

5 Days *to a* Clutter-Free House

*Quick, Easy Ways to
Clear Up Your Space*

Sandra Felton
and Marsha Sims



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INITIATIVE

From Sandra: To my family—my husband, Ivan, and the kids, now grown, Lucy, Peter, and Doug, who were all a part of the mix at the house as we moved from a cluttered to a clear way of life. And for the freedom from the grip of disorganization, I say with a heartfelt Miami-type thanks to the Lord, “*Gracias a Dios! Muchas gracias!*”

From Marsha: This book is dedicated to my three sons, George, Charles, and Darryl, who forced me to learn how to declutter my home quickly. They taught me how to use tough love and to create strategies that guided them toward the decision that they would rather clean up their own spaces than accept my creative consequences. And to my extended family of sons, Jabbar, Jimmy, Chris, Eugene, Garry, and Sadiki, who were always around. We all had fun and learned how to clean up and organize together.

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Preface

As professional organizers, we believe that the disorganized people we have dealt with are among the greatest people in the world. Creative, relationship-focused, intelligent, and warmly sentimental, they are wonderful people to know.

We include ourselves in the group of people who are disorganized by nature. The only difference between us and those we seek to help is that through training and by the grace of God, we have recovered. Our own backgrounds as inborn disorganized folks are excellent credentials, because we have had to learn from scratch. We're able to break down the causes of and cures for clutter in a way organized people couldn't begin to fathom.

In our many years of experience, disorganized people have impressed us with their many good—very good—qualities. Often it is these very qualities that lead them into the cluttered condition of their houses. As we look around their homes, we note they are:

- Intelligent—Oh, so many books and papers!
- Curious—Magazines, newspapers, and time on the Internet
- Productive—Many half-done projects in the works
- Appreciative of beauty—Displays galore of favorite things
- Frugal—Items retained “just in case” they might be needed
- Helpful—Things kept in the event someone else needs them
- Creative—Hobbies and crafts inspire them
- Careful—Abundant receipts, sale offers
- Loving—Pets, sometimes lots and lots of pets

These very qualities are what make the disorganized such lovable and enjoyable people. Unfortunately, these qualities also lead disorganized people toward a way of life that stifles the expression of who they are.

If you can't easily find the things you want and need, frustration clouds the enjoyment of what you are trying to do. Even though you are warm and friendly, the messy house places a barrier between you and your friends and family. And then, of course, a messy and disorganized house is not inviting; it is not a place for you to relax and rejuvenate. Instead, it demands that you spend time and energy on trying to make some sort of improvement—to make your house a home.

You deserve better than that. You *can* have a home that refreshes and inspires you—you simply need to follow what we've dubbed the Mount Rushmore method. It's a five-day “toe-to-head” approach that will create a totally different and enjoyable life of order and beauty.

Building Your Organizing Vocabulary

When we talk organizing, we often use words that may be unfamiliar. When we use the term *Mount Rushmore*, we're talking about a unique organizing method created to get your house in order in five days. The “rush” part means the job gets done quickly. The “more” part means you don't try to do the job alone; you get help. We'll explain the process fully in the first section of the book.

Using a team approach is an important part of the power of this program. When we speak of a Clean Team, we mean bringing in outside forces to help move things from cluttered to clean. A “team” may be only one other person, but ideally it should consist of a few more, enough to get the assigned activities of the day done throughout the house.

When we discuss maintenance, we mean keeping the house organized consistently after it has been de-cluttered. The second section of the book covers that topic.

What About Guys?

People sometimes ask, “Why are your books written primarily to women, since guys are just as messy, or messier?”

Most women know the answer. Whether we like it or not, women usually care more and carry more responsibility for

GOD'S RECOMMENDATION OF TEAMWORK

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.

For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 (KJV)

the house than men. How do we know? Just look around. An Internet group designed for messy men closed for lack of interest. Classes on organizing have a dozen women for every man. Women's magazines have articles about organizing in every issue. Do you see this kind of article in men's magazines? We think not.

