



Dancing With Squirrels

Decluttering Amidst Distraction

Introduction

This is a quick-start guide to decluttering, intentionally geared toward people who struggle with distraction. If you're the sort of person who finds themselves having a hard time concentrating and/or needing to be brought back on track, this guide is for you.

The idea for it came to me when I read an article from a personal trainer a year or so ago. He did a lot of work with fibromyalgia patients, who sometimes can't exercise for more than a few minutes at a time without a flare-up, and he was talking about how progress can be very slow and frustrating.

"Being able to exercise for 15 seconds more today is still progress," he'd say.

And I think that's similar to how it goes with decluttering.

The Problem

Most people who are easily distracted have a hard time sitting still and doing something for an extended period of time. Spending 15 minutes on the same task can be difficult, let alone spending hours at a time!

Yet many of those same people tend to have an "all or nothing" mental approach to tasks like decluttering. They'll decide that they have to wait until they can block off a whole weekend to work on the house, and that never happens.

Or worse, they succeed in blocking off the whole weekend. Then they'll manage to declutter for an hour by sheer force of will, get sidetracked, and the rest of the time will disappear into oblivion.

The Solution

Part of the problem with focus is rooted in enjoyment. Most people don't have to try hard to play a video game for a couple of hours, because video games are fun. The fact that they engage the eyes, the ears, the hands, and the mind make them easy to play for extended periods of time.

First I'm going to show you how to set a reasonable, time-based decluttering goal. Then I'm going to show you how to use the multi-sensory principle, along with some intentional distractions, to add a bit more fun, stimulation, and focus to your decluttering process.

If you have questions, problems, or feedback, I encourage you to contact me. Drop me a message via the feedback form on my website!

Set A Goal

Let me know if this sounds familiar. You've tried to declutter before, but every time you've tried you've gotten bogged down. And after a few failed attempts at "decluttering the house", you've just given up in frustration.

Maybe you read a bit later that you should just "start with the top of your desk". Which sounded easy, until two hours later when you're neck-deep in piled-up papers and despairing of ever getting through it all.

Sound familiar? It definitely describes the situation I was in a dozen years ago!

This is why setting reasonable goals is critically important. In the case of decluttering, people who are prone to distraction tend to do best by picking an area to work on, and a time that they're willing to commit to it. Let's look at how to do that.

Pick An Area

First we're going to pick an area to declutter. Don't spend too much time thinking about this! You're going to get to everything eventually, so starting is the important thing - not where you start.

If there's an area that's always bothering you ("every day I trip over all the shoes in the entryway!") then that's where you start. If not, start in your living room or bedroom. There's no wrong answer here - the only way to go wrong is not to start.

Write the area you've decided to start in on a 3x5 card, and tuck it into your pocket.

Pick A Time

How long can you declutter at one time? If you've never done it before, or if you haven't done it recently, I suggest starting with 15 minutes. Do *not* say "I'll declutter this desk today", or "I'll declutter this bookshelf". Set a time limit, and stick to it.

Why? You're setting a time goal instead of a space goal for two reasons.

The first is that spaces are hard to estimate. A decluttered desk may take 5 minutes, or it may take an hour. It all depends on what you run into and what you wind up doing.

The second reason is that you're looking for a victory. 15 minutes of decluttering is attainable for most people. But when what looked like a 15-minute project turns into a 3-hour job, most people get discouraged and quit.

We want you to have success - so use a time-based goal!

Manage Time & Distractions

Now you have a goal. It includes the space you're working on, and how long you've committed to working on it. You've established some supportive distractions. The only things left to do is set up a couple of time management systems.

Set An "I'm Done!" Timer

You have a time you've committed to work. I strongly recommend you set a physical timer, so you can see how long you have left, and so you have an audible reminder when you've finished.

This is especially helpful when you have something scheduled later on. As much as falling into a decluttering rhythm that lasts 4 hours sounds great, it won't be so great if you miss a doctor appointment because of it!

Set An Interruption Timer

One of the dangers of being highly distractible is that you wind up careening off course and doing something other than what you should be doing.

For example, say you're going through your closet. You've started pulling all of your clothes out, and you suddenly happen across a box of pictures. Two hours later you're still sitting there on the bed going through the box of photos, reliving the memories.

Is going through the box of photos inherently bad? No, but it's taken you off course.

The issue here is that you've set aside time to do a specific thing. In this case, that specific thing is going through your closet. And given that time is limited, and carving out time is difficult for most people, you need to do your best to ensure that the process isn't being derailed.

This is why we have an interruption timer. For decluttering times 20 minutes or less, set it to go off at least every 5 minutes. For times up to an hour, every 10 minutes. For over an hour, 15 minutes.

When the timer goes off, evaluate what you're actually doing vs. what you're supposed to be doing. And if you've forgotten what you're supposed to be doing, reach in your pocket and pull out the card!

The idea here, believe it or not, is to distract you from your distractions. If a distraction derails you, you'll have a built-in reminder to bring you back on task.

Crazy-sounding? Maybe. Effective? You bet!

