

15 Can't-Miss Ways to Declutter Your Mind

I fear I am not in my perfect mind. - **King Lear**

The world of stresses and worries and errands and projects and noise that we must all endure inflicts upon us a mind full of clutter and chaos.

A mind that sometimes cannot find the calm that we so desperately seek.

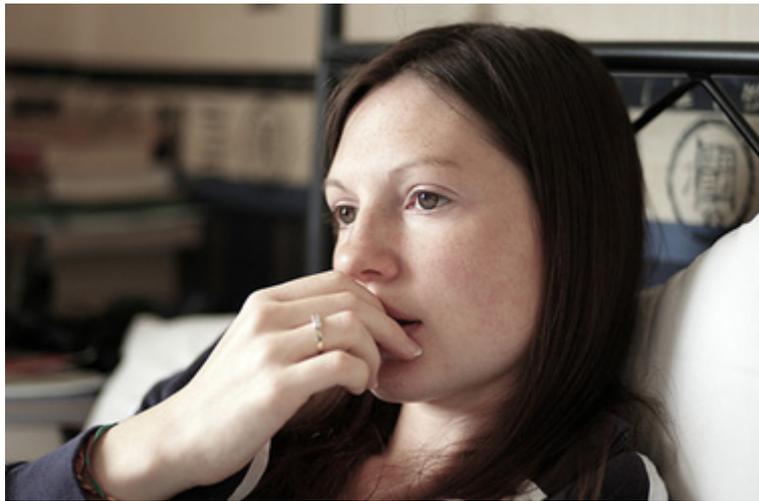


Photo by [Paul Hurs](#)

I've had a number of readers write to me, thanking me for [my articles on decluttering](#) ... but asking me, sometimes with a hint of despair, to write about decluttering your mind, not just your home or your desk.

It's a valid request — if anything needs decluttering, it's our minds, I think — but it's also a daunting task. How do you declutter a mind? It's not as if thoughts are just laying around, waiting for you to pick through them, finding the ones that should be kept and those that are ripe for the donation box. The mind isn't like an inbox, that can be sorted through and acted upon.

The brain is a complex and confusing organ, the core of us as human beings (if you feel, as I often do, that the soul is in the mind and not in the heart). The mind is often covered in the scar tissue of old hurts and traumas, and layered in so many levels of consciousness not even the best of psychoanalysts has ever sorted through it.

So how do we begin decluttering? It's actually not difficult, if you give it a little thought: simplifying shouldn't be made complex.

You can declutter your mind with simple actions, things we've discussed here before, but things that are almost guaranteed to have a positive effect. Little things that can make a big difference, especially when used in combination. Choose a few to try out, and see if they work for you.

1. Breathe. So simple, and yet so effective. Take a few deep breaths, and then for a few minutes, just focus on your breathing. Concentrate on your breathing as it comes into your body, and then as it goes out. It has a calming effect, especially if you continue to return your focus to your breath when your mind strays. It also allows other thoughts to just float away. (Note: some people might call this meditation, but that word scares some people off, so we're just going to call it breathing.)

2. Write it down. If you have a bunch of things on your mind, it helps to get them on paper and off your mind. This is one of the essential habits in [Zen To Done](#) (and GTD, of course) ... writing down your tasks and ideas. This keeps your head from being filled with everything you need to do and remember.

- 3. Identify the essential.** This one is practically a mantra here at Zen Habits. (Can you imagine it? All of us here at Zen Habits, sitting on a mat in lotus position, chanting slowly: “Identify the essential ... identify ... the essen ... tial ...”) But that’s because it’s crucial to everything I write about: if you want to simplify or declutter, the first step is identifying what is most important. In this case, identify what is most important in your life, and what’s most important for you to focus on right now. Make a short list for each of these things.
- 4. Eliminate.** Now that you’ve identified the essential, you can identify what’s *not* essential. What things in your life are not truly necessary or important to you? What are you thinking about right now that’s not on your short list? By eliminating as many of these things as possible, you can get a bunch of junk off your mind.
- 5. Journal.** Similar to “write it down” above, but with a little more depth. Journaling (whether it’s in a paper journal or online doesn’t matter) helps you explore different areas of your life that you don’t think about much. And this exploration might allow you to find some things on your mind that you didn’t realize were there, some things that can be eliminated or pursued. And just getting these thoughts into some kind of a journal is a way of getting them out of your mind as well.
- 6. Rethink your sleep.** Sometimes we aren’t getting enough sleep, or our sleeping patterns aren’t ideal. I’m not saying that you should change your sleeping patterns, but sometimes it can do wonders. And if you don’t give it some thought, you won’t realize how much your sleep (or lack thereof) is affecting you.
- 7. Take a walk.** Getting outside and doing some kind of physical activity is a great way to get stuff off your mind. I like to run or do yardwork, but whatever you do doesn’t matter. Spending some physical energy clears the mind.
- 8. Watch less TV.** For me, television doesn’t relax me, although it might seem that vegging in front of the TV is good for relaxation. TV fills your head with noise, without the redeeming qualities of music or reading or good conversation. Watch less TV, and you’ll notice your mind begin to quieten.
- 9. Get in touch with nature.** Similar to “take a walk” above, but without the bustle of activity. I like to go somewhere with water ... the ocean, a river, a lake, even just a man-made fountain if nothing else is available. Or watching rain does the trick for me too. Somehow this can be calming and focusing at the same time.
- 10. Do less.** Take your to-do list and cross off half the things on it. Just pick a few things to get done today, and focus on those. Let the rest go away. If you do less, you’ll have less on your mind.
- 11. Go slower.** Seems kinda weird, I know, but walking and talking and working and driving slower can make a very big difference. It’s kind of like you’re saying, “I’m not willing to rush through life, no matter what artificial time demands others are putting on me. I want to take it at my pace.” And as a result, your mind is less harried as well.
- 12. Let go.** Worrying about something? Angry about somebody? Frustrated? Harboring a grudge? While these are all natural emotions and thoughts, none of them are really necessary. See if you can let go of them. More difficult than it sounds, I know, but it’s worth the effort.
- 13. Declutter your surroundings.** I’ve mentioned this before, but [decluttering my desk](#) or [my home](#) have a way of calming me. Having a lot of stuff around you is just visual clutter — it occupies part of your mind, even if you don’t realize it.
- 14. Single-task.** Multi-tasking, for the most part, is a good way to fill your mind with a lot of activity without a lot of productivity or happiness as a result. Instead, try to [single-task](#) — just focus on one task at a time. Clear away everything else, until you’re done with that task. Then focus on the next task, and so on.
- 15. Get a load off.** Sometimes it can make a huge difference to unload our troubles on another human being. If you have a significant other or a best friend or a close family member or coworker ... unload your thoughts on them. And listen to them, to return the favor. Sure, it’s just talk ... but it can make a huge difference to your mental sanity.

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