

TMS— Too Much Stuff Syndrome


*“Who is wealthy?
He who is content with what he has.”*

—The Talmud

It is the best of times. It is the worst of times. It is the age of information, but the deluge is drowning us. It is the season of want, but we’re being buried alive. Most of us have much in the way of material goods but little in the way of time and contentment. All that is supposed to make us healthy, wealthy and wise is making us crazy and choking our lives.

In short, we’re suffering from TMS—
Too Much Stuff syndrome.

Some of the symptoms of TMS are similar to those of PMS: bloating, feeling out of sorts and an unusual craving for order. Sadly, TMS does or will affect most of us in our lifetimes and is only destined to worsen in our goods-driven society.



*“We want everything.
We want it bigger, louder,
shinier, faster, and we want
it now. Instant gratification is
as American as drive-through
microwave apple pie.”*

—Dennis Miller, comedian

Life was free of TMS when home was a campfire in a snug cave, a few furs on the floor, maybe a nice hunting scene on the wall—the kind of artwork that stayed when we moved. But with progress came possessions; possessions that in time took on such importance, they followed us in death. Burial pits grew into mounds, mounds grew into chambers, chambers became the great pyramids that held more treasure for the future life than what was meant for the current one. Sort of like the self-storage units we rent today.

Today, we could give any pharaoh a run for his money with all the “treasures” we own. But it’s gotten to the point, for many of us, where the treasures own us, not the other way around. Instead of enjoying life, we spend much of our time servicing what we do have or shopping for what we don’t.

Sages through the ages have always known that owning more than we need weighs us down and compromises happiness. The Buddha warned his followers who coveted worldly goods, “Those who have cows have the care of cows.” Jesus believed that we can’t fully love one another when we’re preoccupied with the acquisition of things. “Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where it grows rusty and moth eaten,” he cautioned. “For where your treasure is, there will be your heart.” Taoism teaches that we can’t live in the moment when we’re burdened with possessions from the past. Its founder, Lao-tzu, summed up the secret to happiness when he pronounced, “He who knows he has enough is rich.”

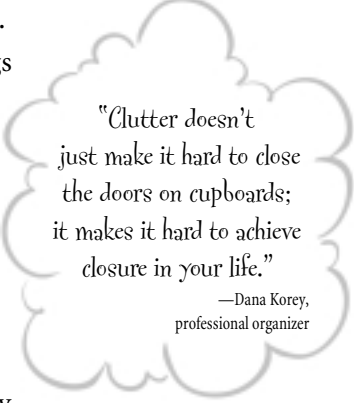
Even when we know we have enough, it’s not always easy to let go. I know. I’ve held on to the excess much of my life. I grew up in a home that was so stuffed with stuff it was suffocating. Not good stuff, mind you, but dreck. Little was discarded because of the family motto, “We might need it someday.” There was also, “We paid good money for this,” and the ever popular, “This could be worth

something at some point.” That last motto could have been part of the family crest, if we had one. It would be inscribed under an illustration of baseball cards—the ones we could never find because on every horizontal surface sprawled layers of junk only a family of devout savers could hold onto.

The time we spent looking for things was mind-boggling, and trying to clean was a joke. Maintaining the place took twice as long as it should have, yet it always looked so messy it was embarrassing to have anyone over. We suffered from an acute case of TMS, and I longed to be free of it.

It was simple enough when I started my adult life with few belongings. But with marriage, two paychecks and then children, things started to mount, morph and take over. I had learned to take better care of things, but I knew we had too many things to take care of. That changed about five years ago, around the time I was living with the chaos of a whole house remodel and worrying about my daughter Lisa adventure racing in the mountains of Morocco.

It was a hot Saturday afternoon, the first day in months that we were free of contractors. I decided to take a dip in the pool, *au naturel*. I emerged from the water, naked as a newborn but a lot lumpier, when I saw *him*—an undetected painter staring down from the roof. Mortified, I sprinted across the patio into the house, ripping the tendon from my arch to my knee. The pain was so intense I could only stand for 20 minutes at a time, a condition that lasted nearly two years. Daily activities became a challenge, and shopping, an impossibility.




“Clutter doesn’t just make it hard to close the doors on cupboards; it makes it hard to achieve closure in your life.”

