

THE HOME YOU OWN

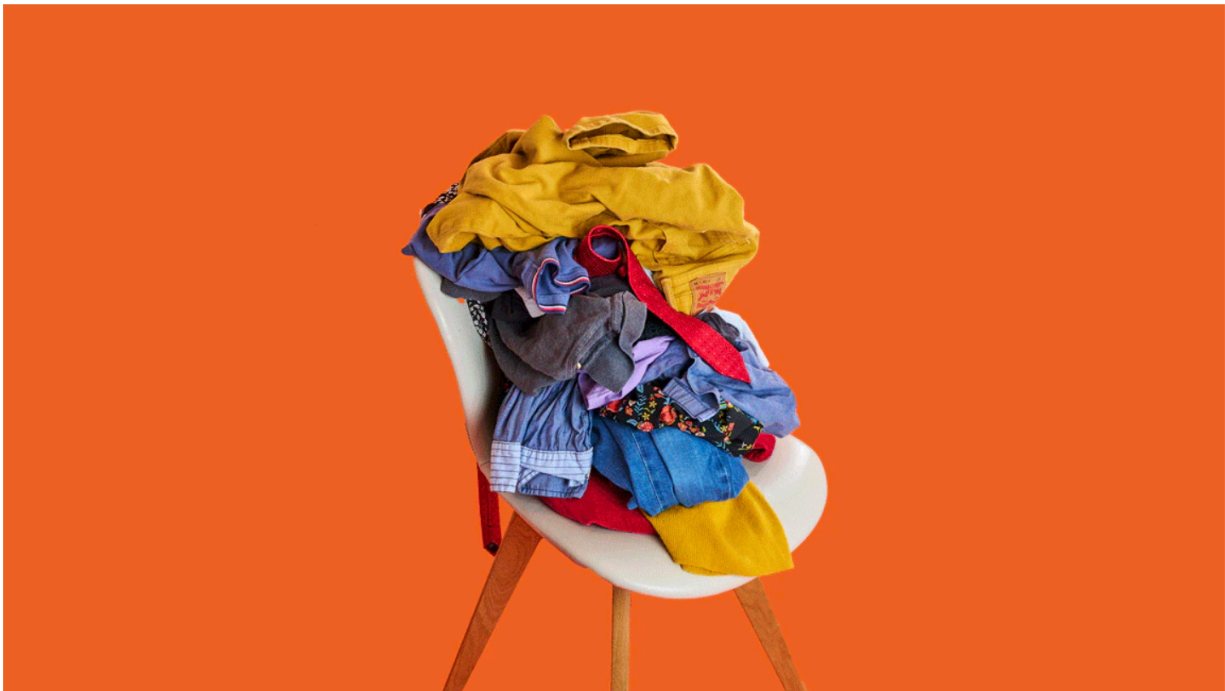
Don't feel bad about your laundry chair

Why a landing spot for the pile of in-between clothes is vital to every bedroom



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(Peggy Cormary for The Washington Post)

Many people call it the laundry chair. But it's not always a chair that serves as a repository for the heap of clothes in laundry limbo. It might be a futon, or an ottoman, or the top of a dresser, or an exercise bike being put to a different kind of workout. If it has a surface area fit for plopping, it will do.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that most of us have some kind of clothes chair, perhaps most famously Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.). The specifics of the pile — its size, the stage of cleanliness — vary, but we need some kind of in-between space, and that's what the laundry chair gives us. It's time to embrace it.

Before her now-two-year-old twins were born, Debora Crossley resolved to get rid of her laundry chair. “I said, ‘I’m not gonna have the chair. I’m not gonna pass this down.’ So I took my chair out of my room,” she says. “But somehow it just got moved into another room.”

Between working as an administrative officer from her home in Temple Hills, Md. and raising her toddlers, Crossley's days are busy. But the stack on the chair isn't only an indicator that she has other priorities — she's actually come to find it helpful. The not-dirty-enough-for-the-hamper pile is full of favorites ready for their next wear. “I can see what's there,” she says. And when the pile gets a bit too unruly, it tells her something else: “That's when I know it's laundry day.”