We include a guy now and then in our references because they often need the same kind of help—they're just not as plentiful when it comes to asking for organizational assistance. Messies Anonymous (www.messies.com) does offer a small ebook called *Messy Men Clean Up Their Act*. So men, you are welcomed into the ranks of those who want to move from cluttered to clear. Just don't be surprised that your fellow male comrades are few.

About This Book

Our purpose in writing this book is to help you move to a new way of life from the clutter that surrounds you. It is for those who are somewhat or significantly cluttered. Keep in mind that an obsessive clutterer may require more significant intervention. But if you have hope and are game, we'll help you usher in comfort you could never have imagined in your house and will never want to abandon.

This book has two sections:

- Section 1 details the five-day program.
- Section 2 explains how to keep your newly ordered house under control.

Thanks to all who contributed by letting us into their hearts and houses. The people are real. When we asked for their experiences with team cleaning, many of them wrote to us, telling how the approach you will read about impacted their lives. We include their writings just as they came to us. They reflect genuine sincerity. Some of our examples are from hands-on, in-the-trenches organizing experiences. Some are composites. Care has been taken to protect the identity of each.

Envious of Having a Team

Maryann set the stage for where we are going when she wrote:

“I’m looking forward to the book. I often wonder how to handle all the paperwork and stuff I have amassed over the years. I hate to think of my passing and leaving my family this situation. I confess, I have been envious of those who could have a team come in and take over. I’m so looking forward to the book!”

So let’s get started!

Introduction

What You Need to Know to Get Started

Have you ever wanted to be on one of those clean-up-your-mess-in-a-jiffy reality TV shows? *That would be so quick and easy*, you think. *I wish they could come to my house.*

Now you can have the same experience—only better. You'll be the producer, assembling the crew and orchestrating the whole show. No strangers in the house. No embarrassment with cameras. No inconvenient timetable. Just good results. A neat, organized house in a remarkably quick time.

That's what this book is about: overcoming trouble, the kind of trouble that clutter brings to your life in one way or another. Like when all or many of the surfaces of your house are cluttered with misplaced items. Like when you hesitate to invite people in. Like when you are sick and tired of the mess and just want to live a clear, clutter-free life. If you're at that point, you've come to the right place. Soon you will be able to breathe a large sigh of relief and inhale the joy of clutter-free rooms.

That's what Renee wanted. She had one of those "special rooms" that was full of debris, boxes, and overstuffed trash bags she'd been meaning to get to (for years). There were surfaces of her house that she couldn't use for their intended purpose because they were

peppered with papers and miscellaneous items. She was tired of her family complaining. But mostly she was tired of living this way herself. The house didn't look good, and it didn't work right. She was simply ready to make a change. This book is for Renee. And if you can relate, this book is for you, too.

First, we'll discuss the problems of clutter. Then, we'll move quickly on to how you can have

clear surfaces and easy-to-find belongings in just a week. *Speed* is our watchword, because it offers the best guarantee of success. In the past you may have started but ground to a stop before the job was done. That won't happen with this plan.

It may sound like magic. But you really can, and will, have a new house in a very short time, and you will learn to keep it that way.

The Big Question That Makes This Program Work

The first important step in working the magic to create your new house is this all-important question: "If everything were

Stop and ask yourself this all-important question: "If everything were perfect and my house were set up exactly the way I want it, what would it look like?"

Imagine it!

perfect and your house were set up exactly the way you want it, what would it look like?”

Take time to ponder it deeply right now. You have to have a firm idea of where you want to go. In sports, many athletes visualize themselves winning. Speakers see a standing ovation in their minds. Young people who are in tune to their future career success often picture themselves in the position they hope to attain. You, in your quest for a clutter-free home, will benefit from doing the same.

Be sure to take a few seconds or more to visualize your table empty, your counter clear, and your floor debris-free before you enthusiastically begin to de-clutter any part of your house. Though it may not seem to be all that important, the step of visualization is vital to success.

Embracing the vision of your perfect house begins the change process in your thinking and your behavior—and helps you to continue maintaining order and beauty. Therefore, we hope you will make this foundational step a permanent part of your thinking long after the book is through.