Supportive Habits

Part of the reason that many people have a hard time decluttering is that it can be quite tedious and boring. As discussed earlier, the more parts of you that are “on”, the more stimulating an activity is perceived to be.

You’re already doing visual and tactile work when you’re decluttering (looking at items and handling them), but you’re not usually doing too much auditory work (unless you’re shaking things and listening to see if they’re broken!). In many cases, you’re not doing much thinking either.

And having both your ears and your brain largely shut down can make you bored quick! So let’s come up with some things to get them fired back up again.

Music & Audiobooks

Both music and audiobooks can get your ears back in the mix. If you’re decluttering things with a high mental load (sentimental stuff, for example), music or audiobooks that don’t make you think too much are fantastic.

If your decluttering for the day is going to be mostly mindless processing, podcasts or audiobooks that get you thinking are a good choice. News podcasts and “how-to” type podcasts are great options. Just don’t pick something that requires you to take notes!

Get A “Clutter Buddy”

There’s no substitute for human interaction - so is it any surprise that some people do better with decluttering if they have somebody else there to talk to? This gets your ears and your brain going, and if the somebody else is willing to pitch in and (supportively) help you make decisions, that’s helpful too!

Get A Virtual “Clutter Buddy”

Maybe you can’t find somebody to come over, but you can find somebody to talk to on the phone. Decluttering time can be a good time to call your mom, your cousin who moved away a couple of years ago, or even a friend across town. In fact, if you have friends that need to declutter their own spaces, you might be able to call each other and talk while you both declutter!

This works best if your decluttering for the day is going to be mostly-mindless processing.

If you’re going to do this, I highly recommend you get a headset for your phone. Wired or Bluetooth doesn’t matter nearly as much as having your hands free to work!

"Dancing With Squirrels" Declutter Checklist

Pick an area.

Anything from one shelf to one room, but no larger.
Write this area on a card, and tuck it into your pocket.

Set a time.

15 minutes for your first half-dozen times.
Increase slowly as you get more practice.

Set the "I'm done!" timer.

Set the interruption timer.

Are you decluttering for....
....15 minutes or less? At least every 5 minutes.
....1 hour or less? At least once every 10 minutes.
....More than 1 hour? At least once every 15 minutes.

Create supportive distractions.

Music? Podcast? "Clutter Buddy"?

Start decluttering!

Product Recommendations

This is a guide to decluttering, so the point isn't really to sell you stuff. If you already have the stuff below, use what you have and get started!

But since I get a lot of people who want specific recommendations, here's what I use.

Timers

Personally, I have an iPhone and I love the built-in apps. You can set a built-in alarm for when you're supposed to be done decluttering, and use the built-in countdown timer to manage your interruption timer.

I'm not specifically familiar with the current state of Android, but I'm sure Android has something similar.

If you're not a fan of smartphones, or if you'd prefer a different route, I would highly suggest something like [this](#).

It's a digital timer that can keep track of two things at once. I used to use one just like it for just about everything - before I got a smartphone, that is. We're talking about \$10 or so on Amazon, so it's not a large expense.

Headsets

If you're going to be talking on the phone as you declutter, I highly suggest that you get a hands-free headset. My personal recommendations in that department are a wired headset, since you won't have to spend close to \$100 to get a nice one.

The one I own is the Image headset, and it can be found [here](#). This is a headset with a 3.5mm jack (the kind that iPhone/Android phones have).

A friend of mine who used this strategy (talking on the phone while decluttering / cleaning) has a cordless phone that takes the 2.5mm jack (slightly smaller than the ones on iPhone/Android), and she swears by [this headset](#).

Again, both of these are in the neighborhood of \$10.

Additional Resources

This little guide was written to help highly-distractable people carve out the time and stay motivated to declutter during that time - but there's obviously much more to decluttering than that!

Articles

I offer several articles per month about general decluttering topics, both mental and physical. You can find those articles over at the [Cluttered To Clean website](#), and you can sign up to get them auto-delivered to your email inbox.

Group Discussion

If you're looking for help with particular clutter issues, consider joining my private Facebook group! There's a growing community there that offers both encouragement and strategies to one another, and you're welcome to join. Head on over to the [Cluttered To Clean Facebook group](#) if that sounds interesting to you!

Personalized Help

I offer fee-based, personalized help - either on an ongoing or an as-needed basis - to people struggling with clutter issues. If you'd like to read a little bit more about me and what I offer, you can check out my ["Work With Me" page](#).

About The Author

Ever lost a decluttering book in a pile of clutter? That was me in 2006. Several years of decluttering later, I realized that my success either meant I'd gotten lucky, or that I didn't think about these problems like most people. So I started a blog.

Minimalism was huge back then, and I was writing to help the people who didn't throw away all their stuff and live like vagabonds (vagabonds with MacBook Pros!), but still wanted to downsize, simplify, and find happiness beyond "stuff".

Six years and countless articles later, that blog has evolved into Cluttered To Clean - and I'm still writing for those same people.

When I'm not writing about decluttering or helping people declutter, I enjoy computer programming, website design, reading, origami, and the occasional game of some back-yard sport. Oh, and tacos. Can't forget tacos.

