

## 4 Body + Soul

# My name is Mariella, and I am a hoarder

Mariella Frostrup has barely thrown out an item of clothing in 35 years. It was finally time for professional help

It was when my wardrobe began to fight back that I realised drastic action had to be taken. Tugging at a forgotten scarf tantalisingly dangling from a high-up shelf, an entire bag of discarded summer sandals landed on my head. A tube of Arnica cream later I resolved to take action. Locating three items of clothing that went together had become a daily challenge; elongated searches for anything from a belt to a bra were raising morning stress levels to potentially fatal heights and consistently making me late. My whole sock drawer would be on the floor before I could locate a pair of black socks. Hunting down a cream shirt I knew I'd once owned would involve pulling every hanger from the wardrobe only to find it stuffed under something else, fallen down among my shoes or lurking behind my precariously piled up sweaters. Think of the dreaded Japanese knotweed, sprouting shoots in all directions and impossible to cut a path through, and you'll have some concept of the challenges faced simply in order to get dressed.

I'm not naturally messy, but beyond the surface serenity of my bedroom, behind closed wardrobe doors, the scene resembled a terrorist attack on Primark after hours. Neither am I a big shopper, but with three and a half purchasing decades behind me and little care for the dictates of fashion, I've barely thrown out a jacket in 35 years. My wardrobe-accruing began in the days when clothes were considered a luxury. Arriving in London at 16 off the ferry from Ireland with two pairs of jeans, a couple of T-shirts and my favourite polo-neck, I still recall the wonder and longing with which I took in the Kings Road and its tantalising array of boutiques selling bespoke punk fashion and lingering hippy chic. As I began to earn a wage, clothes were the stuff of reinvention; each careful-

ly saved-for-item a tangible step away from the poverty of my childhood. Nowadays, with fashion subsidised by cheap labour in faraway places, unless quality or principle dictates your shopping choices, financially challenged teenagers have similarly stuffed closets to the one it's taken me three decades to accrue.

There had been previous attempts to cull the burgeoning clothes mountain. My dear friend, the actress Gina Bellman, who manages to maintain that impossibility for the hoarder, "a capsule wardrobe", had once tried to assist with a cull on ancient outfits. Designer trouser suits from the 1980s would "never be worn again", she insisted; a Chanel jacket bought with the proceeds of my first TV job was never going to button across my bosom. During an eight-hour marathon she threw down the gauntlet while I battled bravely but illogically back, insisting things should be kept for a daughter I had yet to give birth to, or that I'd be a size 6 again one day. We concluded with a wrestling match in the hallway as I tried to reclaim the one dustbin liner we'd managed to fill. Suffice it to say Gina was not going to volunteer to help out again.

It was time to call in a professional. I'd heard about declutterers but fancied they were for oligarchs' wives who could empty Selfridges' designer department in an afternoon. I imagined a terrifying paragon of perfection, immaculately dressed in shades of peach with a cinched waist and patent nude stilettos, who'd laugh at the tragic moth-eaten scraps I was emotionally tied to. Instead, Vicky Silverthorn of youneedavicky.com walked in the door. One-time assistant to Lily Allen, her big smile, long hair and biker boots were the antithesis of the stereotype I'd summoned. She looked... well, human! It made revealing my sartorial crimes so much easier. In her wake followed Polly, her tea-making and tidying assistant. These girls, who charge £350 a day to sort out your clutter, were taking my problem VERY seriously indeed. "Right" she said, "let's get started. Anything you don't want we'll send to charity or sell on my tags-on.com website. If it's got labels attached it's Tags On, if not, Tags Off." Tags On seemed a decadence too far. Who are these people who buy things they never wear? She made a valid point though: "It's more encouraging to get rid of clothes if you can make the money to buy more; selling on the website means we can all enjoy each other's vintage clothing and we're recycling in the process." It was too good to be true; I was going to end up with



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Mariella Frostrup gets to grips with her wardrobe

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It was shocking to be faced with the scale of my consumption over the decades. Does anybody need six white vests, five of them grey? Shouldn't I have flung out the square-toed boots that I didn't even enjoy wearing in the 1980s, let alone now. And why on earth was I keeping hold of my pregnancy jeans? At 50 I was unlikely to be going that route again. Yet at heart I knew my motives were more deeply rooted than the items themselves. I was hanging onto my clothes as insurance against penury; deep down I was still scared I might go back to those hungry-eyed, empty-pocketed, window-shopping days in Chelsea. It was an instinct as consuming with a Joseph suit as it was with M&S pyjamas. Vicky's great skill was to indulge my defence of indefensible articles until I became so sick of the parade of quantity rather than quality that I finally snapped. "Dump it," I shrieked 30 minutes in, and found I couldn't stop. "Dump it, dump it," I carried on in Queen of Hearts style, as the reject pile grew. So what if I couldn't afford to replace them?