Blythe kept hitting a wall in her efforts to keep her home clutter-free. It wasn't that she didn't try; she did. But it seemed that no matter how hard she tried, the clothes somehow ended up in piles on the bed, shoe pairs separated and spread across the floor, the bathroom counter perpetually crowded with makeup. As soon as she would get her kitchen countertop cleaned off and organized, it would slowly creep back into disarray. All of her hard efforts melted and she would have to do a marathon sprint cleanup again. It was a miserable yo-yo experience, and she began to think that she would never, ever be able to keep her house in order. But somewhere

along the way, somebody suggested that imagining a goal was a very powerful force. At first she thought it was a silly and unnecessary step. But because it took only a few seconds, she surrendered her objections and gave it a try. What did she have to lose?

To her surprise, she found that once she had “seen” an area empty, she was able to recognize what items didn’t belong there, and she removed them immediately. It made all the difference. The cluttered areas remained clear in a way they never had before.

Sit for a while and meditate on the details of how your perfect house would look. If you are in the habit of writing in a journal, or even in a blog or social media page, spell out what kind of house would make your heart jump with happiness when you open the front door after a hard day away. Start your writing, “I see my dream house. It has . . .”

- clear surfaces
- harmonious colors (your favorites)
- well-placed furniture
- uncluttered kitchen counters and a picked-up bathroom
- wrinkle-free, fully made beds
- all paperwork under control

Does the condition of your house support you and give you energy and joy? Or does seeing it and knowing all the energy it will take from you to live in it drag you down?

If you are visually oriented, draw a little floor plan, and perhaps sketch what you would like to create. Or collect magazine pictures that show how you’d like your home to look.

MAINTENANCE QUIZ

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being “This needs definite work,” 5 being “We rock at this”), rate your ability to maintain organization in your house.

- ___ I can welcome unexpected visitors without embarrassment most of the time.
- ___ The kitchen is pretty well cleaned after meals and stays okay in between.
- ___ The family is generally good at picking up after themselves.
- ___ The family helps carry the overall load of housework to my satisfaction.
- ___ Laundry (washing, drying, folding, putting away) is under control.
- ___ Regarding bills, filing, magazines, etc., I have a paperwork system that works.
- ___ Once I get an area organized, I generally keep it that way.
- ___ The bathroom stays pretty much in order.
- ___ The beds are made every morning.
- ___ I can leave the house with a feeling of satisfaction about its condition.

A score of 10–19: Red Alert! You need to make maintenance a priority. Focus on specifics as you go through this section.

A score of 20–39: Code Orange! You have some aspects of maintenance under control, but there are areas that need work. It’s tempting to say you are doing “good enough,” but in reality you are only about halfway to having the kind of organized house you want.

A score of 40–50: Blue Ribbon! You are doing a stellar job of keeping your house organized. You and your family will not only have a house that is easier and more pleasant to live in, but being organized will open up wonderful areas in your life that will surprise you.

Look at the items you scored the poorest on. Based on your evaluation, give careful attention to the habits and systems that will make order happen for you in a consistent way.

This is the trip we're going to take—a journey to reach that imagined destination. Join us if you want to travel from chronic disorder—a place beyond dreams of what your life could be—to a permanent, new way of beautiful and organized living.

Ah! There Are Good Times Ahead

You want your house to be organized so you can come home without facing hours of work that you don't have the time or energy to do. You want it to look good. You want it to say "Welcome!" to you and your family and your friends. In addition, you want to be able to find things and work easily in the space you call home. And you don't want to have to work long hours to try to get and keep it organized, beautiful, and useful.

That's the practical side. But there's something that matters more. This is the soul of the matter: Deep down you know you were created for a different kind of life. A life of dignity, a life of service to others, a life of hospitality. Our hearts echo the words of legendary Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz when asked how he overcame his negative beginnings: "I don't think God put us on this earth to be ordinary."¹ Deep down you feel—maybe you know—that God wants you to walk a victorious spiritual path that is being hindered because you haven't gotten your oh-so-earthly act together.

You've tried to do it by yourself in the past. You've vowed you are going to make it happen, and soon! You've bought books on organizing. In fact, they might form your biggest

pile, if you could locate them all. Maybe you have even had partial success for a while. But trying to organize is like trying to lose weight or stop smoking. Sometimes you make progress and then slip back. Sometimes you get bogged down early in the game. Sometimes the progress is so slow, you get tired of working the plan you have. Your momentum fades away. This program addresses and overcomes these hindrances.