—Dana Korey,
professional organizer

The lack of shopping was especially frustrating. I'd make these long lists of necessities for my family, the house and myself and fret because I couldn't get out to buy what I needed.

But then a funny thing happened. Weeks after I'd made the first list, I discovered I really didn't need or want most of what seemed so critical at the time. The hallway actually looked better without the rug I thought was so necessary, the missing earring magically materialized and I realized I would have worn those new brown boots that I coveted as much as the black ones that were already gathering cobwebs in my closet.



"Simple is hard to do, but when you get there, it's so liberating."

—Eileen Fisher, fashion designer

Now that I'm up and running again, the experience has put my acquisitiveness in perspective. I now know that I don't always need what I think I need, and most of the time I'm better off without it.

Like me, the most fervent followers of any doctrine are often converts. Take professional organizer Julie Morgenstern. This goddess of order confides that she spent the first quarter of her life in utter chaos. As an actress, director and artist, she was afraid she'd lose her creativity if she was held captive by systems and procedures, so she lived out of piles of stuff.

Her "aha!" moment came shortly after her daughter Jessie was born. "It was a beautiful spring day, and I wanted to take Jessie for her first walk," she said. "But it took me two and a half hours to find and pack what I believed I needed for her diaper bag. By the time I got it all together, she had fallen back to sleep. I thought, 'This child is not going to have a normal life if I don't get my act together.' I didn't want her to miss opportunities on my account. I had missed the moment."

It was a breakthrough. “I was willing to risk the creativity because I saw the reward on the other side of the piles,” said Morgenstern, who now writes bestselling organizing books and an insightful column for *O* magazine.

I never considered the connection between chaos and my own creativity; I just knew too much stuff was draining me of too much time and energy, two things I never seemed to have enough of. In my own quest for the cure, I’ve learned more than a few tricks about the judicious buying, purging and organizing of things, which I’ve detailed in the following chapters. These are small, affordable, easy-to-implement ideas that have made a huge difference in the quality of my life. What I’ve learned can improve your life, too.



Recognize the Seven Warning Signs of TMS

Most of us suffer in some degree from TMS. Learn how serious your case is from the following symptoms:

1. **Bloating**—Whether it’s overcrowded bookshelves, closets, or cabinets, clutter not only causes discomfort, it adds ugly pounds and bulges.
2. **Headache**—The responsibility of insuring, storing and caring for too many things can bring on many a migraine.
3. **Supersensitivity**—“You love your *Playboy* collection more than you love me. Admit it.”
4. **Cravings**—“I know I stashed those Snickers bars somewhere in the freezer, but they’ve disappeared amid the frostbitten mystery meats.”

5. **Fatigue**—How much more energy would we have if there were fewer items to move, sort and clean?

6. **Cramps**—Who doesn't get pangs and spasms from moving that stuff around every time we need a clear space to eat, work or sleep?

7. **Moodiness**—"How can I possibly (sob) give that presentation if I can't find my lucky panties or my notes?"

Diagnosis:

1–3 symptoms: Congratulations! You're in great health. Be sure to stay that way by continuing to practice "all things in moderation."

4–6 symptoms: It might be wise to lay off the flea markets, the mall and eBay for a while. Consider monthly clutter colonics instead.

7 symptoms: You suffer from a full-blown case of affluenza. Give your charge card a rest, crawl under the covers and read the following chapters.

What We Gain from Living with Less

❁ **Time** is the biggest bonus—it's what we need to enjoy life's great gifts: family, friends and the great outdoors. When there's less stuff to fuss with, there are more hours to play with.

❁ **Energy** is another perk—it's the essential fuel we need to pursue our passions, whether they involve travel, sports or romance. Too many possessions drain that energy.

❁ **Serenity** also comes into play—when we learn to live with less, there's less mess-induced stress. There is also less worry about the care, loss or insurance of things.



"If there is to
be any peace, it will
come through being,
not having."

—Henry Miller, writer

Need a little **space**? The less stuff we have, the bigger our surroundings feel and the better they flow. As New York interior designer Clodagh writes in *Total Design*, "A feeling of spaciousness is determined far more by clarity and energy flow than by square feet."

