

Exclusive interview

Three weeks into the lockdown, the novelty's worn off, and most of us are discovering that working from home is no picnic. Marie Kondo, the tidying expert so famous that her surname has become a verb, tells Kate Bussmann how to make it work



Keep calm

and

Kondo on

Portrait by Keith Ng



Marie Kondo is right on time, of course. It's 7.30pm, but lunchtime in LA where the Japanese tidying expert now lives, and when she pops up on my laptop screen, she is startlingly, preternaturally beautiful. Perfectly composed and self-contained, she seems otherworldly, not least in comparison to the civilians who share the screen: me in one corner, her translator (Marie Iida, familiar to anyone who watched smash-hit 2019 Netflix series *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*) in another. Kondo has evidently already trained her immaculately manicured hands not to touch her face, allowing them to flutter only occasionally before the camera to emphasise a point or show me the rose-gold MacBook Air and single notebook on her almost empty desk.

This is my first interview since the start of the coronavirus pandemic: Kondo was the one who insisted on video rather than face-to-face, presciently so; when the interview was first arranged, we weren't nearly as far down the path to panic and no one was contemplating a full lockdown.

But arguably, Kondo was built for this kind of crisis. Not for her family – husband,

Takumi, and two daughters, aged three and four – a descent into hoarding and chaotic self-isolation. Her mission, ever since she discovered a talent for organising aged just five, has been about creating calm through tidiness, keeping only those things that 'spark joy', as her catchphrase goes.

As anyone who even flirted with the KonMari Method outlined in her first book, 2011's 10-million-selling *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, can attest, purging your possessions and carefully curating what's left really does make you feel happier, lighter and calmer. And now, more than ever, she's an evangelist for its powers.

'There is so much anxiety in the world right now, and I do feel like there's a need for self-reflection, to ponder that question of how do you want to live your life,' she says through her translator, her soft, high voice soothingly musical. 'One solution is to tidy your home,

'Clearing a space that allows for concentration is more important than ever'



'You shouldn't be looking for things to throw away, you should be looking for the things you want to keep'

because that process is discovering what's most important to you. It allows you to control the environment you are able to control, so it does offer a solution in that sense.

'It's a process of clarifying what's going on inside you as well, and the more you are in touch with that, the calmer your viewpoint of the world. Even if you feel society is mired in anxiety and restlessness, this makes you see what's in front of you, and remember the things and people you do have, to foster a feeling of gratitude for them. That has a calming effect on your heart.'

Somewhat ironically, the book we're here to talk about today is about a place few of us are able to be right now: our workplaces. *Joy at Work* is the fourth spin-off of her original bestseller (so her fifth book in English, but her ninth in Japanese), following, most recently, one for teens: *The Life-Changing Manga of Tidying Up*.

This book, co-written with professor of management Scott Sonenshein, covers how to organise your workspace and also tackles digital decluttering – how to tidy your smartphone, computer, even your calendar, of which more later. But while most are unable to work in our offices, many are still working from home, where clearing a space – physically and psychologically – that allows for concentration if you're all cramped together 24/7 is more important than ever.

While she's mostly associated with tidying homes, from the off she was also tidying workspaces – meeting clients at their offices hours before the work day began to help them sort through mountains of paper (early mornings, she says, are best for tidying offices). She bluntly demolishes the kind of theories that might get in the way of a clear-out: such as that mess somehow equals creativity, and neatness is boring.

Much of what she advises in the book – which, of course, was written long before the current crisis – can equally apply to a home office. She has three hard rules about desk storage, for instance. Rule 1: designate a place for each item and store by category. Rule 2: use boxes and store things upright – this will help maximise space. Rule 3: don't store anything on top of your desk. 'Your desktop is a work surface, not a storage cupboard,' she writes. 'The only things on your desk should be whatever you need right now for the project you are working on.'

On this last one, she's a little flexible: she allows you to keep pens in a stand on your desk rather than in a drawer, and you're also allowed an ornament or a potted plant. When we speak, she has a bunch of pink flowers in a vase; Takumi has a wooden 'zen egg' on his desk: 'It has a calming effect, when you're pondering something,' she says.