We Call It the Mount Rushmore Method

Now, if you are ready to quickly get your house in order with deep-down organizational changes that you can maintain, the program in this book is designed just for you. As we've already said, we call this powerful new approach the Mount Rushmore method, not to be confused with the Mount Vernon or Mount Vesuvius methods mentioned in our other books.

The “rush” indicates that the plan calls for the house to be cleared up quickly, in five days of activity. The “more” part of Rushmore indicates that it takes more than one person to execute this plan. Like the massive sculpture of four U.S. presidents, it requires a team.

You want your home to be different from what it is now—really, really different, right? Well, you can do it! You really can. Even if you have a long history of failures. Even if you have struggled for a long time, maybe years, without success.

Take our five-day challenge and be amazed at what happens. You've got everything to gain . . . and only a disorganized home to lose.

It's Hard to Change

This program is designed to get your house in order in only five days, and with minimal mental distress.

“How can I avoid distress?” you ask (because experiencing pain in the process is what has kept you from progress in the past). You do it by sidestepping that most-serious-of-all pain-producers: decision-making (groan!). You hate to make hard decisions about getting rid of things, about where to store things, about how to group things. You are a smart person, but when it comes to making simple decisions about how to

Even if you own a mansion, if you keep bringing things in and never throw anything away, eventually you will fill it up.

handle your belongings, you crumble. It is your weak point, your own personal Kryptonite. The plan in this book cuts decision making to a minimum, while building support for you for the entire duration of your efforts. (We'll explain more about eliminating decisions and building support in the chapters ahead.)

We understand your situation and how you feel about it. Both of us are among that wonderful group of people who have many good qualities, but staying effortlessly organized is definitely not one of them. We share certain characteristics that make organizing more troublesome for us than our neatnik neighbors, friends, and family, who seem to control their houses successfully with a minimum of effort. The difference is, we've learned what it takes to step out of the enforced confusion we used to live in. By applying what we have learned, we are able to enjoy the pleasures of coming

home to an orderly environment, being able to retrieve what we need easily, and opening the front door to one and all on the spur of the moment. In this book, we'll share those secrets with you.

Fall in Love With an Organized Life

Real, long-term change will come only when the heart and mind passionately embrace the dream of an organized way of life, which fills our lives with what we really love—beauty. Many disorganized people actually have a keen love of beauty. That love spurs them to take home the charming figurine from the garage sale or to collect shiny marbles or coins. Sitting in their disordered homes, they proudly point out their lovely collections. Their shortsighted vision allows them to see the beauty in individual items, but their farsighted vision keeps them from noticing the wider view that illuminates the condition of the house as a whole. They love beauty but are too easily satisfied with individual items.

Somewhere along the way the fog begins to lift. Somewhere in the organizing process, they catch a glimpse that stirs a yearning for something beyond a messy house with touches of beauty. Messies all want more than a house that works well; we want it to look good, too. We know another way of life is possible. Pictures in magazines, memories of their childhood home, a visit to a friend's house or a model home, even television or movie settings remind them that it's desirable and possible. Their prime motivation begins to change to a love for what they can barely see at this time—a way of life full of charm and beauty.

Fall in love with order and beauty. Don't settle with living in a house whose condition drags you down, makes you sorry you have to live there. Do you wish you could just move to a fresh and lovely new house, leaving all you have behind? You can reinvent your house into that dream. Seek the happiness you will experience by getting the house under control and keeping it the way you dream it can be. You'll love it!

Section One

Getting It Under Control

1

The Clutterer Psyche

People like us, who struggle with clutter, have a much stronger attachment to our belongings than most. We see their possibilities, their beauty, and their place in our personal history with a special intensity. What is simple to others is complex to us. That's why we have more difficulty making decisions about what to do with the "treasures" that fill our homes.