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Eventually the cupboard was bare and the bedroom a sea of mini moguls; clothes to sell, clothes to give away, clothes to re-hang and clothes to either mend or alter so they could enjoy a second life. Instead of a sense of desolation I felt utterly elated, as though a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I was sent away to catch up on my work while Vicky and Polly continued theirs. Two hours later it was all I could do not to cry with delight at the vision that greeted me. A half-empty, colour-themed wardrobe of matching super-thin hangers (provided by my declutterers), where everything left was on display including several outfits I'd forgotten about, lined up to be used again. I spent an hour just sitting there in wonder, looking at the view. My angels of deliverance left with boxes and bags piled full of my discarded clothes and I fully expected to wake up in a cold sweat, regretting the loss of a lifetime of investment. My friend Poppy had recently cleared her bathroom of old creams and

cosmetics and admitted to me she'd woken at lam the next morning, crept out of bed and removed half of them from the bin. Luckily I experienced no such regrets.

Over the next few days I dutifully followed Vicky's few instructions. I bought a plastic clothes folder (new to me) on Amazon, so my sweaters could be piled up perfectly, taking far less space, and a de-bobbling machine to bring old cardigans back to life. Most indispensable was the advice handed down from Vicky's late mother, who in illness, painfully aware of her own mortality, told her daughter poignantly: "Never keep something for best." With her words ringing in my ears I've started to really enjoy my clothes again. Admittedly not all combinations are a success (sequins at breakfast raised objections from all the family) but the miserable feeling of a morning of having nothing to wear as I gazed forlornly at the jumble has been totally banished. So too has the dysfunctional sense that the fuller my wardrobe, the greater my distance from the past. I now look at my immaculate clothes rail, divorced from deeper psychological hangovers and imbued with a sense of sartorial adventure, feeling that, if anything, I still have too much. We all need a Vicky, she says on her website, and I sense I'll want her back very soon, even if it's just for a chat.

## Streamline your life with psychologist Dr Cecilia d'Felice's step-by-step guide

Many of us have what might be called a "tendency towards accumulation": keeping items because they "might be useful one day", cluttering up desks with unnecessary detritus, not being able to throw away old bills, clothing, shoes, papers and magazines, or overloading the kitchen with bag ties, rubber bands, string, old food and glass jars.

So why do we want to keep things that are no longer of any value or use to us? And what can we do about it?

### Understand that you need to feel in control

Control, and the need to feel in control, play a major psychological role in maintaining hoarding behaviour. Hoarders often feel they have little control in their lives, particularly over human relationships. Objects, conversely, are stable and ultimately controllable. The irony, of course, is that even in not-so-extreme cases the collection of arbitrarily amassed objects eventually begins to control the hoarder.

A cluttered desk in a high-stress work environment, for example, can help employees feel they have carved out a little territory of their own. Their many objects are a way of claiming space, space that is inaccessible to others and acts as an unconscious deterrent to intrusion. A cluttered desk also sends unconscious messages to other colleagues, such as, "I am too busy/important/stressed to tidy my desk." An impenetrable desk also sends an unconscious message of being irreplaceable. It signifies that only the owner knows where everything is, creating the illusion that they are indispensable.

Similarly at home, a hoarder who fills up space with piles of junk is making a clear statement about territory, similar to an animal scenting its borders. It suggests not only a deeply buried insecurity, but also a need to fill the void, as if empty space, like silence, is an unbearable proposition that requires filling up.

### Work out what the 'stuff' represents

Hoarding is an external reflection of an internal state of being. Material "stuff" becomes a physical defence against feelings of inadequacy, of social unacceptability or of some other lack. A defended mentality is generated where nothing emotional can get in and nothing can get out. There simply isn't the space to process feelings.

