

Peter Walsh – the decluttering guru on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* – is suitably impressed. It usually takes journalists a whole two minutes to confess that either they or a family member have an issue with hoarding. Me? I manage to admit to my dirty little secret in 30 seconds flat.

“This is a record!” he says. “But this is why I think it’s all rather fascinating – because, with clutter, everybody has a story.”

The Melbourne-born organisational expert and author, who now bases himself in Los Angeles, has seen it all. He recalls one couple who reluctantly threw open their doors to Oprah’s TV crew.

“It was a 914 square-metre, three-storey house and, when we started, there were fewer than 60 square metres of living space,” recalls Walsh, shaking his head. “It took eight weeks to get the stuff out of the house; there was 75 tonnes of trash, 3200 pairs of shoes and more than 3000 handbags. It took 10 of us eight hours just to remove the clothes from the master bedroom.”

This is obviously an extreme case but, according to Walsh, it happens more often than we’d expect: “Some research suggests two to three per cent of the Western population are extreme hoarders like that couple, so it’s a big problem.”

Certainly, it’s not as dramatic as that for every hoarder. At a more common level, the problem manifests itself across different areas of life. The email inbox is full; the Foxtel iQ has reached its limit; the mobile phone message bank is chockers; magazines are piled up to be read ‘one day’; the ninth pair of must-have jeans is purchased. And, of course, all of it has sentimental value.

For anyone thinking, there’s no way this applies to me, think again. According to a report by the Australia Institute entitled *Stuff Happens: Unused Things Cluttering Up Our Homes*, 88 per cent of Australian abodes have at least one room full of trash-slash-treasure, with the average property having at least three rooms in disarray. As you might expect, the spare room is most commonly the one packed to the rafters. What’s more, the research found that four in 10 Australians find themselves feeling anxious, guilty or depressed about the amount of disorder in their homes, sometimes going to extraordinary lengths to deal with it.

“People move house, add rooms and even purchase more ‘stuff’, such as storage containers, to accommodate the stuff they’ve bought or acquired but never used,” says Australia

TRASH OR TREASURE?

Stressed by the mess? Panicked by the piles? If you’re lost in the disorder of a hoarder home, an expert spring clean can help declutter chaos in both house and head

STORY JOSIE GAGLIANO



Institute researcher Josh Fear. “One person interviewed said that, at one stage, she wanted her home to burn down – it was that cluttered.”

Not surprisingly, the number of professional organisers is rising as quickly as the piles of still-tagged clothing in our darkened closets. Sarah Cottman, owner of decluttering company Heavenly Order, based in Sydney’s Northern Beaches, found her way into the industry after combating her own affliction.

“I was disorganised as a kid and was diagnosed with ADHD in my 20s. I then married a man with ADHD and went on to have three children – all with ADHD,” she says. “About 10 years ago, I saw a professional organiser, Julie Morgenstern, promoting her book, *Organizing from the Inside Out*. I read it and realised it’s simple to be organised when you’re given the proper tools.”

After that, Cottman turned her life around >

and, following a few of years of practising her new skills, found herself being called upon to give advice on how to take control of the chaos in other people's homes and offices.

With that, her new career was born. Today, she's one of nine accredited 'expert' members of the Australasian Association of Professional Organisers (AAPO). With more than 220 members from here and New Zealand, AAPO recently introduced the accreditation system to increase professionalism within the industry.

Of course, all of this begs the question: Why do we hoard in the first place? Cottman's theory points to a serious root cause. "We're becoming more and more isolated in our communities and we try to fill that empty feeling with stuff. Tonnes and tonnes of stuff," she says. "Sadly, we don't seem to be any happier when we have more stuff. In fact, we're more stressed, as we then have to pay for it and store it. It's a ridiculous way to live."

One of the key ways we try to prevent that feeling of isolation, she explains, is by keeping things that have been passed on to us by family and friends, some of whom may no longer be with us. "It's understandable that we want to cling to as much as we can

so that memories aren't lost, but unfortunately this can be overwhelming."

Walsh, who's authored several books on clutter, including his latest, *Enough Already*, brands this 'memory clutter'. "You're worried that if you let go of the stuff, you'll lose the memory," he says, before going on to talk about a second key type of clutter, which falls into the all-encompassing 'I-may-need-it-one-day' category.

"This refers to the stuff you hold on to in anticipation of a whole lot of imagined futures. There's the fondue pot you've never used,

and 'I might need it one day' my credo.

As for the acquiring of new 'stuff', this is often more about the promise of what we believe it will deliver, than the shiny new product itself, explains Walsh. "For example, you buy a treadmill, but what you invest in is the promise that, somehow, this piece of equipment will magically make you fit and healthy; you buy the cookware advertised on TV, but you invest in the promise that it will make dinnertime a wonderful, traditional, family affair. People's homes are full of products, but our lives are full of unfulfilled promises."

