

more mess,

Learning to tolerate the natural chaos of life can free your time, spark



HAPPY HAVOC?

Research suggests that piles of papers, a random assortment of to do lists and a collage of favorite photos on a bulletin board can lead to brilliant ideas.



less stress

surprising discoveries and help you feel happier than ever.

On my desk is a half-empty bag of wasabi peas. Beside it is a disposable razor from a gift bag I received several weeks ago, a bottle of Sally Hansen Sheer Beige Gloss, a flyer from a Tibetan art museum on which I scribbled a reminder to call the pharmacy, an idea for a story, my older daughter's drawing of a robot in a purple minidress, a stack of books I will read someday if it kills me and a festive rainbow of curling Post-its dating back to the Pleistocene era.

On certain days, this mess stirs up all of my anxiety and self-loathing, especially when, in addition to the detritus on my desk, toys cover my living room floor, the cat is stalking a dust

By Marjorie Ingall Photographs by Levi Brown

SOULLESS STERILITY?

Struggling to keep everything immaculate can sap your energy, not to mention your creativity.

bunny the size of a rabbit and I can't find the phone number of the scientist I'm supposed to interview in 20 minutes. I gaze around at it all and, feeling utterly overwhelmed, become convinced that I will never make another deadline or write another book until I frantically straighten up.

I see desks in decor magazines, naked except for one perfect potted plant, and I moan and sigh like someone looking at porn. I'm not alone in my obsession: According to *Consumer Reports*, Americans spent more than \$2 billion in 2004 to impose external, Container Store-like order on their life. "The world is so complicated today, with images and information bombarding us all the time," says Carol Gould, a marriage and family therapist in San Francisco. Who wouldn't want a home that felt like a serene refuge?

COPING WITH CHAOS

Many experts would say that my chronic longing to be neat and tidy has less to do with the state of my stuff than the state of my life: A year ago, my husband was diagnosed with thyroid cancer; ever since, my day-to-day has been nothing if not disorderly. Suddenly, I had to live with the most painful, agonizing kind of messiness. Would Jonathan get better? I wondered again and again. If he didn't, could I handle it? "Controlling your environment allows you to feel that you're at least

MOVE PAST PERFECT

Nothing stays neat forever. Rather than obsess about tidiness, try to roll with life's ups (pups?!) and downs.



You have to find the level of

controlling something," confirms Julie Holland, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine in New York City. "You can't control Iraq; you can't control the economy; but you can control the amount of dust in your carpet. It's a way to feel as if you're not powerless."

But although it's possible to impose neatness, at least temporarily, exerting control over life is more challenging, as I discovered when my relatively young, always-healthy husband got sick. Learning to accept occasional messiness and the uncertainty that goes along with it—the life kind as well as the clutter kind—is really about accepting this fundamental lack of control.

That may seem grimly fatalistic, but there's a positive side to letting go. Order and predictability may sound better, but mess, it turns out, has its own rewards, even if you can't always see them at the time. "A chaotic period can be a catalyst for greater understanding," says Rabbi Irwin Kula, author of *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life* (Hyperion). "Ambivalence, contradictions and tension ultimately give rise to wisdom."

I relate to that. I am the least Zen person you can imagine, but while Jonathan was having surgery, getting radiation and acting completely zonked-out from his resulting low thyroid levels, I had no time to be a drama queen. I had to earn a living and take care

of our daughters, 3 and 6, not to mention my spouse. I had to learn to tolerate untidiness. And a disorganized desk is nothing compared with the messiness of a relationship and the tension that can arise when two people make a life together.

While Jonathan was sick, for instance, I wanted to talk about it. He didn't. "When there's stress in a marriage and you work through it together, it leads to greater intimacy and depth," Kula says. "You can run from emotions and ideas that make you uncomfortable, you can repress them as fiercely as possible, or you can step back and figure out what you're struggling with." I did some figuring, and it led me to realize that I needed to work on my own generosity so I could meet my husband's needs rather than focus on my own desire for reassurance. The last thing my husband felt like doing was discussing what he was going through. I had to accept that, for him, simply being together felt comforting, even if we were sitting in silence. His illness brought us closer not only because we relied more on each other, the two of us clinging against the storm, but because I learned to be more tolerant of his way of coping.

If you happen to be in a crisis, relationship or otherwise, Kula suggests coaxing the process of understanding along by asking yourself, How can this situation help me better grasp who I am?

How can it make me more compassionate in my web of connections? “The more you face your frailties and understand yourself, the more empathy you’ll be able to muster.”

My struggle to accept that Jonathan and I had different communication styles made me think that perhaps I also needed to view the other imperfections in my life more tolerantly, including the debris on my desk. The two concepts may seem different, but just as discovering how to coexist peacefully with life’s emotional messes (and your spouse, for that matter) can make you a stronger, more empathetic person, so, too, can living with a bit of physical clutter. Both, after all, are about letting go of the need to control every last thing and seeing what comes into your life in return. “If you focus all your energy on excessively organizing your time—or your desk—you won’t be as open to all kinds of opportunities,” says Eric Abrahamson, coauthor of *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder* (Little, Brown).

