

## How to Eliminate Junk Stimulus by Greater Good Berkeley

Reigning in clutter adds ease to your life.

We Americans are often overwhelmed and exhausted. Did you know that 235 million people are currently grappling with feelings of time-starvation and moderate to high levels of stress, exhaustion, or burn-out in the United States alone?

While many things factor into this collective exhaustion, I've found, in my own life, that much of it stems from the sheer amount of stimulus and the build-up of, well, stuff. Here are several ways I filter out what I've come to think of as "junk stimulus."

1) First, rid your environment of physical clutter.

- Clean out one drawer or shelf everyday religiously until everything in your home has a place—and everyone in your household knows where that place is. Commit to five minutes a day, everyday, until the job is done.
- Find a large box for donations or other "give aways," and put it somewhere accessible until you are finished with this process. Donate or recycle anything that hasn't been used for a year.\* This goes for clothes, dishes, books, furniture (yes, furniture!), games, toys, shelf-stable food and spices, the super-awesome tortilla maker you've really wanted to try out since you picked it up in the '80s, and that tent you haven't pitched for three years. Remember that your stuff is for today, not some imagined future. Be ruthless—you will thank me later every time you open a tidy, nearly empty, drawer or cupboard.

2) Now, limit the amount of stuff you let back into your house.

- Cancel all snail mail except things like hand-written thank you notes. Sign up to get your bills online. Cancel ALL catalogs and junk mail. (I like the free app PaperKarma : You take a picture of catalogs, mailers, credit card offers, phone books—and they get you off the mailing list!) You can get everything you need online or in a digital version, including books, magazines, newspapers, season information from your local theatre, information from non-profits you love, concert schedules. You may have to call them to ask them to remove you from the list; I've had to plead and beg in the past. Again, be ruthless when you ask to be removed from these lists: All that direct mail is clutter.
- Put a recycling bin right by the door that you walk through with the mail, and don't open junk mail that comes through—photograph it for PaperKarma, then rip it up and recycle it.
- Don't go into a store without a list of what you need, and don't let yourself buy anything

that isn't on the list. (This works wonders with my children, especially in places like Costco.)

3) Next, get rid of all unneeded media and audible stimulus.

- Turn the ringer off on your land line, if you've still got one and you still get junk calls (even though you are on the Do Not Call registry ). Have friends call your cell phone, and use your landline to check messages or to dial out only.
- Turn off your TV unless you intend to watch something specific. Don't expose yourself to advertising—it is junk stimulus in and of itself. Record your shows and fast forward through the ads.
- Identify sources of irritation or unwanted stimulation in your household, like whining, too-loud music or background television, . Make a concrete plan for how you will eliminate this junk stimulus over the next few weeks.
- If your home or workspace is noisy, play soothing music or put white noise on in the background—ironically, it will help filter out noise. This is a proven way to sleep better! (I like the app White Noise .)

4) Finally, prune niggling tasks, because if you feel hassled by a long task list, this too is a source of junk stimulus. So weed that puppy down with gusto until it is a realistic representation of what you actually can accomplish given your current status as a human being (and not a super computer).

- Automate as many of the routine tasks on your list as you can. Set your bills up on auto-pay. Create a standing grocery order (I use planetorganics.com, and they choose seasonal fruits and vegetables for me). Install a timed watering system for potted plants. Get an automatic pet feeder. Note: Don't automate anything that brings you joy.
- For most people, email is a to-do item that never quits. Rein it in. Which emails do you really have to read? Which must you respond to? Consider boldly deleting everything that you don't absolutely need. I love gmail's new tabs—they allow me to batch-delete emails that I don't have time to read before I get sucked in and read them anyway. And I use a "bypass the inbox" filter for a lot of emails—they just go straight to a file, where they wait for me until I have time for them. Feel free to respond to email on YOUR terms; there is no law in the universe that says that you must sacrifice your sleep, well-being, or other priorities simply so that you can get through your email.
- Prune your to-do list with this question: If it turns out that my life is a lot shorter than I hope it will be, which of the things on my list right now will I wish I hadn't wasted time on? Pay particular attention to anything you do just for prestige, praise or to feel superior to others, anything that makes you tense or anxious but doesn't contribute to your growth over the long haul, and anything that involves toxic people or situations.

How do you feel when you've pruned all this clutter? What other things do you do to eliminate junk stimulus?

\*Warning: this process will probably be derailed if you start trying to sell your stuff—that is a totally different project. Donate it to a good cause; write-off the donation if you'd like.