"We're becoming more isolated in our communities and we try to fill that empty feeling with stuff. Tonnes and tonnes of stuff"

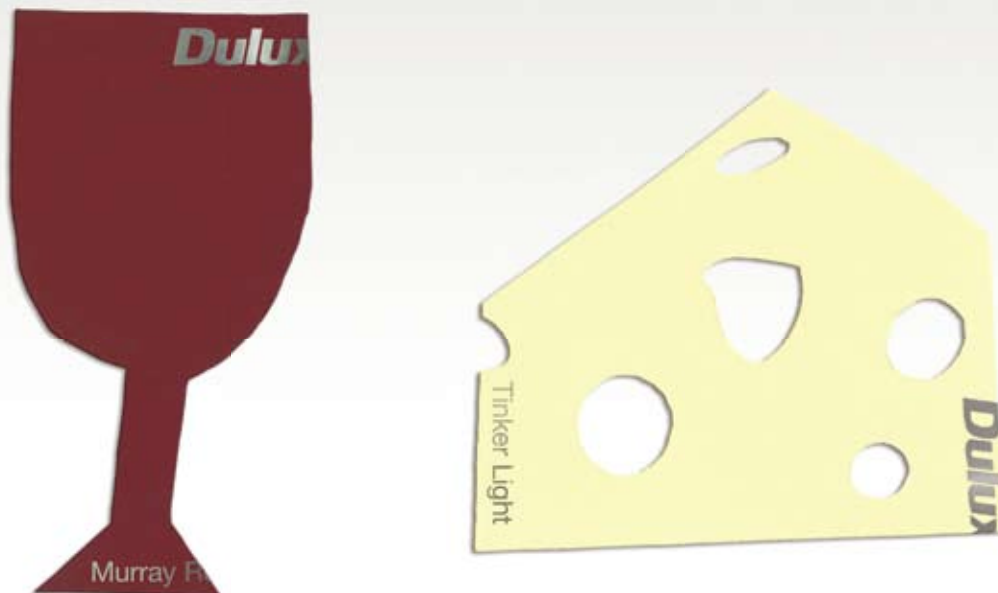
but you're sure, one day, you're going have a fantastic fondue party."

I have to say, this all sounds rather familiar. Coming from a family that wasn't particularly affluent, I grew up with the fear that something would run out, whether it be money or food supplies. It never did, but I've lived my life as a saver of money and a keeper of things, just in case. Saving for a rainy day is my mantra

Based on this idea of endless product possibilities, it would seem hoarding is something we learn from a young age. "In a home that's cluttered, the message you're teaching children is, we're powerless in the face of our stuff," warns Walsh.

Actor Blair McDonough, from Nine Network's *Sea Patrol* and travel show *Postcards*, knows all about that. >

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"I come from a whole family of hoarders," he confesses with a laugh. "We grew up in the country and, for as long as I remember, we had an old 1930s car around which Dad hoarded stuff. We forgot about it until 10 years later, when we unpacked everything and there was the car. Dad still has two six-car garages that are full of crap: tennis racquets, barbecues, statues, everything.

"I'm the youngest of four boys and, while we're all hoarders, I think I'm the worst," McDonough admits. "I like hoarding stuff I think is practical and useful, so I find shelves or chairs – especially couches. I'm about to pick up a mate's couch, which I don't particularly need, but said I'd take anyway."

Still, obsessively squirrelling things away can sometimes be a sign of a larger issue.

"Hoarding is frequently associated with obsessive compulsive disorder," says associate professor Rocco Crino. In his research as a lecturer in clinical psychology and head of the Anxiety Disorders Clinic at the University of Western Sydney School of Psychology, he's also found hoarding to be linked to other disorders such as dementia, schizophrenia and Prader-Willi syndrome.

But it's also worth noting, for all those avid collectors of comics, stamps and action figurines, that keeping things, per se, need not necessarily be cause for alarm. "There's no problem with holding on to stuff," says Walsh. "The problem is when the stuff takes over."

When it dramatically reduces our living space, leads to health and safety issues or affects the bank balance, the impact is very real. Meanwhile, shared territory is often where stashes and neat freaks will clash.

"In some more extreme cases, the hoarding

This is when it's worth calling for help from a decluttering professional. Dymo National Organising Week will be held across Australia and New Zealand next month. Now in its second year, the event will be launched by Walsh, who will be on hand to share his advice on turning chaos into calm.

The first step, he says, is to imagine what a room would look like empty. Then he suggests asking yourself, "What's the life I want? What do I want from this room?"

From there, small steps work best. After all,

"In extreme cases, hoarding overflows to take up the living space, leaving only walkways through clutter to parts of the home"

overflows to take up all available living space, leaving only walkways through the clutter to essential parts of the home, such as the bed, the stove, the shower," says Crino. "In some cases, the attraction of vermin to the clutter, or the hoarding of old food well past the use-by date, can present a health risk."

For those in such a predicament, just the thought of reorganising, let alone throwing out all the useless items, is totally overwhelming.

it took years to accumulate all the superfluous stuff, so you can't expect to be rid of it in one day. And the main thing is to realise you're not alone.

"People ask me all the time, 'Is there a hoarding type?'" says Walsh. "And I say, 'Absolutely – the type is flesh and blood.'" **SM**

Dymo National Organising Week runs from September 7 to 13. For details, call 1800 727 537 or visit www.nationalorganisingweek.com.au.

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