Therein lies the genius of the laundry chair (or, as I call the bench in my bedroom, “clothes mountain”). No matter how many marital spats it may cause, it's not actually a signal of chaos — it's a way of creating order *within* the chaos. Psychologists and decor experts agree, pointing to the natural need for an intermediary place to put things that you haven't quite categorized yet, or to use as a staging ground for what you might need in the near future. The pile can save you from overwhelming items that don't yet require laundering. Plus, there's a comforting predictability to the cycle: As soon as you clear the heap, you've freed up space for the next collection of clothes to begin gathering.

“When you have the pile, you consolidated the mess, right?” says Sally Augustin, a principal at Design with Science, which makes recommendations to designers based on neuroscience research. The laundry chair lets us see ourselves as people who have begun to take steps toward completing our ever-growing to-do lists. “When you have a pile like this, you have taken action.”

For Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University who studies clutter and procrastination, the “action” part is key. He, too, acknowledges that a laundry chair can serve as a way to organize your life. But he’s wary of a heap that sits *too* long. “That to me is maybe more of the bigger issue,” he says. “If you have the pile there, is it something you’re going to get to?” If the answer is yes, more power to you.

Even folks who make a living beautifying homes espouse the virtues of the laundry chair. Christopher Boutlier, an interior designer in D.C., calls the laundry chair “absolutely unavoidable ... It’s just this convenient spot for you to put something while you’re debating in your head what you’re gonna do with it.”

When creating spaces for clients, Boutlier tries to help them minimize clutter by incorporating hampers or valets into the designs. But he’s skeptical that those pieces truly change habits: “Even if there is a convenient option there, our default tends to override it.” In the end, that’s just fine with him. After all, Boutlier keeps his own in-between pile.

He thinks of his mound as a visual to-do list, since it often includes clothes that probably need to go to the dry cleaner and items he's considering donating. He says the idea that he'll actually do those tasks in a timely fashion is "delusional thinking. Completely. But in the grand scheme of delusional thinking, it's pretty harmless."

Somewhat surprisingly, laundry expert Patric Richardson, author of the book, "House Love: A Joyful Guide to Cleaning, Organizing, and Loving the Home You're In," celebrates the concept of a laundry chair. He routinely advises people that overwashing clothes can damage them, and this is a piece of furniture that can prevent precisely that. "If anybody's doing anything so that they re-wear something, I mean, I'm totally supportive, be it a chair, be it a laundry table," he says.

While an admirer of the concept, at first, Richardson — perhaps the only person on the planet who genuinely loves to hang up clothes — didn't think he had his own version. But, as we talked, he revealed the existence of a bench in his bedroom where he lays his jeans each night. I had to break it to him: Even a skimpy laundry chair counts.

Interior designer Tracy Morris, principal of Tracy Morris Design in McLean, Va., says clients rarely request a piece of furniture specifically for holding laundry. Still, she's under no illusion that the benches and chairs she adds to bedrooms don't wind up serving that purpose. "It's kind of like a Q-tip. Everybody knows what you really use a Q-tip for, but it's never advertised on the box," she says.

Morris has her own laundry chair, too — a fact she has no qualms about admitting. “Sometimes I’m like, okay, I have gotten everything clean except for three pairs of pants that are folded on my laundry chair,” she says. “That’s okay. They’re going to sit there.” That’s because those pants belong there, at least for now.

And really, don’t we embrace the gray area — the happy medium, the middle ground — in other aspects of life? That’s how Wyatt Yankus, a geopolitical analyst who lives in D.C., feels about the laundry chair, a feature of the home he considers “vital.” He’s had one since he was a kid (much to his mother’s dismay), and after all this time, he’s developed a theory about its purpose: “The way that people talk about coffee shops being the third place between home and the office, I kind of think of the laundry chair as being the third place between a drawer and the hamper.”