People who have hoarding characteristics are often also emotional withholders. We often hear people talking about "anal" personalities, referring to Freud's developmental psychology where

children grow through profoundly important physical and emotional stages. If stuck at the anal stage (Freudians would argue through severe enforced potty training and strict parenting), individuals find it hard to let go — translating into the ability to be free and generous with themselves — and feel they must hold on to everything they have, for fear it will be misunderstood, taken away or abused.

Such individuals find it hard to articulate themselves as emotional beings. Ironically, this lack of tolerating their own messy internal emotional processes becomes externalised into creating an almighty mess that other people have to negotiate. There is, therefore, a pronounced passive-aggressive quality to hoarders who feel unable to express negative emotions such as anger, or feel they cannot ask for what they need emotionally.

### Establish if you are a 'problem' hoarder

If you are living alone and are too embarrassed to invite anyone into your home because of the "clutter", you would be wise to seek professional help. If you live with someone else, do remember that non-clinical hoarders often unconsciously choose people who don't hoard to cohabit with in an attempt to find balance. They find it hard to accept that there's a problem, however — even when the non-hoarding partner begs them to throw things away. As with any other maladaptive behaviour, hoarding is usually a problem if your significant others tell you so, even if you don't always agree yourself.

### Intervene if necessary

Interventions are obviously necessary if the hoarding has become dangerous — it is essential, for example, to seek immediate help for elderly relatives who cannot access specific rooms because of clutter and where there is a fire risk.

For less extreme behaviour that still interferes with quality of life, it is important that an understanding is reached so that everyone can cohabit comfortably together. If the hoarder really cannot bear to part with their objects, suggest a storage facility. If after a year they haven't used any of the objects in storage it would be logical to suggest getting rid of them.

A day-to-day tactic is to invest in some useful baskets or boxes where the ubiquitous "piles" can be stored without getting in everyone's way. These can be labelled "papers" (including bills, magazines and letters), "clothing", "shoes", etc. The non-hoarder is at liberty to remove objects that are lying around and place them in the appropriate container, thereby eliciting a degree of relief. Again, if the hoarder has not used any of the items contained for an agreed period of time — two months, say — then the non-hoarder can suggest the "filing, storage facility, recycling" model.

### Have manageable goals

Start with manageable goals that do not feel overwhelming. For example, don't feel that you have to tackle the whole of the kitchen. Start with one drawer and give

yourself a reward at the end that is nurturing, even if it's just a cup of tea.

Once you have cleared the drawer, ask yourself how you feel. Give yourself a score between 0 and 10, with 0 being feelings of lightness and relief, and 10 being extreme anxiety and desire to replace everything disposed of immediately. If your score is above 5, ask yourself why you need these items so badly. Could you store them somewhere out of the way until you feel ready to throw them away permanently? Give yourself a time frame, so that if you have not gone back to your temporary store in, say, a month then you will dispose of the items.

After a few days of living with your uncluttered drawer, ask yourself how you feel about it. Usually people feel a sense of relief, lightness and reduced stress.

Now work systematically through your space at home and at work. Again, just one drawer, cupboard, surface at a time is fine. Go through the process outlined above until you are satisfied.

### Remember, you are being creative

Next, get into the habit of having regular clear-outs. Spring-cleaning after the winter is highly therapeutic, and an end-of-summer trawl will also yield a good cache of items that can be let go of. Remember that this is a creative not a destructive act. By removing the old and unused you are making way for the new and useful.

### Change your habits

Once you have cleared your space to your satisfaction, apply some gentle but firm rules.

When buying something new, take it as an opportunity to also choose something to recycle.

In the kitchen, store "clutter" items in clear containers or bag them up, and have limits on how many elastic bands, empty jam jars or bottles you really need.

Keep your desk clear by keeping essentials accessible, but store less-often-used items in drawers (resist the temptation to put broken pens in there too). Always file information efficiently.

Throw away anything in any of your spaces that is useless, broken, degraded or unsafe immediately. Use the "one in, one out model" whenever possible.

### Change your behaviour

Learn to let go of your need to control by investing more in relationships, friendships and activities that encourage you to express your real feelings and creativity.

If anxiety is a maintaining feature of your need to clutter, engage in some CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) or other therapy to help you reduce your stress and live in the moment.

Take some risks and give things away. You will be surprised at how challenging this feels at first, then surprised at how good it ultimately feels.

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