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Is your stuff holding you back? Clutter expert Peter Walsh tells Alice Gorman why it's time to come clean on that shoe collection PETER Walsh is a professional organiser. A man who can delve into your bulging wardrobe, cast an eye over the chaos in your kitchen and tap into what's really behind the "stuff" clogging up your life.

A half-hour phone interview with this LA-based expert organiser, is part-information gathering, part-therapy session as he cleverly describes the devastation that is my home.

**TD**

"How does he know?", I wonder, as he describes the piles of unread books in my lounge room; the wardrobe bursting with clothes too small, too old or long forgotten; the ridiculous mound of toys in my sons' bedroom; and the boxes of ancient school books, uni notes, photographs and life mementos gathering dust under the house.

"Gee this man is good," I think, as Peter goes on to tell me I'm not the only one drowning in "stuff".

"There's two main kinds of clutter that people struggle with," he says. "There's memory clutter, that's the stuff that you hold on to because it reminds you of a particular person, achievement or event in the past. Stuff like your kid's school work, stuff you inherited from your grandmother; books from uni when you studied anthropology 15 years ago; You can't let go of it for fear that you will lose the memories or let go of the dream.

"The other clutter is the 'I might need it one day' clutter. The stuff you hold on to in anticipation of a whole lot of imagined futures. I need this fondue kit because one day I might have a fondue party. I need these magazines because one day I might need the information in them." As Peter keeps talking my mind wanders to the growing pile of home-decorating magazines working its way up the wall of our bathroom, biding time for the day we design and build our new home. How many times have I looked at the teetering tower and thought, "Better not throw them away, there's some good ideas in those magazines." And what about all of those fabulous high-heeled shoes, a hangover from my life before kids, yet totally impractical for my new life with children.

Peter Walsh is an Australian – a former teacher who transitioned to corporate training, with a focus on organisational change and conflict resolution.

He left for LA in 1994 to establish an office for the company he and a friend owned. The plan was to open the office, stay a few months and come back to Australia. Ten years on he's still in LA, where his skill as a professional organiser is highly sought-after by everyone from Oprah Winfrey to the Discovery Channel.

"In a weird LA story way I had very good friends here who are TV producers and they were making a show for the Discovery Network about organising," Peter says.

"They encouraged me to try out for the show. I did and 10 years later that show went on to be one of the most successful shows on the Discovery Network. We filmed 120 episodes. It was a standard home organising makeover show. I'd go into homes totally overrun with clutter, we'd drag everything out of two

rooms and put it on the front lawn. The people weren't allowed to put anything back in the house unless husband, wife and myself agreed." He also did five seasons with the Oprah Winfrey Show where he was known as the "Get your life organised guy". He's still a contributing editor to O: The Oprah Magazine, he's released five best-selling books published in 10 languages and now there's an app and a DVD – all geared at helping people rid themselves of clutter.

Peter often travels home to Australia, where he makes regular appearances on Channel Ten's The Living Room.

He'll be on the **Gold** Coast on July 25 as part of the Australasian Association of Professional Organisers Annual Conference.

That there is an Australasian Association of Professional Organisers is a surprise to me. How long has clutter been a problem for so many of us?

How much does the rise of clutter-induced stress relate to the rise in powerful TV marketing and the saturation of our department stores with cheap **Chinese**-made toys, clothes and household goods, I wonder.

"I think it's each of those things," Peter says.

"The rise of marketing, the increase of inexpensive consumer goods. The relatively easy access to credit – all of those things come together. There's also other more fundamental things going on. One is we live in a society that says 'If one is good, two is great.' This idea that we show our wealth and our love and our social status by the **acquisition** of stuff.

"We're conditioned to buy stuff. The whole marketing tack is 'Your life might be good but just buy this thing and it will be great'. We buy these products but we're really investing in the promise. We buy the treadmill but really we're investing in the idea that somehow it will magically make us fit and thin.

"I see homes full of these products but people have this deep sense of dissatisfaction because none of the products really fulfil these promises.

"The stuff we own has incredible power and people don't really appreciate the power it has." So now that we've identified we have a problem, what's the solution? Peter says he starts by asking people to explain their vision for their life. "We're all so focused on trying to work out what we need for our home, wedding, our birthday," he explains.

"We have to start using the word FROM instead of FOR.

"What do you want FROM your home? Give me three words to describe what you want from the perfect master bedroom? The words I get are usually haven, sanctuary, relaxing, romantic. Now let's look at their bedroom. The first thing I see is a computer. Does a computer in your master bedroom give you what you want from that room?

"Obviously the answer is no so the computer has to go. The stuff you own has to help you create the life you want." Peter is insightful and intuitive but he says pinpointing my problems down the phone thousands of kilometres away isn't so hard. That's because most of us have the same problem areas – clothes, paperwork, garage and kids toys.

"Clothes are really about the self we present to the world," he says. "People have a lot of emotion tied up around their clothes. They have WISH clothes. 'I wish I was thinner'. We wear 20 per cent of our clothes 80 per cent of the time." The solution? Turn all of your clothes hangers backwards. Over the next six months as you wear and wash something from your wardrobe return it with the hanger facing the right way. At the end of six months, anything that is still facing backwards has to go.

As for the children, parents should remember that the kid with the most stuff isn't necessarily going to be happier.

"Set limits. Before they can get another toy they have to let one go. Gather those toys together on a regular basis and take them to the Salvos or to Vinnies. Get them to talk to the volunteers about the children who will benefit from those toys." And Peter suggests before I buy a new pair of shoes I let an old pair go. Once you have successfully decluttered your home, your mind and your life there's one word you have to stop using to stay clean: later.

"It's the simplest thing in the world," Peter says. "All you have to do is remove this one word from your vocab.

“You have to stop saying I’ll put it away later. I’ll deal with it later. I’ll make the bed later. I’ll fold it later. I’ll deal with them later.”

Hear Peter and The Living Room’s Barry du Bois speak on Friday at 7pm at the QT Hotel **Gold** Coast. Tickets are \$67. Go to [aapopresentsaneveningwithpeterwalsh.eventbee.com](https://aapopresentsaneveningwithpeterwalsh.eventbee.com)

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