

WHY DECLUTTERING BOOKS IS SO EMOTIONAL – AND HOW TO DO IT ANYWAY

Books and magazines often carry more than just words. They hold our memories, inspirations, aspirations – even parts of our identity. That’s why sorting through them can feel unexpectedly emotional.

As a psychotherapist and professional organiser, I’ve seen time and again how our bookshelves reflect what is going on in our inner world. There are the unread titles we once felt we *should* read, the sentimental books given to us by special people, those that represent who we wish to become and others that mark past chapters of our lives. They tell a story – and not just the one written on the page.

But the truth is, books we no longer need or love become part of the clutter, the heavy weight we carry around. And clutter, as I often say, is simply “decisions that haven’t been made.”

I’ll admit – I love buying books. There’s something so hopeful about them. But I’ve had to get really honest with myself: part of me seems to believe I can absorb the knowledge by osmosis, just by having the book on my shelf. The reality? Actually sitting down to read takes time and focus – which isn’t always easy, especially as someone who’s dyslexic, running two businesses and doing my own creative things. I often want to take in all this wisdom, but I have to acknowledge what’s realistic for me right now.

So where do you start?

Begin with a bold move: pull everything off the shelves. Yes, every last book. Holding each one in your hands – rather than glancing at a spine – gives you a fresh perspective and a sense of momentum. It also gets rid of a little dust along the way!

Then, begin to sort your collection into these categories:

- **Keep it**
- **Donate it**
- **Don’t Know (aka think about it a bit longer)**
- **Action it (return or give to specific person)**

If you’re working through a large collection, try turning the reviewed books onto their side, to track your progress.

Stuck on the unread ones? Ask yourself honestly: *Does this still speak to me, knowing everything else I want to read?* If it feels like an obligation or a burden, give yourself permission to release it. You’re not failing by letting it go – you’re choosing to prioritize what truly matters now.

Sentimental books need gentler handling. Move these to a separate ‘Don’t know’ or ‘Memory’ pile and revisit them after the main cull. Take time to reflect. Is it the book you want to keep, or the person or memory attached to it? You can honor that connection in other ways – write a few lines about what the book meant, take a photo, or journal the memory. That simple act can help you say goodbye without regret.

When it comes time to let books go, choose a method that aligns with your values. Whether it’s donating to a charity shop, a community library, or a women’s shelter, knowing your books will continue to bring joy can ease the process. I always find Oxfam the best place to donate books because they list some of the specialist books online.

And what about magazines?

Magazines tend to whisper, “*I might need this later.*” But if you haven’t referred to an issue in months (or years), it’s likely safe to let it go. Trends change. Ideas and policies evolve. Before recycling, consider tearing out or photographing the pages that genuinely inspire you. However, these need to go into your Action pile – decluttering isn’t the time to start reading! Alternatively set aside a ‘Read It’ pile to come back to later and stay focused on letting go of what no longer serves you.

Your bookshelves and magazine racks should reflect who you are now, not who you were, or who you thought you *should* be, or the projects you thought you *should* do. Decluttering them can be liberating, almost like shedding a skin – one that makes room for the person you’re becoming.

Letting go creates space – not just on your shelves, but in your head and in your life. And that’s where the real magic begins.

Written by Helen Sanderson, author of *The Secret Life of Clutter: Getting Clear, Letting Go, and Moving On*.

Resources:

Boston Book Removal

bostonbookremoval.com/

Boston Book Removal provides FREE, scheduled pick-ups of books, vinyl records and CDs. Please note that there is a 4 box minimum for pick-ups. There is no maximum limit.

Bay State Books

www.baystatebooks.com/

Recycles books that are not appropriate for donation (stained, missing covers, etc.) Various donation bins located around Greater Boston.

Friends of the Brookline Library

<https://www.brooklinelibrary.org/community/friends/>

The Friends conduct an ongoing book sale at all three Brookline libraries. Proceeds fund library programming and staff development.

More than Words

781-788-0035

shop.mtwyouth.org

Prison Book Program

United First Parish Church

1306 Hancock Street (Basement), Quincy
prisonbookprogram.org/donate-books/guidelines/