LENOREBROOKS
DESIGN

Clutter and ADHD

For people with ADHD, clutter is inevitable. It can also be creatively inspiring! Because of this, banishing clutter can feel impossible or undesirable. But the truth is, everyone has a different tolerance for clutter, a threshold where it goes from neutral or creative to visual noise, distracting, and/or anxiety producing.

Our goal is to help you create systems that allow for the ebb and flow of normal clutter, without letting it get to the point of distraction and anxiety. A good system will also avoid perfectionism; we don't want to create spaces that make you feel like you have to keep them picture-perfect at all times. This means that we need to identify what is cluttering your space, how it got there, and why it stays. If you clean up without this step, it will just get messy again. Once you identify what is causing the clutter, it is much much easier to put systems in place to bring it down to a comfortable level. This worksheet is a tool to help you think about your relationship to your space. We've included a lot, so use as much or as little as seems useful.

Definitions

You're probably here from [How To ADHD](#)'s clutter episode, so you already know about "clutter in motion" and "clutter in stasis". But, if you need a refresher here's some quick definitions:

"Clutter in motion": things that are out of place because they were recently in use and might be in use again soon. In this category are things like a pen I was using, coffee cups from today, books I'm reading or referencing in my writing, that sort of thing.

"Clutter in stasis": things that don't have a place, or that do have a place but haven't been put away for so long that they are semi-permanent fixtures (usually they concentrate into various "piles"). This tends to be the more frustrating and/or anxiety causing clutter, and the harder to deal with.

Clutter in motion can become clutter in stasis if we don't deal with it. Coffee cups from *last week* are definitely in stasis! Our general approach to the ADHD/space/clutter intersection is to focus on limiting clutter in stasis while finding a threshold tolerance for clutter in motion.

Section 1: Defining clutter for YOU

These questions are designed to start breaking down "clutter" into different categories and help you figure out your personal thresholds. There are no right or wrong answers. Take your time and give as much detail as feels useful. If there's a question you don't know how to answer, observe your space or your reactions for a few days and come back to it.

How would you describe your feelings about clutter? Are there types of clutter you like vs types you hate?

Do you need your desk or work area to be free of clutter-in-stasis in order to work well? What about clutter-in-motion?

Think about the place you regularly eat. Is it comfortable? What makes it feel like a "proper" space for a meal? If the space has other stuff in it (like I usually have a random assortment of stuff shoved to the side of my dining room table), does that feel cozy, neutral, messy?

What makes a room feel cluttered when you walk in?

If you imagine a room that is very full of things but all the things are useful or nice (like it's not full of garbage and dirty dishes), at the too much/too messy end we have

"cluttered"; how would you describe the end that isn't too much/too messy (is it cozy? Weird? Nice but distracting? Uncomfortable?)

When you see a visually-busy but clearly purposeful display, do you find it feels unpleasant or cluttered? (for example, a shelf with many carefully selected curios, or a cork board covered in post cards and pictures and things in an otherwise tidy room).

Thinking of the same sort of busy but purposeful display, how would it feel to have one made of meaningful things in your space? Particularly, would it be inspiring? Distracting? Potentially both?

If you have open shelving, does it feel cluttered when everything is neatly put on the shelves? What about if everything is on the right shelf, but in a messy way (say, you've just shoved a bunch of papers on the "papers" shelf, but they're in a messy pile).

Does clutter / messiness contribute to feelings of overwhelm if you are *NOT* cleaning? That is, when you are in your space doing other activities, have you noticed clutter contributing to feeling distracted, overwhelmed, or unmotivated? Be as specific as you can: are there different types of objects that are more likely to be distracting?

Alternatively, is there an area or type of "inspirational" clutter in your space? Something that you look at and feel inspired, motivated, or cheered up by? What kind of name would you give it to differentiate it from other clutter?

Have you noticed a threshold of clutter where it goes from unnoticeable or not bothersome to distracting and problematic? If so, thinking back (or in the present, if that is the case now), is it the amount of clutter, the type of clutter, or are there other factors that you can identify that contribute to creating that threshold?

Section 2: Getting specific about your space

For this section, I recommend going through it once for each room or activity area that you want to deal with. The goal here is to take a step back from the assumptions about what we do or need in a space and notice what actual activities, needs, and wants are contributing to the objects that accumulate in that space.

Who uses this space? Include all family members, as well as guests or work partners if this is a space where you spend time together, and indicate the frequency.

What activities/hobbies take place in the space? Include everything, even if it's not what the space is for. Do you sew in your dining room? Eat in the family room? Include those things.

Do you have any household pets? If so, do they spend time in the space? Do they have toys, food, or other objects that belong in the space, or that don't have a place but tend to migrate to this space anyway?

Are there people or pets that you would like to have in the space, but who aren't able to spend time there now?

When you are doing your activities in this space, are there tools or objects that you tend to interrupt yourself to go look for? This can include things required for the activity, but also things that you need for other reasons: sweaters, fidgets, notebook, anything that pulls you away from something you would have otherwise continued doing.

Section 3: Tips for creating structures that reduce clutter

Once you've started to identify different types of clutter and your own tolerances, you can analyze *what* keeps appearing out of place and *why*.

Step 1 - Observe: Go to your space with a blank sheet of paper and write down everything that is not "away," regardless of whether it's been there for half a year or 10 minutes.

Step 2 - Categorize: Look at your sheet of paper, and on a second piece of paper start grouping the things that are out of place. If you aren't sure how to categorize things, start with "in motion" and "in stasis."

Step 3 - Analyse: Now, looking at your categorized things, ask what brought them into this space? What has kept them in this space?

Step 4 - Brainstorm Solutions: At this point, you will have a much better sense of what is happening in your space, and you may already have identified some key changes that can help prevent clutter in motion from transitioning into stasis. Sometimes solutions are as simple as needing a waste bin or laundry basket nearby, or dedicated shelf for the hobby-related books that always migrate to the hobby-action spot. Here are a few things you can think through if the solutions for some out-of-place objects aren't jumping out at you:

- Does this thing have a dedicated space? If so, what keeps me from putting it there? If not, where could it be kept conveniently?
- What activity is this thing part of? Do I want to keep doing that activity in this space?
  - If so, what would help make that activity something I can "put away" when I'm done?

- If not, what prevents me from doing the activity where I *do* want to do it? What makes me do it here? What changes might reverse those?
- Is this thing here because I'm avoiding routine maintenance or chores? If so, is there something about this space or it's relationship to the rest of my home that makes it hard to complete that chore?

Step 5 - Repeat: You don't do the same things every day. It can be helpful to keep coming back periodically and repeating steps 1-4 to find things the first pass missed, but also as a way to analyze whether your changes are working once you put them in place.

A final note

If a space has been dysfunctional for a long time, it can be tempting to make big changes. We recommend testing changes as much as you can with temporary versions of longer term investments.

Some easy ways to test new arrangements and systems:

- Use delivery or shoe boxes to test whether a sorting or storage system works for you before investing in a permanent item
- Rearrange old furniture before buying new furniture
- Find an object that can substitute for the support you want during a testing phase (a laundry basket to test whether you need a blanket box; a dining room chair to sub for a small table in your hallway)
- Tape out the footprint of potential new furniture to see how it affects flow

This kind of analysis is a process, but the results can be very rewarding. Remember to start small, take your time, and be kind to yourself.