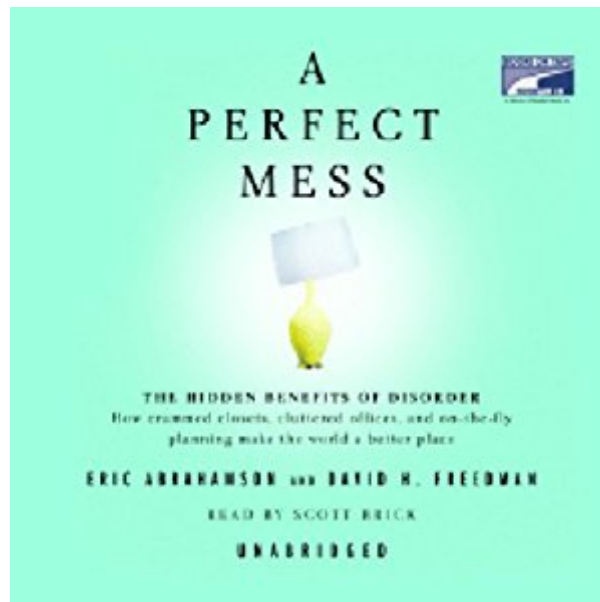


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# A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits Of Disorder



## Synopsis

Ever since Einstein's study of Brownian Motion, scientists have understood that a little disorder can actually make systems more effective. But most people still shun disorder-or suffer guilt over the mess they can't avoid. No longer!With a spectacular array of true stories and case studies of the hidden benefits of mess,A Perfect Mess overturns the accepted wisdom that tight schedules, organization, neatness, and consistency are the keys to success. Drawing on examples from business, parenting, cooking, the war on terrorism, retail, and even the meteoric career of Arnold Schwarzenegger, coauthors Abrahamson and Freedman demonstrate that moderately messy systems use resources more efficiently, yield better solutions, and are harder to break than neat ones.Applying this idea on scales both large (government, society) and small (desktops, garages), A Perfect Mess uncovers all the ways messiness can trump neatness, and will help you assess the right amount of disorder for any system. Whether it's your company's management plan or your hallway closet that bedevils you, this book will show you why to say yes to mess. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Over the last several years, I've worked very hard to become more and more organized with my stuff. I used to have a very difficult time finding things that I needed when I needed them and I also had some degree of difficulty effectively managing my time. Thankfully, over the last few years, I've really managed to conquer both of these. I feel incredibly productive on an average day now and I

rarely have trouble finding the things that I need. Yet with all this organization, I find that there are simply some things where organization gets in the way. The best example I can think of is brainstorming. When I go to the library, I find lots of books and articles worth reading. I often photocopy interesting passages there. At home, I often jot down notes from things that I observe as well as tearing articles out of magazines as I read them. This ends up being something of a pile of ideas. And what I've found is that this pile of ideas is much more effective if it's chaotic. If I try to order it, I get fewer ideas out of that pile. On the other hand, if I just let it be, tossing new stuff on there in a haphazard fashion, it starts to click. Then I just set aside some time each week for brainstorming, where I grab articles from that pile at random, read what I've highlighted, flip through personal finance books, and so on. This chaos generates ideas - things that would not have normally associated themselves together sometimes become linked because of this mess. Frankly, sometimes it's better to have disorder. And that's the idea behind *A Perfect Mess* by Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman.

I have a feeling reviewers of this book will be self-selected. You're drawn to *A Perfect Mess* if you're living in clutter now and are tired of being told to "Just get organized." Judging by this book's rank, that's a lot of us. I can remember having the messiest desk in my grade school class and then the messiest office in my building when I was a college professor. My home office is cluttered. But when I try to get organized, I just end up losing things. Besides, I love reading books that question our basic, taken-for-granted assumptions. The best parts of the book are those that call attention to the cultural aspects of messiness. Countries have different definitions of order. The Japanese (possibly because they live in small spaces) tend to take a high level of neatness for granted. Parking garages won't accept motorcycles because they don't fit the definition of cars, according to the authors. Secondly, the authors spell out the astronomically high value Americans place on organization. Professional organizers flourish. We spend millions on closet organization. Many people (and even more organizations) associate messiness with incompetence. The authors carried out their own informal interviews, but they could have cited research. About 20 years ago a professor at Arizona State University, Mary Jo Bitner, conducted experiments where she showed airline passengers photos of a travel agent's desk. One group got the "messy" version and others got the "neat" version. Passengers were prepared to blame the "messy" agent for all sorts of errors, even those beyond the agent's control. Around the same time, I recall reading a newspaper article addressing the reactions of freshmen at UC Berkeley to their "unkempt" professors.

In their book *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder* authors Eric Abrahamson (a professor of management at Columbia Business School) and David H. Freedman (a contributing editor at Inc. magazine) question the widespread assumption that organization and neatness are inherently better than disorder and clutter. They argue that in fact some degree of messiness is very often to be preferred to strict order--because the cost of maintaining order can be higher than the benefits accrued from it, for example, because disorder can be the mother of invention, because messy systems can be more efficient and robust than perfectly neat ones. In making their case Abrahamson and Freedman do not confine themselves to domestic mess--the topic that leapt to my mind when I first saw the book's title. Clutter is just one of twelve types into which they categorize messiness. Others include "time sprawl," as when tasks are left unprioritized, and "convolution," which occurs when organizational schemes are illogical. Accordingly, the authors discuss not only messy homes and offices but messy leadership and messy organizations, pathological messiness and artistic messiness. The topics covered in *A Perfect Mess* are far reaching--from the suspect claims of professional organizers (for example, that the average person wastes an hour a day looking for things) to Arnold Schwarzenegger's "improvisational lifestyle" (incredibly enough, he doesn't keep a schedule, or didn't, at least, when he was first running for governor), from the Noguchi filing system to natural landscaping to cell phone noise and compulsive hoarding. Throughout, the authors profile people and businesses and systems that have profited from the introduction of some degree of some type of messiness."

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