There's a daily ritual for the post-corona

HOW TO KONMARI WHEN YOU HAVE CHILDREN, BY MARIE KONDO

Before our first daughter was born, I envisioned my ideal lifestyle like this: I would awake refreshed in the morning, get dressed, and have breakfast ready before the children woke up. I would complete my work for the day so quickly and efficiently that there would be plenty of time left to play with the children. In the evening, I would make dinner, pouring into it all my love and affection, and we would then sit down to enjoy it together as a family. At bedtime, I would do some yoga and relax before falling asleep, pleasantly tired. And of course, my house would always be tidy!

That was my ideal, but life is not that easy. Once I gave birth, I had no time and no emotional space. My expectations and aspirations dropped to the level of being satisfied if I was able to brush my teeth before I went to bed and being relieved just to know that my children were alive. Babies wake up often and early, so I never got enough sleep. I was always tired, my ability to concentrate dropped markedly, and I couldn't get my work or the chores done on time. I tried to keep our home neat and tidy, but the kids would dump a bag of salt all over the floor or open up the drawers and mess up my writing tools, which were neatly organised into compartments. No matter how much I tidied, the house quickly reverted to clutter.

Once, after I taught my daughters how to fold clothes, they pulled out everything that I had put neatly away in the drawers, "folded" them all over again, and put them back. It looked perfect to them but of course not to me! I'm sure they just wanted to try folding by themselves, but I couldn't see any humour in it at the time. I scolded them harshly, only to mentally kick myself later for my impatience. This situation didn't spark even a 'j', let alone 'joy'. Things calmed down only once they started school.

Raising toddlers can be really hard, but it taught me a valuable lesson: don't aim to keep things perfectly tidy when your children are little. At the same time, however, I did make a point of at least keeping some of my own personal space tidy, such as making sure that the drawers of the desk in my office were neat or the way that I hung the clothes in my closet sparked joy. With children, we have a lot less control over many aspects of daily life. For this very reason, it's important to make the spaces over which we do have control spark joy. Creating a space, even just one, that sparks joy for us each time we're in it really can change how we feel.

All extracts are from *Joy at Work*



Kondo with her two young daughters

germ-phobe too, which she used to do when she worked in an office: when you arrive each morning, wipe the top of your desk, your computer, mouse, keyboard and phone, and on Mondays, do a deeper clean – the legs of your chair, the cables under the desk. 'It sounds like a lot of work, but altogether it took less than a minute,' she writes. 'Yet it made my desk area look so neat and tidy, it seemed like a world apart. The atmosphere lightened, and it was easier to get down to work. While my hands were busy cleaning, I could empty my mind and make this part of my day into a little meditation, a ritual that allowed me to switch into working mode.'

There's a degree of anxiety in letting Marie Kondo visit your home, even without her physically there, so in the hours before our scheduled call, I find myself trying to tidy up, but it's a futile gesture. A few months earlier, I would have been proudly showing off my neatly labelled boxes on the shelves, because I am a Konvert, albeit a lapsed one. I've sorted beauty products, clothes and electrical cables according to the world-famous KonMari Method: dump everything into an enormous pile, sort by category and only keep what truly sparks joy. As I sheepishly point to the shelves behind me and start to explain how I once 'Kondo'd' them, I catch a glimpse of the look on her face: the shutters have come down, stress momentarily flashing across it.

'That's great to hear,' she says, when I tell her that her new book arrived just at the right time, but even via the translator I can hear it's an automatic response. What must it be like to be Kondo: instantly recognisable, continually accosted by fans eager to show her pictures of their Kondo'd cupboards and drawers, hungry for her approval? 'It really depends on the person,' she says, before insisting, somewhat hollowly, that 'what makes me particularly happy is when people share that they have

finished tidying by my method, and share with me how their life has changed afterwards'. To have your name become a verb must be an odd feeling. She nods. 'It feels very strange. To know it has permeated so much around the world is very surprising.'

