

Participants save money and gain better mental health with a 52-week challenge

AT A GLANCE

Clutter, mental health and financial well-being are improved with a 52-week declutter challenge.

The Situation

Clutter, mental health and financial well-being are all connected. Clutter in a home produces high levels of stress. Stress produces cortisol which increases the risk of depression, anxiety, weight gain, heart disease, memory issues and intensifies chronic illnesses. Mental clutter reduces the ability to process information clearly and to make important financial decisions. In-organization leads to misplaced items, repurchased, unneeded supplies and frustration with late fees from forgotten bills. Clutter is expensive in so many ways.

Our Response

Declutter classes have been a staple at the University of Idaho Extension since 2015. Participants appreciate the information which includes a 52-week declutter challenge in the materials; however, putting this modification into action can be an ordeal. In December 2022, the educator introduced a yearlong declutter challenge figuring she might attract 25 participants that would continue this weekly email experiment for a few weeks. Using the 52-week calendar from Home Storage Solutions as a guideline, every Friday, an email is sent to the group with “clutter clues” or bite-size tasks to help participants declutter spaces in their home. To be an active member, the “Declutter Crew”



Garage and workspace declutter before and after pictures.

must check in at least once a month using a Qualtrics survey. This survey records progress, questions and participant tips. Non-active participants are removed once a month to avoid “cluttering” their email but can be re-added at any point. Many members work on the clues given or other relevant areas that need attention first. To maintain motivation, “clutter prizes,” which help organize their spaces, are randomly given once a month and check-ins are answered and praised. Clutter tips are collected and posted online for added support.

Program Outcomes

On Jan. 1, 258 participants enrolled in the challenge. To date, there are currently 133 active participants, and more being added each week. Members from all

over Idaho and Washington share their successes with before and after pictures and behavior modification entries like:

- “...I have inventoried and labeled all my storage boxes and inventoried all my books/binders so that I can label them as well and organize everything into an accessible order. I have all the rooms in my home organized (other than refining/fine-tuning all the drawers and cupboards etc.), except my office which is next on the list. I can see light at the end of the tunnel. It’s amazing!!! Can’t wait to complete the process and go into maintenance mode so I can spend all the time I freed up by having my home in order working on fun projects like finishing my book and doing more traveling!”
- “Can you say, ‘behavior modification’? That is what this challenge has been for me. Before I knew what needed to be done, I just didn’t do it. This challenge has helped me find my rhythm. I look forward to the clues each week. This has become a new way of life for me. Every day, I make an effort to do at least five declutter tasks and my house is beautiful because of it. I feel so much freer because everything has a place, I am not buying things I don’t need and my clutter is gone.”
- “My beloved husband took off work to help me run a few business errands today at noon. When he got here, I went out to the car and it was decluttered!! In more than 30 years of marriage, that has never happened before. Our date may not have been so romantic; it included a couple bank runs and trip to post office... but it touched me more than most dates would ever! Haha! Thanks again for the inspiration, apparently you inspired my husband by osmosis!”
- “All of the hints have been helpful and eye-opening in ways you may not have intended. Living with a hoarder and QVC junky, this has been an

extremely tough emotional exercise that I have nibbled carefully around the edges of. I am indeed one of those who intends to work through more of the suggestions at an even slower pace than it may seem to be happening at this moment. I’ll get there...”

- “Since the death of my husband I have finally begun in earnest, with the help of my son, to go through his clothes and tools and rehouse them. I’ve delivered four bags to the consignment shop, 12 bags to the thrift store, a pickup load to the auction and two loads to the dump. I’ve cleaned out my garden shed and started on the carport in preparation for a family reunion/life celebration in July. I’m pleased with my progress and that I am finally motivated again.”

The challenge has received 1,393 check-ins and participants have donated almost 1,200 boxes, bags and items to thrift stores with an estimated value of \$59,600. In addition, a Kamiah group shares items at a weekly meeting. They cannot take their own clutter home but can buy each other’s items. The money raised goes to a local charity and the rest is donated to the thrift store. To sell bigger items, the Declutter Crew came together in August 2023 to hold a large community yard sale at the Latah County Fairgrounds. They sold 754 items and earned \$2,076. Leftovers went to a local thrift store where 66 loads were received in less than 1 1/2 hours. The yard sale was marketed through social media, reader boards and local newspapers. Sellers were also interviewed and photographed for a front-page story in the Lewiston Morning Tribune.

The Future

Participants have asked to continue this challenge into 2024, with a second yard sale already scheduled in July. It has resonated with so many, has changed behavior, and increased participants’ financial well-being and mental health.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Karen Richel, Financial Extension Educator • University of Idaho Extension, Latah County • 208-883-2241 • krichel@uidaho.edu

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