Think of it this way: When you’re looking at a variety of things in front of you—pictures, desk toys, disparate stacks of paper—your mind starts jumping around and making intriguing connections. “The more stuff you have out in the open, the more ways there are to arrange the items and the more information you can gain from them,” Abrahamson explains. My friend Tanya, a textile artist, concurs. “I need to see my materials, tools and photos around me. They make me want to create; if I don’t see them, I’m not as inspired to move forward with my work.”

The same thing happens when you mix different types of people. “In companies, there’s a tendency to put everyone with the same function on the same floor,” Abrahamson says. “But if you sit different departments together so folks mingle at the coffeemaker, there’s more chance for an influx of new ideas.”

Katie has now found a happy medium, tossing paperwork into a few general folders and doing a more elaborate sort-and-toss a few times a year. Abrahamson points out that being able to tolerate a bit of dishevelment can make you more efficient in the long run. “By letting paper pile up for a while before you deal with it, you make one trip to the filing cabinet instead of 10.” Even Albert Einstein, great thinker that he was, advocated messiness, famously saying, “If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk?” Perhaps that’s why a 2005 survey by the nationwide recruiting firm Ajilon Office found that people who call themselves neat freaks are likely to earn less than folks who don’t describe themselves that way.

This compromise between entropy and order can make life feel more meaningful, if you let it. As my friend Jessica says, “I sort of accept my messiness, but I still strive for some kind of system, and that’s when I make my discoveries. When I’m weeding through the monstrosity of paper that is our dining room, I inevitably find a year’s worth of my son’s drawings in a bin, and it’s fantastic to see his progress. Same with all the other stuff around. I love the serendipity of it, especially when I’ve lost something for so long that I’ve forgotten about it. When I do tidy up, however half-assed, it turns life into a treasure hunt.”

BEAUTY IN DISORDER

You could say that Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin, came to the same conclusion about mess. The man was a genius; his lab, a pigsty. In 1928, he left for vacation and abandoned some cultures in their petri dishes. When he returned, he found that mold had grown in one of them; observing the fuzzy growths, where bacteria seemed unable to flourish, led to his

mess that’s optimal for you.

This isn’t to say that we should all throw our papers into the wind, let cat hair coat every surface and allow dishes to pile up to the heavens. The point is to find the level of mess that feels optimal for your work, life and peace of mind. For some people, that may be quite a bit; for others, not so much.

Take my friend Katie, a reformed megaslob. “Twice,” she says, “I’ve actually thrown out a sink full of dishes that had been sitting for so long that they were caked in muck rather than attempt to wash them. It was simply easier for me to buy new ones.”

That’s extreme, granted, but most of us end up with a few dirty pots left in the kitchen when we sit down to eat. If we stopped to wash every last one of them, the food would get cold. “You can’t let mess impede your enjoyment of the meal,” Kula says. “They’ll get washed—later!” As for Katie, when she moved to a new, larger apartment, she swore she’d make a fresh start. “I vowed to be tidy in all areas, not only in the kitchen. I set up an ultra organized filing system and spent days stashing every piece of paper I owned into its exact place,” she recalls. “But it was so disheartening when the mail came, with new bills and things to file. I realized I was never going to keep up.” Perfection, after all, is ephemeral, as evanescent as the moment when all of Katie’s papers were neatly filed (and her dishes washed).

lifesaving breakthrough. (Abrahamson adds that years later, when Fleming was given a tour of a pristine, well-organized laboratory, a fellow scientist exclaimed, “Imagine what you could have discovered here!” Fleming wryly replied, “Not penicillin.”)

Even if you’re unlikely to have a scientific aha! moment anytime soon, you may find that more disorder means more random moments of beauty. (Chaos theory actually refers to a seemingly random jumble that contains hidden order.) “If you’re not always focused on finding the main path, you’re more open to the world,” Dr. Holland says. With that in mind, I recently played hooky from work to chaperone my 6-year-old’s class trip. If you haven’t figured it out already, I have problems with procrastination—which is about holding out for perfection rather than jumping in and taking risks, even if the results are a little messy. I spend far too much time at my desk checking e-mail and looking at important cat pictures online. Then I castigate myself for being so unfocused. So on this morning, I told myself that because I wasn’t accomplishing anything anyway, I might as well be with my daughter Josie, instead of at my desk.

The trip was the essence of messiness. There was no AC on the school bus, but instead of bitching, I focused on Josie’s luminous skin and delicious little-girl smell. (continued on page 161)

More mess, less stress

(continued from page 131) At the beach, where the children were studying tidal pools, I observed from the shore as Josie was knocked down by a wave. Instead of rushing to her, I stayed still and watched her eyes widen and her body freeze for a moment, before she bounced up laughing, coated in sand. (That night, I washed half a cup of the stuff out of her hair. Talk about mess.) After she was in bed, I stopped procrastinating for once and started writing. I had to crank to meet my deadline, but I also felt rejuvenated and newly motivated. Away from the computer, my ideas had the time to gel.

The Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* is about the beauty of imperfection, the art of appreciating the loveliness of hair that's full of sand as opposed to a perfect, sprayed, unmussed 'do. *Wabi-sabi* isn't about embracing dirt; it is about savoring the beauty that can be found even in a chipped bowl, recycled to hold some stones from the beach, or in the inviting softness of old leather. It's a truly environmentally friendly way to live—the opposite of our craze for consumerism—and one that's very human.

A perfectly minimalist, clutter-free house, on the other hand, may be beautiful, but it's also sterile, a little cold. You might say the same of someone who worries more about a wine ring marring her countertop than enjoying the wine. Something meaningful is getting sacrificed on the altar of tidiness. "If you feel hollow inside, a fabulous apartment won't make everything better," Dr. Holland says. "You'll always be searching for the next level of perfection." Or you'll be guarding against the natural devolution of what you've crafted, unable to relax for a moment. "You can treat your home like a museum but still get termites," Dr. Holland adds. You can also treasure your white flokati rug, asking every guest to take off her shoes and drink only clear beverages, as an acquaintance of mine did, but then one day, a visiting dog can manage to scarf a bowl of M&M's in a minute, and upchuck in Technicolor all over the rug (true story).

Similarly, you can exercise, eat right and go for regular checkups and still end up getting cancer, as my husband did, or scrupulously avoid soft cheeses, sushi and litter boxes and still have a miscarriage, as I did. Accepting human frailty—and occasional piles of newspaper—is a lot saner than constantly seeking perfection.

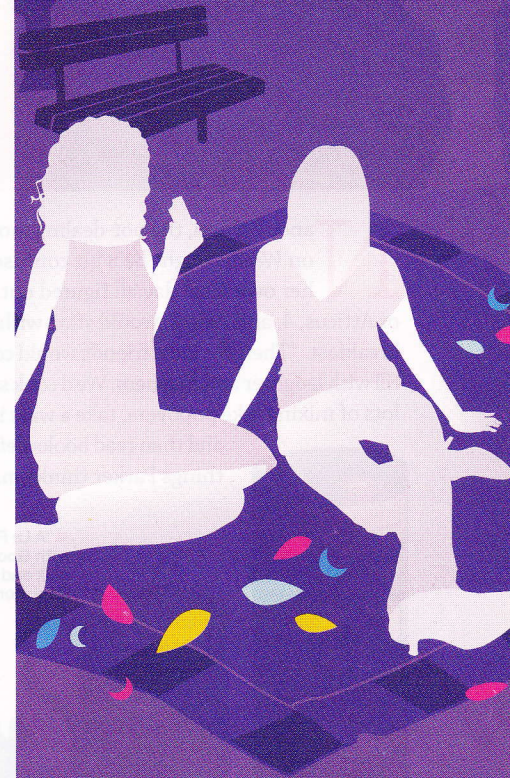
Clearly, mess isn't simply about stuff. Ambiguity will always be with us, and finding the right balance between order and anarchy is a work in progress. There will always be pain and uncertainty; the trick is learning to live with it. "It's possible to be happy, even if your desires are never fully satisfied," Kula says. "Your yearnings themselves can be a huge source of self-awareness and joy."

Unfortunately, most of us expect life to be as clean as an operating room. When something terrible (and therefore messy) happens, we want there to be a reason. She shouldn't have gone to his apartment on a first date. They shouldn't have taken that adjustable-rate mortgage. "But when we try to justify the unjustifiable, what we're doing is blaming or deflecting; we're saying, 'That can't happen to me!'" Rabbi Kula explains. "You can't separate nature's beauty from its destructiveness." That's terrifying but also liberating. If you admit that understanding the universe or fixing its messes isn't always possible, you can be more loving and humane, toward others and yourself.

"Mess is life, and too often we don't appreciate it until it's gone," says my friend Judith, whose golden retriever died earlier this year. "A few days ago, I went to get my idiotic, overpriced vacuum cleaner fixed and discovered that—surprise!—dog hair had gummed up the works. The guys at the repair store were joking that I needed to get a different, less sheddy dog. Then I told them what had happened. And they hugged me! Now every time I look around my apartment and notice that the tumbleweeds of rusty hair are gone, I feel sad. In retrospect, there was joy in that mess."

I had a revelation of my own when my husband got sick, and then recovered: I need to be a little more forgiving of my own disorganization, internal and external. Instead of beating myself up and lamenting my Post-it collection and seemingly scattershot way of working, I'm better off focusing on the things I have the power to improve and letting-the-hell-go of the rest. In the process, I've discovered that my tendency to do several things at once, all imperfectly, may not be such a liability. When I get stuck on one assignment, I can move to another; if my mind isn't worrying a problem like a dog with a bone, my subconscious tends to come up with a solution. In my way, I've been organized all along. I just couldn't see it. ■

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