No one could have predicted the phenomenon she would become. No one, that is, except editor Tomohiro Takahashi, who, according to an article in the Japanese publishing journal *Shin-bunka*, bought the book before she'd even written a word, after her proposal won first prize in a publishing training course called 'How to write bestsellers that will be loved for 10 years'. 'She's going to be on TV and become famous,' he reportedly told *Shin-bunka*. 'I felt a mysterious energy around her that I had never experienced around other people.' According to the journal, he worked with her intensively on the book for eight months, and when it came out, he was proved right: with worldwide fame following her success at home in Japan.

The story Kondo herself tells is a little different. As she describes it, after setting up her organising business as a student, she gradually gained so many clients that she had a waiting list, at which point people started begging her to write a book so they could gain her expertise. The book, she has said, took three months to write.

Like all the best superhero-origin stories, Kondo's is a story of continual triumphs over adversity. In the past, she has related how her mania for throwing things away as a child eventually drove her parents to ban her from tidying. But it was her mother's zeal for housework that initially inspired her interest. 'She would go about it with so much joy, it looked like she was having so much fun,' she tells me. Her childhood home was 'a very

Kondo and her husband Takumi at last year's Oscars

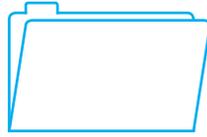


normal, ordinary Japanese home. It looked very organised on the surface, but once you opened the shelf [sic] it was very cluttered.'

As a schoolgirl, she became so obsessed with purging her possessions that she had something akin to a spiritual awakening. 'I would come home from school every day and wander round the house with a rubbish bag looking for things to throw away,' she has recounted previously. 'One day, when I opened the door of my room, everything in it looked dark and murky and I thought, "I hate everything in this room, I'm going to throw it all away, I never want to tidy again." And I fell to the ground.' When she awoke two hours later, 'Everything in the room was shining and I realised that you shouldn't be looking for things to throw away, you should be looking for the things you want to keep.'

Perhaps the greatest misconception about the KonMari Method is that she does not, in fact, insist that you should chuck out most of your possessions; rather, as *The New Yorker* put it, she advocates a kind of 'transformative existential keeping'. Despite the medieval-sounding fainting spell, and the fact she worked for five years in a Shinto shrine, she refuses to describe her work as a religious calling or even spiritual. But that childhood revelation did lead to what is the central differentiating principle to her method: a kind of animism. Before you discard something, she asks you to thank it for its service; she thanks her purse when she puts it away at the end of each day. To non-Konverts this may sound silly, but it's oddly freeing. As someone who clings to things out of guilt, it has helped me.

Once Kondo arrived at university, her hobby was allowed free rein. 'I would tidy my friends' homes, and eventually word spread that when Marie comes to visit, your home becomes remarkably tidy and organised. Gradually, people I didn't know would say, "I would pay you to teach me how to organise my home." This made me see that this might be



HOW I DECLUTTERED MY COMPUTER

The joy sparked by a tidy desktop can be quite addictive. But I must confess that I only started keeping mine tidy recently. One day a fan came over to talk to me while I was working on my laptop at a café. I was so mortified by how cluttered my display was that I've kept my desktop tidy ever since...

[Now] the only things I keep on my [computer] desktop are a folder marked 'Storage' and any other items, such as photos, that I want to use that day. I consider my computer desktop to be a workspace, just like my desk, so I display only those things that I intend to use right away.

My storage folder is like a filing cabinet. Inside are two folders, one called 'Documents' and one called 'Photos', as well as a document I need to review soon and photos that I'll be using within the next few days. The 'Photos' folder contains photos I would like to use in near-future projects.

How you categorise your digital folders will depend on what's easiest for you in your line of work. — Marie Kondo

something that can be shared with a wider audience. Little by little it led to my establishing a business.' But when she tried to scale it up from one-on-one 'tidying lessons', it wasn't an immediate hit. By then in her mid-20s, she had quit an unsatisfying job at a staffing agency to go full-time and describes, in *Joy at Work*, being crushed with embarrassment when 'only four people signed up for my first seminar, and two cancelled at the last minute.