Other benefits from living a pared life:

- ↳ **Focus:** The home is like the mind. It works best when it's clear of brain-boggling clutter.
- ↳ **Spontaneity:** When we don't have a pile of possessions tying us down, we're more open to spur-of-the-moment outings and long-term travel.
- ↳ **Charisma:** When we're consumed with shopping for, maintaining and discussing our possessions, we become shallow and boring. By taming an acquisitive lifestyle, we open our minds and our hearts to more interesting pursuits and thus attract more interesting people.
- ↳ **A Richer Life:** It's simple math: If we spend less, we save more. Besides, what's going to comfort us in the end is not the stuff we've hoarded but the love we've given away.

"There must
be more to life
than having
everything."

—Maurice Sendak, writer

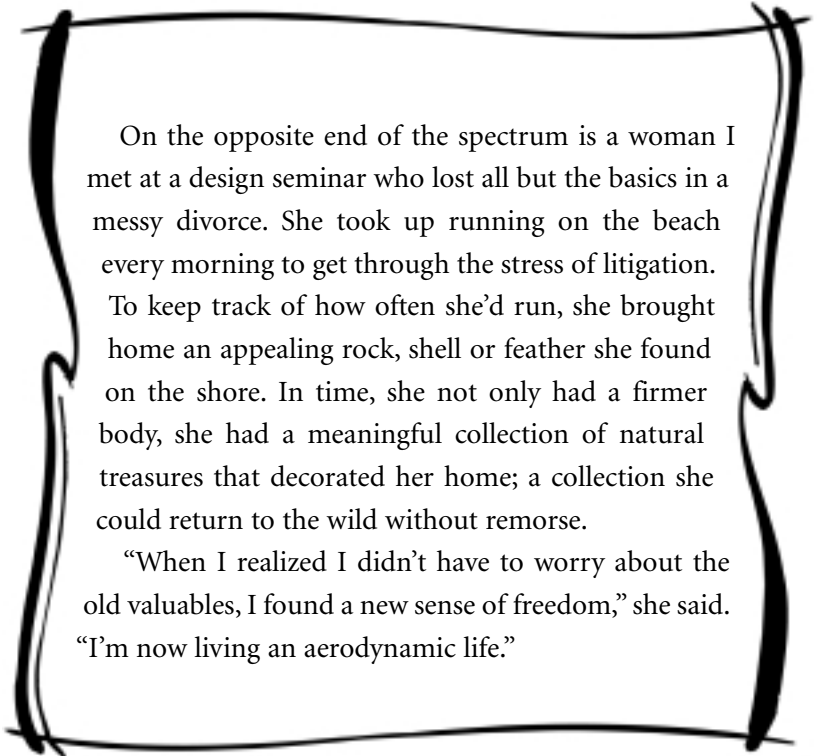


LIFE MATTERS:

The Ransom of Possessions

Rich and Sue are down-to-earth teachers who used to love hosting end-of-the year parent/student potlucks and inviting friends over to shoot pool and watch videos, at least until they got “lucky.” That’s when Sue inherited a bundle of money and a bulging houseful of objects from her wealthy art dealer uncle.

The couple liked their old tract home, but since it was way too small and seemed unworthy of showcasing their new possessions, they put the windfall into a larger, more elegant place. Sumptuous fabrics, handwoven rugs and French limestone floors are now a backdrop to the precious art and antiques that fill each room. The effect is stunning, but so precious, it’s put a crimp in their former open house policy. They’ve become understandably paranoid about anyone dribbling on the white silk sofas or marring the eighteenth-century walnut tables. So, the school and the billiard parties are in the past. In their place, one gets a house tour. The offer of a drink or a nibble? Fahhgedaboutit—they might leave their mark. The couple now lives in a gilded cage, prisoners of their own possessions.



On the opposite end of the spectrum is a woman I met at a design seminar who lost all but the basics in a messy divorce. She took up running on the beach every morning to get through the stress of litigation. To keep track of how often she'd run, she brought home an appealing rock, shell or feather she found on the shore. In time, she not only had a firmer body, she had a meaningful collection of natural treasures that decorated her home; a collection she could return to the wild without remorse.

“When I realized I didn't have to worry about the old valuables, I found a new sense of freedom,” she said. “I'm now living an aerodynamic life.”

