

The Atlantic

The Economics of Tidying Up

Months after publication, Japanese home-organization guru Marie Kondo's book about de-cluttering has reached peak interest. Behavioral science may explain the appeal.



Natsuno Ichigo / Courtesy Penguin Random House

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MAY 13, 2015 | BUSINESS

“In this book, I have summed up how to put your space in order in a way that will change your life forever.”

This is the ambitious first sentence of Marie Kondo's best-selling manifesto, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Direct and devoid of clutter, this

sentence rings true to her philosophy. Unlike most self-help books, there are no extraneous words, no pandering—the lack of “wink wink” gesturing reads as an appealing, authentic statement.

Though [Kondo's book](#) was published in English in October of last year, a search on Google Trends still puts [interest in her near an all-time high](#). (A search for her name in Japanese [produces a similar result](#), though her book was [originally published in 2010](#).) If Google searches are any indication, interest in [tidying is also at an all-time high](#), and some of this interest must be attributed to the rise in Kondo's method—which is to hold onto only items that “bring joy.” Following the purge, Kondo provides clear directions for how to store all your belongings in a way that makes them easily accessible and hard to mess up. A [good number of journalists](#) swear by her methods, and [effusive referrals](#) of “[She changed my life](#)” [abound](#). During Kondo's AMA on Reddit, one superfan asked her how to teach her method [to children under 10](#).

In the introduction of her book (and several times throughout), Kondo quantifies the power of her advice—she estimates that she's helped her clients (a group that doesn't include her countless readers) dispose of no fewer than a million items. This number is astonishing, but a key element of Kondo's argument is that hardly anyone is aware of how many items he or she owns. Most wouldn't even notice if some of those items are gone, she argues, but the problem is that throwing things out and putting belongings in the right place requires jumping through some psychological hoops.

Why do people have so much trouble throwing things out? Turns out, the answer lies in people's heads. Running through Kondo's best advice and most of her book is the argument about the anxiety-induced limits of human decision-making. Seeing as [an entire branch of economics](#) studies exactly that, it's no wonder that economists have a particular interest in her advice.

Financial Times columnist [Tim Harford](#) agrees that Kondo's methods are not only intuitive, but compelling to economists. Harford says that the clutter that piles up in apartments is a product of people's cognitive blunders.

In my reading and practice of the eponymous "KonMari Method," I found that Kondo does implicitly touch on some important behavioral economics concepts and cognitive biases that prevent us from being tidy. She takes strong stances against these irrational mental habits that govern us. In other words, I think the reason Kondo-mania continues is because she has actually hit upon some good solutions to deal with these pervasive mental fallacies.

For example, Kondo aptly attacks what's called the [sunk-cost fallacy](#). The term "sunk cost" applies to payments (of time or money) that have already occurred and thus can't be recovered. The money's spent, an investment has been made, and it makes people irrational because it seems a waste to not use something that one has poured resources into. The irrationality of this thinking is that people ignore whether an item they own is still useful to them, and whether they'll actually use or resell it. In my tidying efforts, I find that the sunk-cost fallacy hits harder for new items, because unused items retain more value in resale. Kondo's advice is to get rid of them, and her faith in keeping only the things that "bring us joy" addresses the economic concept of opportunity cost: The mental and physical toll of keeping an unused item around is greater than throwing it out.

Harford, the *FT* columnist, found that the KonMari Method addressed other economic concepts, such as the status-quo bias and diminishing returns. He writes: "Status quo bias means that most of your stuff stays because you can't think of a good reason to get rid of it. Kondo turns things around. For her, the status quo is that every item you own will be thrown away unless you can think of a compelling reason why it should stay." I found that this new status quo was particularly helpful in discarding paper, namely because I couldn't

find a compelling reason to hang onto all my credit card statements. They came in the mail, and I kept them just because *that's what I always did*.

Kondo's method sets a new status quo: throw them out. My boyfriend and I took this one step further, cancelling our paper statements for credit cards and utilities.

I found it a bit harder to put Kondo's wariness of diminishing returns—the idea that the more you have of something, the less valuable each successive item is—into practice. Perhaps it was because this most applies to the items I have the hardest time throwing out: clothes. Kondo's method of putting all of whatever-item-is-being-evaluated on the floor not only overwhelmed me, but it also made me anxious. It reminded me that the reasons I have so much clothing are that firstly I want to be prepared in case I don't have time for laundry in a given week, and secondly that [the neurological pleasure of cheap fashion is very scary and real](#). Because of my laundry concern, the idea of having three pairs of identical black work pants seems pragmatic to me. (There's another philosophy of simplicity, that of [Matilda Kahl](#), that recommends wearing the same thing to work every day.) I could see the diminishing returns of having 20 T-shirts, so I discarded the ones that don't fit.

Another important point that Kondo protects us from is [the folly of prediction](#): People systematically make terrible guesses about the future. So instead, people should focus on the present, and in tidying, this manifests in the form of using present-day valuations of all of one's belongings. People are wrong when they think that pair of jeans will ever fit again, Kondo is arguing. They're also wrong when they think they'll read that book again. These optimistic predictions keep people from getting rid of things they don't need.

Another way of looking at this fallacy is as a form of loss aversion—that humans psychologically hate losing things. Not only do people hate the idea

of losing something that might be need someday, but things seem valuable just because they belong to us. In [one famous study](#), economists Daniel Kahneman, Jack Knetsch, and Richard Thaler demonstrated with a coffee mug that [people ascribe much higher value to things they own](#), simply because they owned them. This means that people might do well to take the KonMari method further, to think hard before acquiring any new belongings. (And indeed, Kondo [has advice on how to shop](#) as well.)

At first I wasn't able to stray too far from maintaining the number of items I originally owned—I initially stuck to my old notions of the status quo (behavioral economists would call that [anchoring](#)). But Kondo does a convincing job of arguing how thrilling it is to discard items one doesn't like, and it certainly helped me stop counting altogether.

Aside from economics, I also found two less-touted parts of the KonMari method very important in this process of purging. The first is keeping family away when tidying, as sentiment runs high when a family member is around. The other is that the KonMari method should be executed in complete silence. No music, no background movie or TV show. This makes the KonMari method both intense and a bit exhausting, but I have never used my intellect so hard to fight myself in cleaning up my apartment—I've also never been as successful at it.

My biggest revelation came when I was cleaning my bookshelves: 20 percent of the books didn't even belong to me. I realized that Kondo is right—it's actually rare for anyone to notice that something is gone. Cherished books belonging to old roommates, college friends, my father, even an old boss—their owners never got in touch with me, even as we're more connected than ever.

A rational place to live doesn't sound very sexy, but a tidy place to live is indeed much more comfortable. And now tidying carries a point of pride

beyond having a clean apartment: knowing that we're outsmarting our cognitive biases.

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