In the large, almost empty, seminar room, I struggled to get my points across, painfully aware of my own inexperience. I felt so miserable and so sorry for the poor participants that I longed to run away and hide.' Rather than giving up, she looked at the problem rationally, decided she needed to market herself better, built up from smaller groups to larger ones, and found her way again.

Watching her debut book take off was 'thrilling', but as it grew bigger, so did the pressure to be 'Happy Marie, always full of joy'. 'I started to create my own obstacle,' she recalls, 'telling myself I needed to be constantly sparking joy in my own life. Otherwise, I don't have the right or permission to share this message with the world.'

In 2015, when sales for her books had reached eight figures, she was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People, and became inundated with offers from around the world, accepting as many as she could. She was also pregnant with her first child, and the pressure, as she writes in *Joy at Work*, 'took a toll on my mind and body. Sometimes I couldn't control my emotions and would burst into tears at the end of the day.' She describes being physically and mentally exhausted, and ultimately, she realised that 'I simply couldn't go on like this'.

The arrival of her daughters – as for any minimalism-inclined parent – was equally challenging and, in fact, led to her largely abandoning her perfectionism, something she has not admitted until recently. In fact, one of the sharpest criticisms of her method has been that it's unrealistic when you have children. But in *Joy at Work*, she reveals a far more believable scenario. 'Even before I had my own, a lot of my clients had children, so I based a lot of what I learnt on their experience and I firmly believed that tidying was possible, even with children,' she says now. 'But after I had my own, particularly when my daughters were one or two years old, and they were completely out of control and would overturn the shelves and make a mess, that's when I realised it is really very difficult.'

When I ask whether her decision to be more honest had been influenced by her move to America, and its far more emotionally revelatory culture, she turns and speaks to someone, and I realise she's not alone – her husband is in the room. She bats away the idea, but tells me that ever since that low point, they do, as a couple, something that sounds distinctly LA: a 'joy analysis'. Once a month they sit with a sketchbook and figure out what's on their agenda for the next few months, whether that will make them happy, what they should commit to and what they shouldn't.

Takumi, who she met in front of a lift when she was a student, and was friends

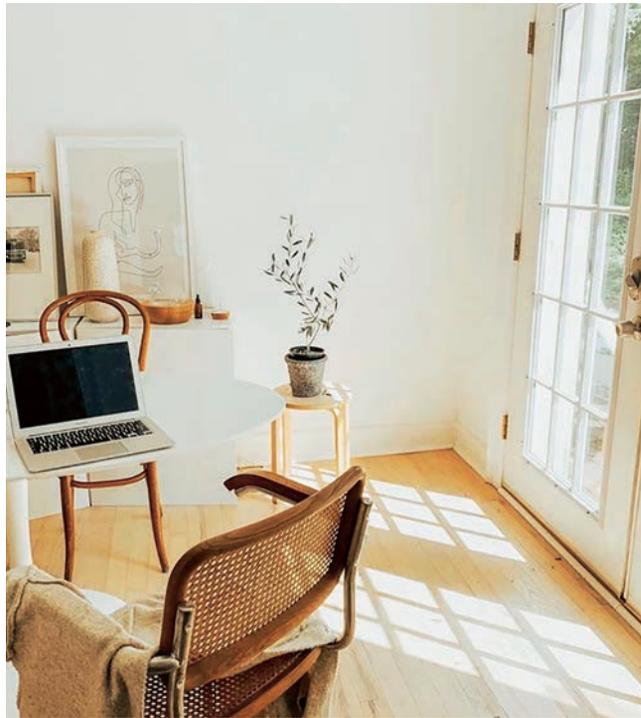
You have been Kondo'd: bedroom transformation by a certified KonMari consultant



WORK FROM HOME THE KONDO WAY

Marie's tips for 'sparking joy' in your home office or desk

Deal with work-related items separately from personal items. The order in which you tidy is important in the KonMari Method. In the home, I generally recommend starting with clothes and progressing through the more advanced categories in the order of books, papers, *komono* (miscellaneous items) and sentimental items. I recommend this order because starting with the easiest and working up to the hardest category helps us develop our capacity to choose what to keep or let go and decide where to store everything. For tidying the workspace, just drop the clothes category and proceed through books, papers and *komono*. Work on one category at a time. Begin by taking out every item in each category or subcategory and piling them in one spot.



