- House cleaning

REAL STORIES AND HEALTHY LIVING IDEAS

Life+Health

Why I RAGE CLEAN



How my compulsion to tidy reveals more about my stress and mental load than it does about my need for spotless countertops

BY GEMMA HARTLEY

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It always starts with a small thing: a candy wrapper behind a couch pillow, a pair of socks on the living room floor, the contents of a kid's backpack spilling into the hallway. Triggered, I begin to notice each small thing that is out of place, all that is dirty or neglected.

Suddenly an infinite to-do list unfurls at the back of my mind. While my family members go about their day, creating new messes as I'm dealing with the old ones, an anger is ignited inside me. *No one else notices what needs to be done. No one cares about this house except for me.* These sweeping (and largely untrue) statements stoke the fire of resentment in me until it's a raging blaze.

And then I start to rage clean.

The fridge desperately needs to be emptied; the bathroom grout must be bleached; the junk drawer needs to be organized. I move furiously from one task to the next, scrubbing surfaces with vigor. I vacuum so forcefully that my arm gets sore. When I start to tidy, any anonymous clutter in my path is destined for the donation bin. This burn-it-all-down cleaning mode usually ends with my living room pristine but my energy completely drained.

The Meaning of the Mess

Over time, I've learned that my rage cleaning is never really about the initial untidiness but is instead about the avalanche of noticing and resentment that cascades through me after that. When I'm the primary person in charge of the mental load in my home, the big picture of everything that needs to be done (and often many things that "could" or "should" be done) quickly becomes overwhelming to me. Because the mental load isn't simply doing the domestic tasks—it's clocking what needs

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to be done, making a plan for how to execute tasks, delegating work and overseeing that work to make sure it gets done. Add work deadlines and family schedules to that domestic load, and it's a recipe for a control-cleaning blowup.

The compulsion to clean also tends to ratchet up when I'm stressed or anxious about, say, a looming work deadline or a big family decision that's stuck in limbo. When certain parts of my life feel overwhelming, I'm very likely to gravitate toward cleaning or organizing to create a small sense of order and accomplishment. The modicum of control I feel when dusting a long-forgotten corner helps with the unease I experience at times of low personal agency.

While cleaning out my closet obviously doesn't get me any closer to having a work project completed, it does give me a tangible "win" that helps me feel like a capable human being. Plus, it brings me a sense of control that counters the feeling of chaos that usually disturbs me more than the mess I'm noticing. I can't solve the stress that arises from being hit with an avalanche of mental-load tasks in five minutes, but I *can* get the toilet scrubbed.

The Science of Stress Cleaning

Because cleaning tasks often involve soothing and repetitive movement (think running a vacuum back and forth or making methodical circles while washing dishes by hand), they can help quiet a noisy brain. That's why meditation teachers like Jon Kabat-Zinn suggest dishwashing as an exercise in mindfulness. A small study of students found a 27% decrease in participants' stress when they focused solely on the sensations of washing dishes by hand.

Scientists from the University of Connecticut found that stress could push people to use cleaning as a coping strategy in times of high anxiety. Study subjects were asked to prepare a speech about a piece of art and later deliver the speech in front

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of a panel of art experts (talk about stressful!). While waiting, the subjects were asked to clean the object. Those who reported feeling the most anxious spent more time cleaning the object than did those who were less stressed. These findings suggest that anxiety motivates organisms to return to a familiar state of things being predictable "in order to regain a sense of control," wrote the study authors.

Cleaning is certainly not the worst behavior to engage in when trying to find comfort amid chaotic days of high work and life stress. However, it's worth addressing the source of your being overwhelmed so your mind won't go back to spinning in circles as soon as you've scoured the grout.

How to Calm the Compulsion

I think of rage cleaning or anxiety decluttering as the response to the straw that breaks the camel's back. Removing the proverbial straw won't cut it at this stage, because you've already reached your breaking point. The accumulation of everything *before* the cleaning compulsion is triggered is the real problem.

Sometimes a good stress cleaning can clear the decks for work to get done, but only if it's used as a reset button.

The fact that women often feel more pressure than do men to keep their homes clean and have everything under control (not to mention the ways in which we're conditioned to carry the mental load) means we're often left holding that responsibility. If we don't want to buckle beneath that pressure, we need to off-load some of it (or simply avoid taking on so much of it in the first place) by getting the support of those around us—not just with the physical domestic tasks but also with the noticing of what needs to be done in the first place.

I wouldn't say that my rage-cleaning tendencies have "helped" me balance the mental load in my household, but those blow-up moments have served to indicate when the way my partner and I are handling the household responsibilities needs a reset. Over the years, and through many conversations about what real support looks like, my rage and anxiety cleaning sessions have become fewer and farther between. I now know when I need to ask for support, and my partner and my kids have learned to notice what needs to be done and take the initiative to do it!

Sometimes a good stress cleaning can clear the decks for work to get done, but only if it's used as a reset button rather than as an hours-long escape. When we're conscious of what lies beneath the surface, we can keep the counters clean and clear away our stressors with equal satisfaction. ★

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Our Book Picks

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BY SARAH VINCENT



***Jane and Dan at the End of the World* by Colleen Oakley**

Marital discord meets mortal danger in this high-stakes tongue-in-cheek romp. During their anniversary dinner, Jane shocks Dan by asking for a divorce. To make matters worse, they aren't even through their first course when ecoterrorists hold up the restaurant. But why do the terrorists seem to be following the plot of Jane's last novel? And can Jane and Dan work together to survive?



***Fun for the Whole Family* by Jennifer E. Smith**

Meet the extraordinary Endicotts, four siblings who lost touch after their chaotic childhood: Jude, a famous actress with three big secrets; Connor, an author with terrible writer's block; Roddy, an athlete risking his relationship for one final season; and Gemma, the older sister, who basically raised them. To reunite during a family trip, they must come to terms with their past and one another in this touching family drama about secrets and forgiveness.

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