a big missing piece that I think this is what happens, and this is what I wrote that why I wanted to write the book is I watched everybody declutter and then the pandemic hit and they bought everything and then some again. And I was like, right, because we couldn't, we, all of our connection, all of the stuff we did was taken away and we didn't have something to replace it with so we started shopping.

So I am a big fan, go to the animal shelter and walk the doggies. Call your best friend that you haven't seen and go out for tea, do some activity, take a walk with a friend.

You're killing two birds with one stone. You're walking, exercise and you're connecting. There's so many things we can do. But it's so important that if you're trying to replace that that you actually replace it.

Amy Morin:

And do you find that most people have too much of one thing, like somebody might have too much clothes? Are there items that we're cluttering our houses with too much? Or is it kind of across the board that we have just have too much stuff in general?

Tracy McCubbin:

Across the board, we have too much stuff. I mean, for sure everybody has too many clothes. Ridiculous. Ridiculous. But across the board, and it really sort of, I think the kind of clutter you have tells a lot about you. If you've got tons of kitchen clutter, like appliances and gadgets and all those things, usually you have a pretty complicated relationship with your body and your weight.

If it's diet stuff, if you have exercise stuff, same with clothes, books, if you have a lot of books. I have a lot of books. You're an information seeker. But for me, it's getting real about, I see a book and I'm like, "Oh, this is going to solve all my problems.

I'm going to learn about my cholesterol." I don't read it. I don't read it. You know what? I'm better, for me, I'm better off listening to a podcast that that author is interviewed on. That's how I disseminate information. So it's really, I think it's a really good exercise for people is look at your overwhelming kind of clutter. What is it? And that's going to kind of help you figure out what's going on.

Amy Morin:

And how do you define clutter versus if you have a bookshelf and you enjoy those books, maybe it's something you want to keep, but how do you know when it's crossed the line?

Tracy McCubbin:

So I describe clutter as the stuff that gets in the way of the life you want to be living. So let's say that it's your goal. I want to, you're back in the office, I want to get up, get dressed and get out the door in an hour. But your closet is a disaster, stuff to the gills, getting dressed out of the laundry basket.

You start the day so stressed. That's clutter because you want to get up, get dressed, and get out the door. Can you not have dinner on your dining room table because it's so full of packages and things. That's clutter. So that's a really good way. Are you constantly managing your stuff to do other things?

And another really good litmus test is can you tidy up a room? Can you, your kitchen, your living room, can you put it back together in a way that is how you want it in 20 minutes or less. If it takes more than 20 minutes, chances are you have too much stuff. That's a really good, you should be able to do that and... But if you're like all of a sudden it's an hour to tidy up a room, then you're like, "Ugh. Yeah."

Amy Morin:

Okay. Then you know it's crossed the line.

Tracy McCubbin:

Mm-hmm.

Amy Morin:

All right. One last question for you. When we start decluttering, what are some of the biggest benefits that we might start to enjoy?

Tracy McCubbin:

So you have, it's less cost. You're not paying for a storage unit, you're able to use your house, you get back time. Time is our most important commodity. If you figure out that every day I hang my keys in the same spot and I don't have to go looking for them, then I'm saving all this time. So it's time, money, less stress, less stress.

They've just shown it over and over again. I always think of clutter as a constant to-do list. And you said it earlier on, people who have a lot of clutter feel guilty doing other

things because they're like, "I should be home cleaning my house." If you get that done and that's taken care of, then you can go and enjoy your life. So it's really, peace and freedom are a huge part.

Amy Morin:

And who doesn't want more of those things right now?

Tracy McCubbin:

Yeah, I want it. I want some more of that.

Amy Morin:

Exactly. Well, Tracy McCubbin, thank you so much for being on the Verywell Mind podcast and for motivating all of us to do a little more decluttering.

Tracy McCubbin:

Thanks, Amy. I had a great time.

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Therapist's Take! This is a part of the show where I'll break down Tracy's strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life. Here are three of Tracy's strategies that I highly recommend.

Number one: identify how your stuff gets in the way of living the life that you want. I love that Tracy talks so much about how clutter affects not just our mental health but also living the type of life that we want to live. On the surface, I know that sounds dramatic. And no one's ever walked into my therapy office saying, "I think my clutter is preventing me from living my dreams."

But I can't tell you how often that subject eventually comes up. Someone might say, "I can't ever bring someone over to my house because it's always so messy," and it's affecting their relationships. Or someone else might feel stressed out and overwhelmed because they spend so much time cleaning.

And we might eventually get to the root of the problem, which is that they have way too much stuff and it's nearly impossible to stay organized. But you won't be motivated to fix the problem unless you really recognize what it's costing you.

Spend a little time thinking about how your extra stuff might be affecting your relationships, your job, your finances, your health, and your emotional well-being.

Number two: start decluttering one small step at a time. Tracy suggests picking one small area to start decluttering first, like a shelf, a closet, or just a desk.

That's a great way to make a big task seem a lot more manageable. I also like the idea to give yourself a time limit to see how much decluttering you can do in just five minutes or maybe ten minutes. You can also create a challenge for yourself, like you're going to get rid of one bag of items every single day.

Decluttering and organizing one small step at a time makes it feel much more manageable. And as you go, pay attention to the changes in how you feel. You might feel less stressed if a room has less stuff in it, or you might feel more productive when your desk is better organized.

And number three: develop a plan for what to do with your stuff. Obviously, you don't want to just end up moving clutter from one spot in the house to another. Shoving everything into your guest room or piling everything up in a closet doesn't solve the problem. So come up with a plan for what you're going to do with your stuff.

Donate it or sell it, or do a combination of both. Having a plan will make it easier to get rid of stuff. And over time, you'll likely realize that there's lots of stuff you can live without, and you might get happier when you have more space. So those are three of Tracy's strategies that I highly recommend.

Identify how your stuff gets in the way of living the life you want, start decluttering one small step at a time, and develop a plan for what you're going to do with your stuff. To hear more of Tracy's strategies for getting organized and decluttering your house, check out her book *Make Space for Happiness*.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them! Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called 10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.”

To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!* And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer who only holds on to the coolest stuff that he actually likes, Nick Valentin.