'Your desktop is a work surface, not a storage cupboard'

BOOKS

Perhaps you're thinking it would be better to just choose them by looking at the titles while they're still in your bookcase, but please don't skip this step. Books that have stayed too long on the shelf have become part of the scenery. Only by taking each one in your hands can you actually see them as separate entities. Ask yourself when did you buy it? How many times have you read it? Do you want to read it again? And whether you would still buy that book if you saw it in a bookstore. Sometimes people ask me how many books they should keep, but there's no fixed number. If books spark joy for you, then the correct choice is to keep as many as you want with confidence.

PAPERS

The rule of thumb for papers is to discard everything. My clients always look dumb-founded when I say this. Of course, I don't mean that we should eliminate papers entirely. I'm just trying to get across how much resolve we need in order to choose only those that are absolutely necessary and to discard the rest. Start by sorting your papers [that you're keeping] into clear categories, such as presentations, project proposals, reports and invoices. Put each category of papers in a separate folder and store them in a filing cabinet or upright in a filing box placed on a shelf. Storing them this way makes it easy for you to see how many papers you have. Finally, make a pending box, in which to keep only those papers that you need to deal with on that day.

BUSINESS CARDS

Gather them all together and look at them one by one. You can say goodbye to the business cards of people you've already been in touch with through email or social media. Input the info into your contacts folder right away, or record their email addresses in your computer or phone by scanning or taking a photo. If just having some cards inspires or energises you, keep them with confidence.

KOMONO

Divide *komono* into sub-categories: office supplies (pens, scissors, staples, tape etc); electrical (digital devices, gadgets, cords etc); job-specific (product samples, art materials, supplies, parts etc). Begin by gathering all items in the same subcategory in one place and pick them up one by one. With desk supplies, you need only one of each item, so select one and say goodbye to the rest. With consumables (things you keep on hand and use up, like sticky notes, paper clips etc), although we may need to keep a few extra in stock, it is really efficient to have a mountain of sticky notes overflowing your drawers? For job-specific *komono*, we all have things that are unique to our profession... They have the most potential to spark joy in our lives once we start tidying and to keep us motivated to the finish.

with for six years before they became romantically involved, is CEO at KonMari Media, and is the most supportive of husbands, taking on all the childcare and housework when her work is at its busiest. 'He is naturally very good at organising,' she nods, approvingly. 'And he's so great at cooking, he is a master'

He leans in so I can see him and nods his agreement, mock-seriously. I ask whether he was ever concerned for her, as her fame grew. 'I did get worried about how she would handle that recognition,' he says, through Iida's translation, although, like Kondo, he does speak some English. 'Because I know her as someone who loves being at home. She's a bit of an introvert. Whether her being recognised would add to her stress... that's definitely a concern I had and have even now. We try to

'I firmly believed tidying was possible, even with children... until I had my own'

stay together as much as possible so she doesn't feel like she is facing this alone. I always want to be aware of how she's feeling in the present. She not only gave birth to this method, but it's her role to communicate with the world. For her to do that, I very much feel that she has to be protected, she must be in a good state.'

The cost of her success? A form of self-isolation, even before all of this. When I ask how much it would cost me to have her come round these days, I get a surprising answer. 'I don't know my going rate,' she shrugs, a little sadly. 'I don't actually give private lessons any more.' Takumi leans in again and interrupts. 'Priceless,' he says.

Joy at Work: Organizing Your Professional Life by Marie Kondo and Scott Sonenshein is out now (Bluebird, £16.99). For more tips on creating your home workspace, see p42