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Can Folding Your Socks Make You Happier?

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It's a preposterous premise, isn't it, that folding your socks might make you happier? Yet that's exactly what Marie Kondo asserts in her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. As I write this article during the second week of February (2015), her book is No. 1 on *The New York Times Best Seller List*, where it's been perched for the past 13 weeks, in the "Advice and How-to" category. Her book is a best-seller in Europe, too. Moreover, Kondo has become a celebrity in Japan, where she lives, and where a movie has been made about her. She appears frequently on TV, and also delivers lectures.

What? You've never heard of her?

Allow me to introduce you: Kondo is a 30-year-old "cleaning consultant," aka decluttering expert, whose book has sold more than 2 million copies. That nudges her into the top echelon of self-help authors. *The New York Times* has recently published two favorable articles about her, which is how I learned of her.

"How could a decluttering expert generate so much interest?" I wondered as I headed to my local library to pick up a copy of her book, after waiting my turn for numerous weeks. I never imagined that I might adopt some of her tenets and they might have a positive impact on my life.

WHAT'S UNUSUAL ABOUT KONDO AND HER TECHNIQUES?

There are **10** things that set Kondo apart.

The **first** is that she started early. As a precocious 5-year-old, she was fanatical about tidying her room, her siblings', and even friends' and relatives' spaces. At school, when the other children went outside to play during recess, Kondo went inside to straighten. "When I found something not in use, I would pounce on it vengefully and throw it in the rubbish," she reveals in her popular book.

Yet something was wrong. No matter how hard she worked to discard items, Kondo was unable to banish the mess around her. The clutter kept reappearing, like a disease that couldn't be eradicated. Moreover, her prodigious efforts made her feel irritable. This situation highlights the

second way Kondo is different from most other organizational consultants: She quickly discovered that tossing out miscellaneous items didn't lead to a simpler life.

Kondo's frustration prompted her to make a major discovery, which is the **third** parameter that differentiates her from most—the importance of cherishing what you love. This is how she describes her experience:

One day after school, I opened the door to my room to begin cleaning as usual. At the sight of that untidy space, I finally lost it: "I don't want to tidy anymore!" I cried ... I had spent three years tidying and discarding things, yet my room still felt cluttered. Would someone please tell me why my room isn't tidy when I work so hard at it. ... At that moment I heard a voice.

"Look more closely at what is there."

With that thought still in my head, I fell asleep.

If I had been a little smarter, I would have realized that focusing solely on throwing things away can only bring unhappiness. Why? Because we should be choosing what we want to keep, not what we want to get rid of. ...

I had been so focused on what to discard, on attacking the unwanted obstacles around me, that I had forgotten to cherish the things that I loved, the things I wanted to keep.

As a result of this experience, Kondo developed the following criteria for deciding what to keep and what to discard: "**Does it spark joy?**"

DOES IT SPARK JOY?

Asking whether each possession sparks joy is the **fourth**—and most important—aspect that makes Kondo unique. This provides the foundation for her whole philosophy.

"Does it spark joy? If it does, keep it," she advises. "If not, dispose of it. This is not only the simplest but also the most accurate yardstick by which to judge."



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Selecting and discarding your possessions is a continuous process of making decisions based on your own values.

How will you know if a possession sparks joy or not? Touch it, recommends Kondo, which is the **fifth** way she's different from other organizers. "Take each item in your hand and ask: 'Does this spark joy?'" Hearts and bodies don't lie, she promises.

POSITIVE EFFECTS

The positive effects associated with her method are the **sixth** way Kondo differentiates herself from others. She believes that choosing what sparks joy—and discarding the rest—allows you to have greater clarity about your life.

"When I put my house in order, I discovered what I really wanted to do," is something Kondo says she frequently hears from her clients. "For the majority, the experience of tidying causes them to become passionately involved in their work," she reports. They become more ardent about their interests, home and family life, too. "Daily life becomes more exciting."

Further, Kondo argues that the magical effect of tidying is related to becoming more confident about your decision-making capacity. "Selecting and discarding your possessions is a continuous process of making decisions based on your own values," she points out. The process of evaluating your possessions hones decision-making skills overall and vastly improves self-confidence, she proclaims. "By repeating this process hundreds and thousands of times, you naturally improve your decision-making skills. People who lack confidence in their judgment lack confidence in themselves," she observes. "I, too once lacked confidence," she reveals. "What saved me was tidying."

Kondo emphasizes that "tidying" impacts people's bodies as well as their minds. Many clients report that they lost weight or firmed up their tummies. The main reason "tidying" has this effect, she theorizes, is that people feel more contented and believe they have everything they need. According to her, when people part with excess clothes, their bodies tend to firm up; when they discard books and documents, their minds tend to become clearer; when they select clothes they truly love, they appear to feel they have everything they need; and when they eliminate the number of cosmetics they own, their skin seems to become smoother.

