

Scientists find clever way to help you de-clutter your home

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If your attic is full of stuff you no longer use but can't bear to give away, a new study may offer you a simple solution.

Researchers found that people were more willing to give away unneeded goods that still had sentimental value if they were encouraged to take a photo of these items first, or find another way to preserve the memories.

Such a strategy could help parents part with old baby clothes they no longer need or help a former athlete give up a favorite basketball or hockey stick.

"What people really don't want to give up is the memories associated with the item," said Rebecca Reczek, co-author of the study and associate professor of marketing at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"We found that people are more willing to give up these possessions if we offer them a way to keep the memory and the identity associated with that memory."

Reczek conducted the study with Karen Winterich, associate professor of marketing at Pennsylvania State University, and Julie Irwin, professor of business at the University of Texas at Austin.

The results were just published online in the *Journal of Marketing*.

"The project got started when I realized I was keeping an old pair of basketball shorts just because they reminded me of beating a major rival basketball team in junior high," Winterich said.

"I didn't want the shorts - I wanted the memory of winning that game and that's what I thought of when I saw the shorts. A picture can easily mark that memory for me and I can donate it so someone else can use it, which is even better."

Inspired by this story, the researchers conducted a field study involving

797 students at Penn State who lived in six residence halls on campus. At the end of a fall semester, the researchers advertised a donation drive before the students left for the holidays. But there was a catch: There were actually two different advertising campaigns that varied by residence halls.

In the memory preservation campaign, signs in the residence hall bathrooms stated, "Don't Pack up Your Sentimental Clutter...Just Keep a Photo of It, Then Donate." In the control campaign, fliers told students, "Don't Pack Up Your Sentimental Clutter, Just Collect the Items, Then Donate." Similar numbers of students were exposed to both campaigns.

After finals week, research associates who were unaware of what the study was about emptied donation bins in each residence hall, counting the items donated.

The researchers found 613 items were donated in the halls that hosted the "memory preservation" campaign, versus only 533 in the control campaign.

Reczek said the results show it may be relatively easy to break our old habits of clinging to some of our possessions with sentimental value.

"It is not terribly surprising that we can keep the same memories alive just by taking a photo of these possessions, but it is not a natural behavior. It is something we have to train ourselves to do," she said.

In other related experiments, the researchers found that it wasn't just the memories associated with these possessions that were keeping people from donating - it was the identities linked to those memories.

For example, older parents may still feel connected to their identity as new mothers and fathers and not want to part with their infant clothes.

In one study, some people who were donating goods at a local thrift shop in State College, Pennsylvania, were given instant photos of the items they were donating, while others were not. They were then asked about whether they would feel a sense of identity loss from giving away the item.

Results showed that those who received the photos reported less identity loss than those who did not.

"These memories connected to possessions are a carrier for identity. It is this reluctance to give up a piece of our identity that is driving our reluctance to donate," Reczek said.

This memory preservation strategy won't work for items that don't have sentimental value, she said. It also won't work for items you want to sell instead of donate. She also suspects there may be a limit to what some people are willing to give away.

"It may not work for something that has a lot of sentimental value, like a wedding dress," Reczek said.

The bottom line is that everyone benefits by using this [memory](#) preservation strategy to de-clutter a home, Winterich said.

"We hope that it will not only make it easier for people to clear out clutter, but it will also help spur the donation process, benefiting nonprofits and the recipients that they serve," she said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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