Because most Messies are perfectionists at heart, whether our house looks like it or not, we feel just terrible if we make a "wrong" decision that we know we'll regret later. And we are more sensitive to the psychological pain that decision making brings. We say "I just can't" when it comes to letting go of a prized possession (and aren't they all prized?). We "awfulize" what might happen if we let it go and need it later. We are heartbroken if we feel we must part with something we love. No wonder we are sluggish when decision time comes around.

Many in the “orderly segment” of the population are not like that. In amazement, we watch our organized friends rip what we consider to be precious items out of their lives with hardly a twinge of care. They tolerate making mistakes—or just the possibility of making one—and move on. They don’t seem to care if they will regret their decisions later. For them, it is not nearly as traumatic as it is for us. For whatever reason, we clutterers just get too emotionally attached to the things that come into our lives. Those organized people are able to continue life unscathed after getting rid of a belonging we would consider potentially useful or somewhat sentimental.

You need some of that calm approach from others who are organized. In the Mount Rushmore team approach of clearing the clutter from your home, only you will make final decisions about what to keep and what to let go. As the surfaces begin to clear, you’ll see more realistically what you have, and how much you have of it.

As the project unfolds, you will realize that even though there are safeguards built into this Mount Rushmore approach, you’re tapping in to the energy and efforts of others to help you overcome your natural tendency toward clutter. Using a carefully crafted plan, their skills can work wonders for your situation and still honor your desires about how you want to handle your belongings.

Clear Is Better Than Cluttered

We’re on to something, right? There’s something within you that yearns for relief from the chaos of disorganization. You

don't like the way it looks, and you don't like the way it works. A few people who are way, way down at the end of the clutter scale continuum—the people we see on television shows about hoarding—seem insensitive to the seriousness of their situation. They are clutter-blind and frequently resist changing. But that is not you. You probably resonate with what Rhett Butler told Scarlet was his reason for leaving her chaotic life to seek peace in *Gone With the Wind*: “I want to see if somewhere there isn't something left in life of charm and grace.” You know that the condition of your house is a big part of finding that charm and grace in your own life.

“I want to see if
somewhere there isn't
something left in life
of charm and grace.”
—Rhett Butler, *Gone
With the Wind*

In a way, that “charm and grace” is hard to define. For many people, the condition of their house holds a spiritual aspect. They know that God is a God of order, and they suspect He values it in their lives. Some ask themselves, “What would Jesus do?” But Jesus didn't have a house or say anything about housekeeping. (Except maybe in the story of the woman who lost her money somewhere in the house. Now that rings a bell in our experience!)

Some fantasize for themselves or threaten their children with the question, “How would you feel if Jesus came to visit and saw your room like this, young lady!” Perhaps Jesus wouldn't appreciate being used as a threat for children to clean their rooms.

The Bible does say, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). And looking around the

house, it may seem overwhelming for even the most willing heart to determine how to apply this verse.

Nonetheless, in spite of what may be confusion and inability on our parts, for many people, organization seems to be more than just making a mechanical improvement in our houses and lives for purely practical reasons. Something of who we are and why we were put on this earth seems to compel us to live differently. We know it's not right to live frustrated and hindered by an inability to keep the daily stuff of life under control. We want to tap in to the charm and grace Rhett Butler longed to experience, and which, we suspect, flows from a higher source. We want to live our best lives.

You Have Already Started

By picking up this book, you have demonstrated both the desire to change your house and the courage to consider an exciting plan that offers hope of real change. You are to be congratulated.

We know you'd love to find a quick and easy approach in executing the change. Well, this plan is as close to that as you will find. We're here to tell you that because of this unique approach, you will be able to move forward and have the stress-free house you want—one where you can function and are not ashamed of its condition. In short, by putting this plan into action, you can have what has eluded you for years!

Troy Produces His Own “Clean-up” Show

As an example of how this plan works, let's take a look at an extreme case that sets the pattern for us. Because of his

home's excessive clutter, Troy, an accountant, hasn't invited anyone over in more than twenty years. During that time, whenever his elderly aunt came to town to visit, she would find accommodations in a hotel or with other relatives. But accommodating relatives had become scarce, and money for hotels had dried up. When she was ninety-three, Troy was forced to do the impossible—invite Auntie to stay with him.

