



The magic touch: Romaine has transformed Emma's kitchen into a clearer, calmer space

THE RESULT

Decluttering CHANGED MY LIFE!

When Emma Elms felt her possessions were taking over, she called in a professional to help her sort them



Stuart, my partner of 12 years, has often complained he's drowning in my possessions. From magazines dating back to

the 90s, to boxes of beauty products I've never used, my junk fills every corner.

And as we're planning an imminent house move to downsize from a spacious but scruffy five-bed to a more compact three-bed closer to better schools, it's time for drastic action. With no idea

where to start, I put in an SOS call to a clutter consultant. Her brief is to help me detox my house of two rooms' worth of stuff and solve my clutter issues for good.

I send her 20 uncensored photos of my house, a brave move, considering the kitchen worktops are crammed with appliances and newspapers I haven't had time to recycle, and there's a "Leaning Tower of Laundry" in the spare room that never seems to go down.

Romaine Lowery, a professional organiser and founder of The Clutter



Before, kitchen gadgets took up all of the counter space





Forgotten buys lurk at the bottom of Emma's untidy wardrobe



Thirty pairs of shoes, and more – all housed tidily



THE RESULT

Clinic, passes no judgement when she emails me to arrange her visit, but gently suggests I tackle the laundry before she comes. She has no idea what she's dealing with here, I muse, having just finished work at 9.30pm and on my way out for a food shop. But then guilt sets in and I stick one load of washing through, stashing another in the spare room.

When Romaine rings the doorbell the next morning, she catches me mid washing-up, which is apparently not unusual for her. When she arrived early for another client, she caught her sneaking out to hide two bin bags of clutter in the car. This same client had so many clothes on her bed, she was no longer able to sleep in it!

I take Romaine on a tour of the House of Shame, telling her that I work from home, have a lively toddler and often work evenings, by way of explanation for the mess. Romaine's no fool. "We can all come up with excuses, Emma," she replies with genuine warmth. "But some people have three kids, animals, they work, have no cleaner and still have a tidy house." Point taken.

Romaine, who is crisply dressed, with an immaculate blow-dry, is the kind of woman I'll never be, but am intrigued by. Direct, confident and unflappable, she's like a bossy sister who tells you what you need to hear when few would.

THE KEY TO A TIDY LIFE

During the initial one-hour consultation, she gives me practical solutions for every one of my clutter crunch points, from the paper invasion in my office, to the toys in every room (see next page). The key is to put everything away as you go, make sure everything has a home, keep surfaces clear, and rotate clothes and toys ruthlessly, regularly pruning or packing away anything out of season or outgrown.

But when Romaine really comes alive is when she whisks out the bin bags and gets to work on my bedroom. "Do you mind me going through your stuff?" she checks. "Don't worry, I've seen it all before!" she laughs, before revealing one client left a pile of sex toys on a table for her to organise...

Decluttering is in her genes and she admits, even as a child, she was

constantly reorganising her bedroom. Seeing professional organisers were taking the States by storm, she realised there was a need for the same service in the UK, as long as us Brits could get over the embarrassment of someone rooting through our kit. I don't mind in the least... I'm just grateful.

During the three hours we spend decluttering my bedroom, several revelations emerge. I ask her, on a scale of nought to ten, how messy I am. In the manner of someone leading an AA meeting, she announces, "Not too bad, but you do have a clutter problem."

First, she wants to know why I've kept the boxes for every single one of my 30 pairs of shoes. "Get rid of them!" she insists. I hesitate. This feels like a strangely big decision. She relents and says I can keep "special" boxes like the pretty Boden one, but the rest have got to go. I fill three recycling

Romaine notices that I own lots of tracksuits – odd considering I never wear them

bags with them and am amazed to realise how many different shoes and boots I own.

The two overflowing boxes of crumpled T-shirts and jumpers at the bottom of my wardrobe are swiftly replaced with rows of neatly lined-up shoes. She admits it pains her that I don't iron my stuff before I put it away, and extols the joys of an evening ironing in front of the TV. I'm not convinced.

Next, she finds not one, but four lovely Jigsaw twinsets, which had been left forgotten under the T-shirt heap. She comments that I own an inordinate amount of tracksuits – odd considering I rarely wear them and would never dream of leaving the house in them.

