

Overwhelmed BY TOO MUCH STUFF?

Feel you're in danger of being swamped by too many possessions? Christina Hopkinson recognises a new syndrome... stuffocation!



Nothing knows its place in this house. Every horizontal surface has a potpourri of party-bag tat, small denominations of

obsolete foreign currencies (pesetas anyone?), blunt pencils, shrivelled conkers and balled-up tissues.

I try, I really do. I shout "put that away" and "where does the sticky tape go?" so often that I suspect that what my family would really like to take down to the Reuse and Recycling Depot is me.

I wish I could be like my husband and ignore it, but I feel anxious, convinced that the house is a reflection of my lack of control. It's bursting at the seams, I'm bursting at the jeans. I want to be the woman with the white sofa in an empty room in the same way that I want to be the one with the Pilates-toned body and capsule shoe collection.

I'm not alone. You can hire professional de-clutterers or buy books that promise to cleanse your home. In a nutshell, we all have far too much 'stuff' and the truth is that the more space you have, the more stuff you keep.

We excavated a basement cupboard area and for just a moment it was blissfully empty but has become a graveyard for drying-up paint tins and camping equipment. If we had a garage, we'd no doubt fall among the 75 per cent of the population who use them to store anything but cars.

Our feelings towards this clutter has a new name: 'stuffocation'. Author James Wallman has published a book of the same name that suggests all this stuff is making us unhappy: "instead of feeling enriched by the things we own, we are feeling stifled by them."

Research carried out by the University of California tells us that women feel

particularly oppressed by all these possessions – with their stress hormones rising just talking about it.

As a result of this, a new trend is emerging and many of us are becoming more interested in experiences than possessions, choosing to spend our money on trips to pop-up cinemas, scuba diving and hat-making courses. James Wallman has even coined a term for those of us who want to do things rather than acquire things: we're "experientialists".

At first, I thought this sounded like a different form of showing off – especially since lots of these experience-chasers like to post photos on Instagram to prove how great a time they're having. But then I think back to things that have made me happy in the last year and it's been that family trip to see *Matilda* the Musical or discovering new trails to run, accompanied by my nine-year-old on his bike. Neither of which has left their mark in increased household clutter. Another solution is to invest in quality

rather than quantity. The website LifeEdited shows a tiny apartment with a few high-end artefacts – the latest Airbook, the perfect jeans, an exquisite tumbler.

Which sounds very lovely and sensible, and I'm sure Gwyneth Paltrow never slips over the pizza flyers on her hallway floor, but in a way it sounds even more aspirational than the consumerism that causes us to buy all these things in the first place.

And I realise that it's me trying to buy perfect objects that has helped crowd my home in the first place. Looking forward, I know that spending money on finally conquering my fear of skiing or learning how to bake like Mary Berry would make me far happier than a new dress I'll never get to wear.

"Stuff the stuff", I think – I'm about living the life. I vow to introduce a 'one in, two in' policy on objects in 2014... well, just as soon as I've bought that half-price coat. **w&h**

Recognise these?

THE SCARY DRAWER Full of unidentifiable keys, loose batteries, random electrical chargers and power cords. You will never need the one marked 'Amstrad'.

VITAMIN BOTTLES A symbol of the gap between how we want to live our lives and the reality. They promise glossy hair and strong bones, but buying them isn't enough. You actually have to take them every day, too.

SHOES THAT DON'T FIT There's no logic for keeping shoes that never fitted. You know the ones, bought in a sale with the hope that "they'll stretch". They never do.

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