When he learned his aunt was planning a visit, Troy flew into a massive cleanup effort, using every technique he'd learned in an organizing class. Some days he worked for twelve hours—sorting, putting things in boxes, throwing things out. Stuffing papers and debris into what grew to be a mountain of thirty-five boxes, he carved out some semblance of what each room should be. You could actually note which room was for dining, sleeping, food prep, etc. But time and his ability to handle the situation were nearly depleted . . . and the job was far from done.

His ninety-three-year-old aunt would arrive in six days, and the house was still a disaster. Even after his Herculean cleanup efforts to box and discard the things that were lying around, every surface in his home—tables, counters, chairs, cabinets, desk, dresser—still was piled high with ordinary things. Vying for every available inch were papers, batteries, cameras, cords, office supplies, tools, toiletries, and myriad other items best called “man stuff.” Not by a long shot was the place good enough for Auntie.

What could be done to avert the shame he would feel if his aunt should see his situation? Troy considered the unthinkable—call in help from four friends with whom he had taken the organizing class. He knew they'd understand and

would follow a plan for de-junking his place. So he quickly sent out a distress call.

With the team assembled, the plan was this: Each friend was positioned in a room with strict instructions to not throw anything away without first checking with Troy.

Each one's job was to sort into boxes the items in his assigned room based on the room where the item actually belonged. In addition, each person had a box labeled "Things I Think You Should Throw Away." Into that box would go all of the broken items and seemingly worthless things each

helper would find. While his friends cleared and sorted, Troy's job would be to decide what to do with the broken and junky things recommended for the garbage pile.

At the end of an eleven-hour emergency marathon, they had filled twenty more boxes. Troy had discarded a truckload of broken and

useless items. The original thirty-five boxes were stacked against a wall and attractively disguised with a decorative sheet. An additional twenty boxes were tucked into out-of-the-way spaces in rooms where their contents would finally be housed. With one grouping of boxes, the team even created a table by covering it with a decorative blanket Troy had acquired while traveling. By the end of the day, Troy's house was not only livable, it was beautiful.

In short, it was ready for Auntie.

Don't get us wrong. The house was not fully organized. But the boxes offered a good—albeit temporary—solution to

LAMENT OF A SAVER

My Treasure Trove

I struggle to keep it all
day by day,
But as soon as I'm gone,
they'll toss it away.

his problem. Now Troy could operate from a clean perspective, emptying and organizing the things in each box one at a time, *after Auntie had gone*.

Troy's story, though it may not fit yours in its severity or detail, sets an example that fits our pattern of recovery. Troy had a keen desire to change, as you probably do. He had a long-standing problem that he'd tried to solve by himself without success. He called in outside help and, by using a plan we'll explain in more detail, he was able to reach his goal—and fast!

You can do it, too. By using the steps of the Mount Rushmore plan, adapted to your particular situation, you'll be able to reach your own personal goal so that you can function in the way you want and need to live. There's a whole new way of life right around the corner. No doubt about it.

It Will Be Worth It All

Each of us has a pressing reason to solve our clutter problem. By clearly identifying and giving words to your own personal motivation, you will validate and focus the change you want to make. Something has been irritating you for long enough that you now are saying, "Enough is enough!" Maybe several of these reasons apply to you:

- You are tired of seeing the clutter.
- You are embarrassed to let anyone come into your house.
- You waste time looking for things.
- You spend money buying duplicates for things you already have—somewhere.

- You have a specific emergency, such as a planned visitor.
- You don't want to leave this mess for your heirs.
- You need to move, but—oh, my!
- Your family is putting pressure on you to clean up.
- You feel helpless and hopeless because you can't solve the problem.
- You want beauty.
- The house is a continual burden.
- You are putting other things on hold until you solve this problem.

How many of these are your personal irritants? Each day they sap enthusiasm from your life. With each that can be eliminated or modified, your quality of life will improve, and it will be worth it.

After considering your motivations, write out a specific, tangible goal. Give it a date to create urgency. By _____, I want to accomplish _____.

By having a reason and giving it a deadline, you're on the way to achieving your goal! Your home will be in order, and you will finally be in full control of your life. The next chapter will open your eyes to a whole new way of looking at organizing, and will orient you on how to get started.