

The Messie Syndrome

Who or what is a "messie"?

The word "messie" comes from "mess". Messies accumulate piles of papers and other objects in their homes, so that the space becomes nearly uninhabitable. This behaviour resembles addiction, and those affected often realize they are behaving irrationally. Objects are kept because they might come in handy some time, or because they are associated with memories which make it impossible to throw them away. Messies are often unable to allow visitors into their homes and as a result become increasingly isolated. Many messies hold on to the illusion of sorting through their piles and creating a well-organized archive.

What causes the Messie Syndrome?

One cause is the ever-increasing range of products available to consumers. In addition, the internet has intensified the flow of information. Advertising and marketing associate objects with emotions. The flood of goods and information forces consumers to constantly make choices. In this situation, messies find themselves overwhelmed.

Who runs the risk of becoming a messie?

The media response, the flood of self-help books on the topic, and the proliferation of self-help groups and cleaning services all confirm just how widespread the messie phenomenon is. Messies are found in all social classes and age groups. A large proportion of messies tend to be well-educated: wide-ranging interest and an affinity for archives may exacerbate the problem.

How was the phenomenon discovered?

The American author Sandra Felton, herself a messie, drew worldwide attention to the phenomenon with her self-help books. All her books were bestsellers, reflecting just how widespread the phenomenon is. In 1981 Felton coined the term "messie" and founded the first self-help group (www.messies.com). Today there are many such groups in a variety of countries.

How many messies are there?

Felton estimates that there are around 33 million messies in the USA, which would represent 12 percent of the population. In Germany the estimate is 1.8 million or roughly 2 percent of the population. However, these figures are only rough estimates. It is difficult to collect more precise figures, because most messies do not admit to being sufferers. What can be observed, however, is the growing number of self-help groups. In the city of Zurich alone there are four groups. In Germany there are over 200 regional groups.

Recommended reading

The Messies Manual, Messie No More, Living Organized, Smart Organizing, Organizing Your Home and Family, When You Live With A Messie. Organizing for Life: declutter your mind to declutter your world. All books by author Sandra Felton.