

Cluttercore: the pandemic trend for celebrating stuff, mess and comfort

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

1 Warmer

Is there a room, cupboard, drawer or other place in your house that is full of things that you don't really use but don't want to get rid of? If so, what kind of stuff is in this place?

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

memento	clutter	archive	crammed	cosy	display
emerge	accumulation	lifeline	valued	knick-knack	well-established

- having existed for a long time, and having been successful or accepted for a long time _____ (para 1)
- the mess created when there are too many things in a place _____ (para 2)
- come out of something or out from behind something _____ (para 2)
- warm and comfortable, and making you feel relaxed _____ (para 3)
- completely filled with people or things _____ (para 3)
- something that you keep to remind yourself of a particular person, place or experience _____ (para 3)
- a person or thing that you depend on very much _____ (para 5)
- the process by which something increases in amount or is collected together over time _____ (para 6)
- a place where you store things that are very important to you _____ (para 7)
- put something in a particular place so that people can see it easily _____ (para 10)
- considered to be important _____ (para 10)
- a small cheap object used as a decoration _____ (para 10)

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- 1 In the past few months, the pavement outside my flat has been taken over by stuff: baby baths, filing systems, books, stools. People leave them, others take them; nobody pays anyone any money. It's a well-established, sustainable micro-economy – and, according to my neighbour, whose bedroom window opens on to this pavement, it's becoming a problem. "You have to ask: where did this stuff come from – and where's it going to go?"
- 2 Clutter has emerged as a by-product of the pandemic. Yet we are not sure what to do with it. "Forced inside, some people have been decluttering, but I've also noticed others re-embracing their stuff," says Jennifer Howard, author of *Clutter: An Untidy History*. "The pandemic has forced us to re-evaluate what we have, make better use of objects and space, and also see their value, often for the first time."
- 3 Howard, who works from home, has noticed what she calls a "renaissance" in encyclopaedias used as laptop stands. In some corners of social media, this kind of reappraisal of forgotten belongings is called cluttercore. On TikTok, videos hashtagged #cluttercore have almost 2m views. On Instagram, there are about 1,300 posts. Many of these show beds piled up with clothes and walls papered with pictures. Other images have a cosier feel: clothes put neatly together, walls crammed with paintings and shelves full of mementoes.
- 4 Cluttercore fan Amy-Louise Holton, 36, who makes and sells clothes on Etsy, describes her clutter of fabrics and threads as "part of the creative process". Irina Balog, a 32-year-old interior designer agrees. She says, "The way I decorate my space is part of who I am."
- 5 For a generation that rent rather than buy, clutter can be a lifeline. "I've accepted the fact that I won't own a house, so making my home joyful and cosy is really important," says Holton.
- 6 Stuck inside, our social lives reduced, we may be more likely to order and buy more things. But clutter is not just mess made by an accumulation of things we don't really need. For some, clutter is being repurposed for pandemic life: for example, my ceramic pot now holds pens instead of plants.
- 7 Joseph Ferrari, who studies the psychological effects of clutter at DePaul University in Chicago, says, "Home is not simply a place; it is an extension of our selves, a living archive of memory." It is now also an office, a classroom and other things. It is something to be looked at, as well as lived in. We may not be entertaining friends, but we are inviting colleagues in via Zoom.
- 8 Of course, one woman's clutter is another woman's rubbish, and how we view it depends entirely on how we define it. "To me, clutter is stuff that is no longer useful and gets in the way of living," says Howard. Based in Washington DC, she wrote her book on clutter after clearing out her mother's house after she died and unearthing "bags of bags, pickle jars, jars of coins, jars of rubber bands, records. So much stuff!"
- 9 Cluttercore is somewhere in the middle of maximalism (the embrace of excess) and minimalism (a commercial sort of Zen). There is a "comfort in things", as the anthropologist Daniel Miller once said.
- 10 As a concept, clutter was invented during the Victorian period. The idea was that new ways of producing things required new systems to display them, explains Howard in her book. This means you get stuff, and then get more stuff to deal with the stuff. In those times, most things were more expensive than today, so they were more highly valued – even if they were seaside knick-knacks or children's toys.
- 11 "Now it is cheap to fill your home with stuff," says the architect and academic Eddie Blake. He smiles: "I like stuff. It helps anchor you."

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3 Find the information

Find the following things in the article.

1. two social-media sites where you can see cluttercore pictures of other people's stuff
2. a word to describe the trend of decluttering your home to make it simpler
3. two examples of items that have been repurposed
4. two things our homes are now used for (in addition to living there)
5. the phrase used to describe the time in the UK from 1837 to 1901
6. the job title of someone who studies human behaviour

4 Prefixes

a. Add two-letter prefixes to these words. Find them in the article to check your answers.

1. ___ clutter
2. ___ -evaluate
3. ___ -embrace
4. ___ appraisal
5. ___ -product
6. ___ purposed

b. Use the words with their prefixes to complete these sentences.

1. My mother cleverly _____ her old bucket and turned it into a birdbath.
2. I've decided to _____ the cupboard under the stairs.
3. An increase in crime is the _____ of poverty and unemployment.
4. We will _____ the situation at the end of the year.
5. I have more time now, so I plan to _____ my former love of gardening.
6. There has recently been a _____ of pupils' needs.

5 From a personal perspective

a. How we view something depends entirely on how we define it, says Jennifer Howard (para 8). How would you personally define the differences between the following pairs of words?

1. mess; stuff
2. mementoes; knick-knacks
3. clutter; rubbish

b. Now look up definitions of these words in a variety of dictionaries. How do the definitions compare?

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6 Quotes

Do you agree with these quotes? Discuss them, using examples from your life or from the lives of people you know.

- “The pandemic has forced us to re-evaluate what we have, make better use of objects and space, and also see their value, often for the first time.”
- “Home is not simply a place; it is an extension of our selves.”
- “There is a comfort in things.”
- “You get stuff, and then get more stuff to deal with the stuff.”

7 Discussion

- **When did you last declutter?**
 - o What things did you get rid of?
 - o What did you do with them? Did you take them to a collection point, give them to a charity, leave them on the pavement, etc?
- **Do you, or does anyone you know, have a collection of knick-knacks or mementoes?**
- **Do you agree that an accumulation of personal stuff can make a home feel cosy?**
- **Have you recently repurposed any of your stuff?**