

08/18/07

Thanks for asking what my cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) consists of. I do what I believe is "classic" CBT for hoarders. CBT teaches us to live with the anxiety we feel about discarding stuff. The goal is for hoarders to learn to live with the possibility that we have made the wrong choice about what to discard. Here is what I do every single day, though I do not do it the same time every day . . . I do it when it is convenient, but I do it every day.

I set a kitchen timer for five minutes. I stop when the timer goes off, no matter what, and especially if I am making great progress. The idea here is that if I know I will only have to suffer through the CBT for a short time, I will not be as likely to postpone it when I am completely unmotivated . . . I know my misery will be over soon. Plus, the goal here is not to focus on the house, but to focus on my head. We've all been through cleaning blitzes with vows to never let the place get out of hand again. That hasn't worked for me and I doubt it's worked for any of you. I have to learn to change the way I think about stuff. And successful CBT requires repetition, repetition, repetition.

I go through my clutter and make one of three decisions about each item. My only permissible options are: give away, throw away (or shred), or put away. I put items into one of three separate boxes marked, respectively, Give Away, Throw Away, and Put Away. I must make a decision about one item before I can go on to the next item. I cannot postpone the decision . . . cannot put the item down to deal with later. There are days when I only deal with one item or two, 'cause it is so hard for me to make the decision. Some days I deal with dozens of items in the five minutes. It varies considerably, but the constant is the five minutes every day.

I start with whatever is on the top of the pile (or it could be the first item on the rod in the closet, first item in the kitchen pantry, whatever) and deal with that first item completely before moving to the next item. I do not pick and choose what items to start with.

I work in one spot, say the kitchen table, until it is done. I do not flit from clutter pile to clutter pile. The idea here is that after a while working in the same place, I will see some progress in the form of a smaller pile on the kitchen table, or -- dare I say it? -- the table top itself! Working in one spot at a time has an inherent reward.

When the timer goes off after five minutes, I must immediately act on the contents of the three boxes. For if I do not, I have only moved the clutter from one place to another. This next step is as important as the first five minutes, 'cause it completes the decision-making process.

If anything is in the Throw Away box, I throw it away right then and there. It is better to take the throw away stuff to the trash bin outside, rather than put it in a trash can in the house. The more completely "out the door" the stuff is, the better.

Whatever is in the Put Away box gets put away into the place it is supposed to be. Clothing gets taken to the dresser, closet or laundry hamper, as appropriate. Books get put on the shelf. Dirty dishes gets put into the dishwasher (which I have learned to unload when it is done, just so I can move the dirty stuff into it). If and only if the place to put something away is totally cluttered and full, so that nothing else will fit in it, can an item remain in the box. And I mean this. If the item will fit into the cabinet or wherever, imperfectly, messily, however, then I put it in there. When I finish the kitchen table and move to a new spot, I can choose that cabinet to work on next. Any item(s) that are in the Put Away box when the weekend rolls around must be dealt with over the weekend. Sometimes this means I have to clean out a cabinet or drawer . . . one of those blitz cleanings, but for a limited space (just the drawer, just the cabinet, etc.). The goal of this cleaning out is not to clean . . . it is to put away the stuff in my Put Away box.

Whatever is in the Give Away box gets put in a clean plastic trash bag for the thrift store, which I tie off by knotting the bag itself. I knot the bag rather than use a bag tie because I want to make it less convenient to re-open the bag and reconsider my decision. The bag then goes into my car trunk to get it out of the house. Note I do not accumulate clutter in my car. I imagine if someone does, she or he would have to come up with a different process. I have until the weekend to give away what is in the bags. If items have been earmarked for a particular person, I must deliver or mail the items to the person before Sunday night. Anything and everything that remains in the bag on Sunday night is delivered on Monday to the thrift store where I donate items.

I keep a calendar on the wall to chart my daily and weekly CBT steps. I use a regular wall calendar that has blank squares for each day. When I do my five minutes, I put a green "C" on that date with a felt pen. When I put away what is in the Put Away box, I put a blue "P" on the calendar for that day. When I throw away what is in the Throw Away box, I put a red "T" on the calendar. And when I take the bag of Give Away items to my car, I put a brown "G" on the calendar. Doing this gives me visual pats on the back . . . let's me know I've been a good girl and done my work. Plus, it lets my husband see I am working on my problem, which means a lot to him since, of course, he absolutely hates living like this.

This entire daily process of the five minutes working on the pile through to the putting, throwing and giving away, and marking the calendar, takes about ten minutes.

On the weekends, I do the same thing I do every day -- five minutes plus put, throw and give away -- then add the additional steps of completing the giving away and putting away process, as described above.

So when does cleaning and large-scale decluttering take place? Well, whenever. I have no schedule for that. I wish I did, but I don't. It is often completely draining for me to do the five minutes and I sure don't want to do cleaning after that. So I clean and declutter when I get to it. But decluttering is something different from CBT. The goal of decluttering is directed to your physical space. The goal of CBT is directed to your mind.

I know the above process sounds very ritualistic. It isn't, really. It is efficient and the way I am doing CBT now. I have in the past done CBT in a less organized manner, and that worked well to get me started on the daily process. As I have continued, I've added bits to the process because they work for me. The calendar was a suggestion from someone else, maybe someone from this group -- I don't recall anymore. Tying the Give Away bags instead of using bag ties was someone else's suggestion, maybe my therapist. I don't remember where that came from. The only constant has been the five minutes and the three choices.

And I can see progress, not just in the kitchen table, in the closet, in the drawers, etc., but in the way I live. I am less inclined to acquire stuff. It is easier to recognize categories of things instead of seeing each item as unique, because as I do my five minutes, I start to recognize things that are similar to items I dealt with previously and ultimately decided to throw it away. So increasingly, I already know I can throw away this item, too. This kind of recognition makes it easier to deal with items in the piles. And as I walk around the house, I have a keener eye. I now see things that I didn't see before, such as an old purse that has been on the chair for perhaps three or four years, waiting for me to get the zipper fixed, or the old scrap of paper with a phone number on it, which I have been meaning to call for a couple years now to see whose number it is to see if I need the number . . . sometimes now, when I see stuff like that, I just pick it up and throw it out as I walk through the house.

I hope this description has been helpful to someone!