THE MENTAL MUSINGS

The Psychological Research Newsletter

Whether you are relocating to a new office, managing your day-to-day tasks, or balancing work-life responsibilities, our surroundings can easily become cluttered and disorganised. But does such an environment influence our mindset, productivity, or well-being? In this issue, we explore the psychology of clutter and how small changes can make a significant difference!

What's Wrong with Clutter?

Clutter is typically defined as the buildup of items that create disorder. It is often associated with hoarding, which can stem from emotional challenges. However, clutter can also arise due to *indecision*, which is the tendency to put off decisions (such as whether to throw or keep aside our items).

External demands can contribute to clutter as well. For example, at work, when we are faced with heavy workloads and tight deadlines, we might put off decisions that seem less urgent, leading to a build-up of clutter.

This is not ideal, as brain imaging studies have shown that clutter can make it more difficult for our brains to focus. This happens because our mental resources are limited, and disorganized items compete for our attention, draining more of our brain's capacity. As a result, it becomes harder to stay on task.

In contrast, when there is no visual clutter, there is less competition for attention. This allows the brain to function more efficiently, making it easier to maintain focus.

Because of this, clutter can also lead to emotional exhaustion and stress, potentially creating even more clutter!
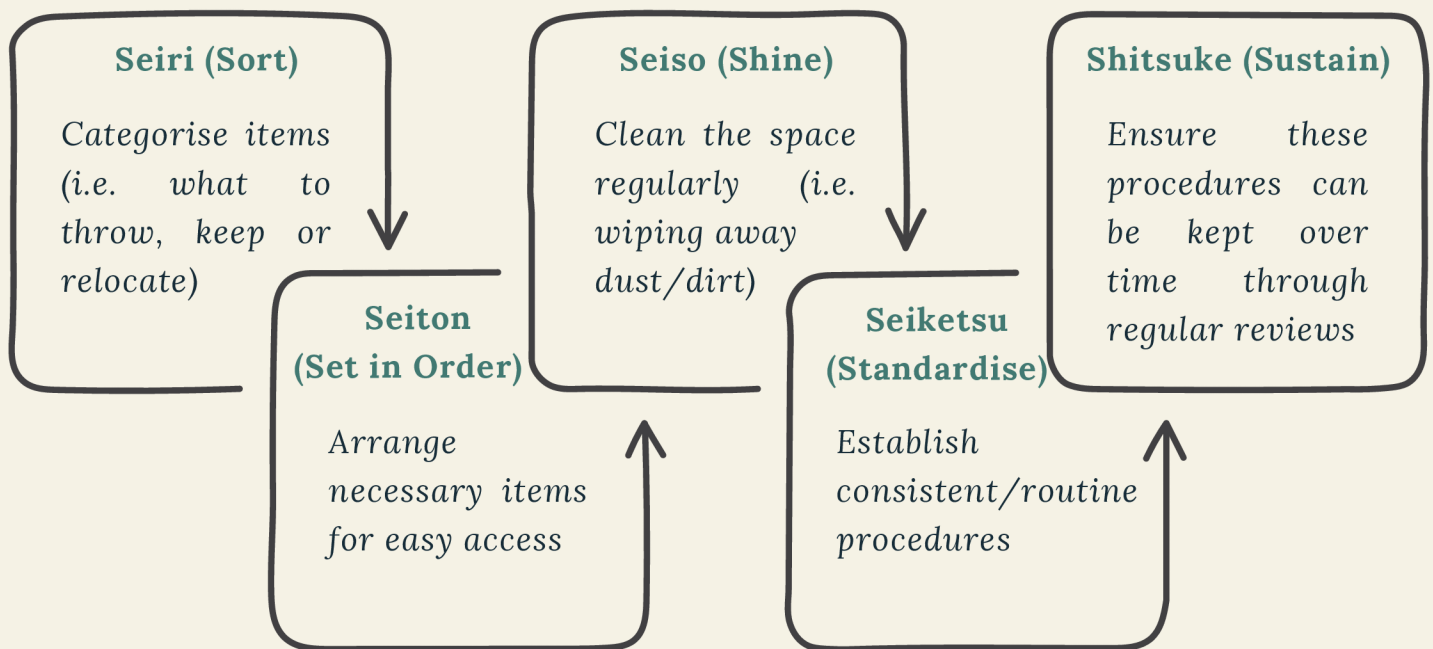
A cluttered desk can compete for your attention!
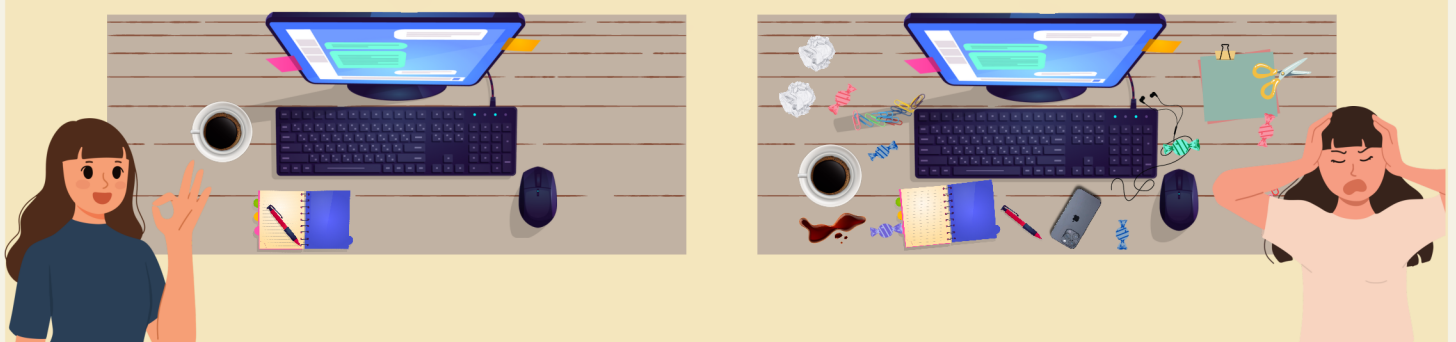
Research has also found that people are more likely to choose healthier snacks and be more generous in an orderly environment compared to a cluttered one. However, cluttered environments are not always negative. The same study found that being in a messy environment can boost creativity. This may be because such environments go against what is expected, just like creativity does, which encourage us to think in new ways. That said, it may be beneficial to keep creative spaces separate from areas that require greater focus and concentration.