Like a factory production line, she gets me sifting and sorting which tops, jumpers and jeans I want to send to charity. Her aim is to empty one chest of drawers completely – when you're downsizing, furniture has to go too. I plunge a couple of tracksuits into a "charity" bag, along with an unflattering swimsuit and anything else I haven't worn for a year. Best of all, the things I want to keep, I simply hand to Romaine, who folds them up shop-style, then places them in neat piles on my now-empty wardrobe shelves. Previously, these housed all sorts of unrelated clutter, including not one, but 15, bottles of sun lotion. I seem to be the queen of "duplicate shopping". >>

make space



THE RESULT

Simple touches such as pretty boxes make such a big difference

FINISHING OFF THE JOB

Romaine's seriously unimpressed with my laundry "system". She decides my problem is that I wash too much, and she's astounded to hear I never wear anything more than once without washing it. Isn't that normal? Apparently not.

The time flies and Romaine is scarily focused, berating me for leaving the room at one point, to return toys upstairs. The golden rule is to stay in one room at a time, she says, so you don't get distracted.

By the end of our session, I'm almost giddy with decluttering and don't want to stop. Romaine says it would take her two more visits to finish the house, but has given me a list of recommendations, so I can finish the process myself. By 10pm that night, I'm still in the spare room, filling my charity shop box with books.

Romaine vows a top-to-toe detox will help us sell more quickly, as buyers are never good at imagining their own possessions in a house and prefer a blank canvas. By the time I've finished, they won't be able to resist. And Stuart? Seeing our new tidy house, I think he's fallen a little in love with Romaine.

Visit clutterclinic.co.uk. Sessions with Romaine start at £50 per hour and cover anything from a clutter-clearing session to a house move. w&h

CLAIM BACK CONTROL

Romaine Lowery gives her tips on conquering clutter

DETOX YOUR HOME

Put aside at least a day for your decluttering session, completing one room at a time. In each room, make three piles. The first pile for things you no longer need (donate them to charity or sell on eBay), a second for items you use now and again, and a third for things you use regularly or want on display. Then find suitable storage. In the bedroom, for instance, bags can be kept in clear plastic boxes stacked at the top of the wardrobe.

STAY ORGANISED

Put things away as soon as you've finished with them, store like with like (for example, all light bulbs in one box, all batteries together) and keep things near to where you use them – cookbooks in the kitchen, DVDs by the TV.

LIMIT WHAT COMES INTO THE HOUSE Buy books from charity shops, then recycle or pass to a friend, and borrow books

from the library for children. Instead of buying new. Hire DVDs or watch films online.

DON'T OVER-FURNISH ROOMS

If you have three chests of drawers in a bedroom, you'll be tempted to fill them.

Love the home you're in. You don't need a big house for it to be gorgeous

GET TO GRIPS WITH PAPERWORK

Sort into piles on the kitchen table, then file. Household bills should be kept to one lever arch file. Don't keep magazines for more than a year and store in matching white or clear magazine files from mujl.co.uk or ryman.co.uk. Your storage should look like part of the design of the room. Use a cutlery tray to store pens in desk drawers and, if you allow

children's toys in the living room, keep them in storage that fits with the room, such as a large lidded basket from theholdingcompany.co.uk.

IN THE KITCHEN

Keep the bare minimum on work surfaces. If you don't use the blender or toasted sandwich maker daily, store in a cupboard.

IN THE HALLWAY

Put hooks on the wall for coats and have a small shoe rack (for eight pairs) by the door. See howardsstorageworld.co.uk



FROM CHAOS, GET CALM

Psychologist Dr David Mataix-Cols reveals how

DITCH THE SHOPPING HABIT We often use shopping as a reward. If you're over-spending or the clutter is out of control, find other ways to reward yourself instead.

VISUALISE VISITORS A severely cluttered house can lead to social withdrawal. One of my clients used the acronym "CHAOS" – Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome. To motivate yourself to stay clutter-free, imagine how you'd feel if an unexpected visitor dropped by.

ACCEPT THE EMOTION Some of us attach more emotional value to

possessions than others. If you've lost a loved one, decide only to keep things with real sentimental or material value. If you're clearing out the home of a late parent, wait until the most acute, painful stage of grieving is over before you tackle it. You'll be more rational about what to keep.

EMPTY THE NEST When children are due to leave home, instead of attempting to clear their rooms by yourself, have a sort out together. Have fun doing it, so you have positive associations with the space, instead of a sense of emptiness.