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Sweep out those mental dust bunnies

Spring is a great time to clean your mind, simplify life and refocus on goals

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The closets are all cleaned out. The winter coats are boxed up. The next step in spring cleaning is to unclutter your mind. Spring is a great time to review your life, reaffirm your goals and revitalize your dreams, says Cary life coach Janet Harrison and other experts.

"This is the ideal time of year to think about simplifying your life, which involves clearing out clutter, physically and mentally," said Harrison, owner of Strategies in Action (www.strategiesinaction.com). Harrison has spent the past decade teaching life and work skills to individuals and corporate clients such as GlaxoSmithKline, Duke University and Wachovia.

"By organizing your environment -- your office and your home -- it helps free your mind to pursue your dreams. Likewise, clearing your mind of unnecessary things enables you to focus more on keeping your life and physical environment in order. The two go hand-in-hand."

Harrison and other consultants who provide life skills training agree that spring cleaning your mind is essential to bringing about a life change and achieving lifelong goals.

"By learning to simplify your life, it opens up opportunities to pursue your dreams," Harrison said. "The secret to serenity really isn't a secret at all. Letting go of what you don't need opens the door to receive what you do need."

A new lease on life

Harrison's advice has opened new doors for Triangle business owners Tom Donofrio and Susan Hamilton.

"I signed up for her Simplicity class because I realized that my life was like a hurricane and tornado combined," said Donofrio, a father of four and nutritional counselor who owns New Era Health and Wellness in Cary.

By implementing Harrison's suggestions, such as "learning how to prioritize things and how to let go of the things that don't really matter in the big picture," Donofrio said, he is now able to "focus on what really matters in life, such as my family and my business."

Hamilton, co-owner of Hamilton & Gilliam Realty, says the skills she acquired in the Simplicity class "are helping me to achieve my professional and personal goals."

"I've learned to enjoy life more by working with people I enjoy and not feeling obligated to work with every client that calls the office," Hamilton said. "The things I learned in class are also helping me get closer to my personal goal, which is to work less and travel more in the near future."

As one step, Hamilton and Donofrio reorganized their offices to remove unnecessary clutter. You don't have to live like a Buddhist monk, but taking a minimalist approach by reducing your material belongings is one method Harrison advocates.

"There's a drastic difference between what we actually need to survive and what we simply want," she said.

An avid adventurer, Harrison learned the benefits of leading a simple life while hiking the Appalachian Trail. She continues to utilize the skills she learned on the trail in other aspects of her life.

"I discovered very soon into my journey along the Appalachian Trail that I had overpacked my backpack and that I didn't actually need most of the things in there," she recalled. "In life, it's like we're all hauling around too much stuff in our backpacks. I think that's an analogy we can all relate to...that we've got to lighten our load, mentally and physically."

Future shock is everywhere

The massive amount of material goods and paperwork clogging our homes and minds isn't limited to American society, according to Chapel Hill author Jeff Davidson, a work/life balance expert who has written more than 20 advice books -- such as "The Joy of Simple Living," "Breathing Space," "60 Second Procrastinator" and "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Reaching Your Goals."

"Mental, emotional and physical clutter is endemic to 21st century man and woman," said Davidson, who shares advice on achieving a simple lifestyle on his Web site (www.breathingspace.com). "The same problem is happening everywhere from Japan to Saudi Arabia."

Davidson said the "overabundance of choices" in today's society is similar to the lifestyle that author Alvin Toffler predicted in his 1970 book, "Future Shock".

"The bombardment of information, communication and ideas is massive and exceeds what any person can logically be expected to handle," Davidson said.

Think small to conquer big tasks

Davidson's strategy is "to divide and conquer by making small changes."

"I recommend doing things like taking your name off mailing lists, only subscribing to a handful of publications and limiting the amount of TV you watch," he said. "By doing those types of things, we can have the recurring breathing space that we all need."

Patience is not only a virtue, but a necessity.

"With the approach of spring, you're not going to magically get back into control in 40 days," Davidson said.

"The accumulations in your life have taken years to gather and the situation is not going to correct itself overnight. One of the most important things to realize is that you have to relent a little at a time, such as cleaning out one file a week or turning down the next invitation to something you don't have time to do. A little at a time, we can reclaim our lives."