Decluttering Our Spaces

Given what we know about the effects of an untidy environment, it's important that we declutter when we can. *The 5S Method*, originally from Japan, is an effective method of decluttering. While it was developed as a workplace organisation method, it is still versatile enough to be applied in various settings, such as our homes.

Seiri (Sort)

Categorise items (i.e. what to throw, keep or relocate)

Seiton (Set in Order)

Arrange necessary items for easy access

Seiso (Shine)

Clean the space regularly (i.e. wiping away dust/dirt)

Seiketsu (Standardise)

Establish consistent/routine procedures

Shitsuke (Sustain)

Ensure these procedures can be kept over time through regular reviews

Unsure about how this can be applied? Let's see how Anjali has decided to clear her workspace!

"Over the holidays, my desk has become cluttered with many gifts and notes on top of my usual things. But I've been so busy that it's hard to find the time to tidy up, and the mess is becoming distracting!

Now that I have some time, it is still hard to get started because it feels too overwhelming. I came across the 5S Method and decided to give it a try."

Sort

- Discard expired snacks, shred old documents, and set aside unused stationery items (such as free notebooks, stickers) to give away.

- Keep cards and photos from colleagues to decorate desk.

Shine

- Wipe down my desk and cables as they are too dusty.

Set in Order

- Place unused stationery (e.g., extra notebooks, pens) in a designated common area for colleagues to take.

- Store rarely used items (e.g., staplers) in a bottom drawer, and keep only regularly used items (e.g., mug and pens) on my desk.

- Rearrange cards and photos so they are neatly placed away from my computer to reduce distractions.

Standardise

- Immediately place non-sensitive items in a document organizer or a tray to avoid cluttering my desk.

- Do a mini clean-up at the end of every week before going home, such as bringing home any untouched snacks.

Sustain

- Set aside 10 minutes per month to go through these steps again to maintain order.

- Check if items placed in common areas are being taken or are no longer needed, or if unused stationery in drawers can be given away.

"It is such a relief to have a neater workspace, and automatically putting aside items in designated areas has been helpful. I don't have to spend a lot of energy deciding how to organize things while I'm working. While sometimes I forget, it's easier to get back on track since I already know what to do with the clutter!"

While clutter can spark creativity, its negative impact on productivity, focus, and well-being generally outweighs the benefits. Techniques like the 5S Method can help manage clutter effectively.

However, for some, parting with unnecessary items can be difficult and may indicate underlying issues, such as hoarding tendencies. If struggling to let go of items is causing distress and/or affecting your life, **it's important to seek support**, either by reaching out to us or any of the available mental health resources we have shared in our last issue.

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