Hurts from the past and fears about the future can also be eliminated by discarding what doesn't spark joy, maintains Kondo. "Isn't it a waste to squander

the opportunity to develop this capacity by saving things?" she asks.

THE KONMARI METHOD

The decluttering regime that Kondo recommends is the **seventh** way she's different from most organizational experts, who typically suggest tackling one physical area at a time. Instead, Kondo recommends addressing one *category* at a time; for example, shirts. She advises collecting *all* shirts, ideally placing them on the floor, so you can pick up each one and touch it.

"Does this shirt spark joy?" she suggests you ask out loud.

If your answer is no, discard it immediately, no matter whether you paid a fortune for it or your beloved gave it to you.

When all items in a specific category have been addressed, go on to another category; say, for instance, pants. Moreover, Kondo recommends using the following order to address *all* of your possessions: (1) clothing; (2) books; (3) papers; (4) miscellaneous items; and (5) things with sentimental value.

When it comes to books, Kondo is indeed a minimalist: She suggests keeping no more than 30. "I recognize necessary information much more easily," she says, when describing how discarding books in her personal collection has affected her. "For books, timing is everything," she adds. "The moment you first encounter a particular book is the right time to read it. To avoid missing that moment, I recommend that you keep your collection small."

Where paper is concerned, Kondo is even more stringent. She notes that, "there are several spots within the house where papers tend to pile up like snowdrifts."

"Does paper spark joy?" she asks. Of course not.

"My basic principle for sorting papers is to throw them *all* away," Kondo declares. "My clients are stunned when I say this, *but there is nothing more annoying than papers. After all, they will never inspire joy, no matter how carefully you keep them.* For this reason, I recommend you dispose of anything that does not fall into one of three categories: *currently in use, needed for a limited period of time, or must be kept indefinitely.*"

Kondo is equally vociferous regarding there not being a need for additional storage space, which is the **eighth** way she's different from most organizational consultants. "The amount of storage space [you currently have] is actually just right. . . . I have yet to see a house that lacked sufficient storage. . . . Once you learn to choose your belongings properly, you will be left only with the amount that fits perfectly in the space you currently own."

The **ninth** difference between Kondo and most other consultants is her adherence to making "tidying a special event."

"Don't do it every day," she preaches. "Why?" you might ask.

Kondo believes that "tidying" should be done only *once*. That's not to say you won't have dishes to do each night and also routine cleaning to tackle; however, she believes that "the work of 'tidying' should be completed *once and for all* within a single period of time." In that vein, she announces that the purpose of her book is "to inspire you to tackle the 'special event of putting your house in order *as soon as possible*,' so you can begin enjoying the numerous benefits of surrounding yourself with possessions that spark joy."

MAKE DECLUTTERING A SPIRITUAL PROCESS

Finally, spirituality is the **10th** distinguishing characteristic of Kondo's approach. Her thinking is influenced by her five-year term as an attendant in a Shinto shrine,¹ a sacred space where spirits are said to reside. As such, she's an adherent of anthropomorphism,² a 40,000-year-old tradition of attributing human characteristics and emotions to other than human beings.

Hence Kondo recommends the ritual of greeting your house out loud when you return. "Hello, I'm home," she suggests you say. "Thank you for giving me shelter."

"If you do this repeatedly, you will start to feel your house respond when you come home," she claims. "You will sense its pleasure passing through like a gentle breeze."

Kondo also recommends thanking your possessions for their service to you before you discard them.

In the same vein, Kondo recommends emptying your purse and pockets every night. "The important thing is to create an environment where your bag can have a rest by designating a specific place to store everything you usually carry inside it," she says.

CONCLUSION

I now return to the question posed in this article's title: "Can folding your socks make you happier?" Kondo claims it will.

"The time your socks spend in your drawer is their only chance to rest," she says. "If they are folded over, balled up, or tied, they are always in a state of tension, their fabric stretched and their elastic pulled."

Instead, "lay the toes one on top of the other and fold the stockings lengthwise . . . Then fold it in thirds, making sure that the toes are inside, not outside, and that the waistband protrudes slightly at the top. If the waistband is on the outside when you finish, you've done it right . . . It makes your stockings much happier." By extension, happier socks make a happier you.

Although I can't venture an opinion about whether my socks would be happier if they were laid flat, I can tell you that *many of the approaches Kondo recommends have made me happier*.

Yes, I've adopted the habit of emptying my purse as soon as I walk through the door each night because *it makes me feel more relaxed*. It's as if I'm off duty. I've also been asking myself one by one if my possessions spark joy. I've discovered that many of them are laced with remorse and disappointment, especially about my marriage ending 12 years ago. It's been a shock.

When I've realized that the items don't spark joy—or anything resembling it—I've gifted them to others and also tossed things in the dumpster, such as plaques and medals I thought I was so proud of.

Most important, asking myself if my possessions spark joy has prompted me to believe that my life should be joyful. That's the biggest win of all. ●

Kondo believes that "tidying" should be done only once.

ENDNOTES

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinto_shrine.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropomorphism>.