

Goddess or Realist?

Getting it together on the Home Front

My mum tells a story about a day in the late 70s when my sister and I were very young and the house was chaotic (as it often was, because my sister and I, as children, used to make an enormous mess). Our close neighbour was visiting (she had seen it all, so was allowed in regardless) and, this particular day, as Mum and Rae kicked toys and piles of clean washing off the lounge and had a cup of tea, they noticed a car drive up outside the house. Rae took one look at who was climbing out of the driver's seat and exclaimed in horror, 'Oh, *no!* It's *Pat!*'

'Pat' was impeccably dressed, as always, in one of those floor-length 70s dresses, teamed with immaculate makeup, perfect hair, and gloves (!) She was clutching a sweet posy of hand-picked flowers from her weedless garden and had just dropped by to see how Mum was going with the children.

As it happened, my sister had just learnt to crawl, so there was a safety gate barricading the entrance to the front verandah. This gave Mum and our angelic neighbour an extra half a minute to boot most of the mess out of the lounge room into the dining room and drag the double sliding doors shut to hide it. The fact that it is challenging to clamber daintily over a safety gate in a floor-length seventies dress bought them precious minutes...

When I grew up and had an extremely messy young family of my own, I recall being at work one day and receiving a phone call from my now ex-husband. His parents (extraordinarily immaculate people who routinely set the breakfast table immediately after dinner) were apparently en route to our house to use our washing machine, as theirs had broken. My stomach fell through the floor and continued falling down all five floors of the building beneath me. The house had passed untidy about a fortnight beforehand and had run several laps around itself since then, tying itself in knots – much like what my stomach was now doing in the underground carpark. There wasn't a single room that I didn't cringe at the thought of my in-laws viewing in disbelief.

There was a good reason for this state of domestic affairs. I was writing my first book, which, (ironically in the context of this coaching pack but understandably at the time) was published under the title of, 'Wits' End Before Breakfast! Confessions of a Working Mum'. I was really 'in the zone' writing it, despite balancing it with a full-time job and two children under four, and the housework had fallen off my radar and become a millstone around my neck.



Normally, when we knew that my in-laws were coming over, there was an insane panic to clean everything up, so that by the time they arrived, we met their unspoken expectation of orderliness. This day, when the house was at its very worst, I was stuck at my desk – paralysed with dread. The game was up. Eight years of pretending to have much higher domestic standards than I actually possessed on a daily basis, I was about to be exposed.

It gets worse. That evening, I came home to the sight of their car still parked in my driveway. This was ominous, I knew, as I took a deep breath and braved a shameful entrance into what was, by five-thirty that afternoon, an immaculate house that I barely recognised. My parents-in-law had stayed there all day and cleaned up every single corner of every single room. Even our bedroom – which included their discovery of my thus-far secret stash of about thirty-six Mills and Boon romance novels, scattered on the floor beside my bed - a large mountain of mush, appropriately symbolic of the intense desire I had at that moment to escape reality.

Far from being thankful for their several hours of effort, I was absolutely horrified. The normal thing, surely, would have been to shuffle and trip their way through the layers of disorder, do their washing, and leave in appalled silence.

Instead, they took me aside and said, ‘Emma – why didn’t you tell us you weren’t coping?’

I was speechless. Mortified.

What I wish I’d said was, ‘We (plural) are coping, actually – this is how we live now that I work full-time, have two children under four and am writing a book.’ Unfortunately, this excuse didn’t occur to me until after the book was published.

These days, I’ve got my act together most of the time on the home front. Something clicked over the last few years and now I adore my house – living in it, caring for it, and making it our ‘home’. It’s warm, inviting, peaceful, clean and organised – not perfect, but a real haven for each of us, meeting all of our needs in different ways. I love that people can drop in unannounced and I don’t pretend not to be home. I no longer suffer from what the internet cleanliness guru, flylady, calls CHAOS (can’t have anyone over syndrome).

Be assured that the following self-coaching program isn’t about creating an unsustainable ‘display home’ and having you stalk the family armed with a kitchen wipe and a spray-bottle of disinfectant.

It’s about dreaming up, creating and sustaining your ideal home environment – whatever that means for you.

Step one: How things are

In this part of the exercise, you will have a frank look at how things are for you on the 'home front'. By 'home front' here, we mean domestic duties, housework, the garden etc.

The more honest you are with yourself, the more opportunities you will uncover for change in the later parts of the activity. Try to answer each question as fully as possible. Remember that no-one else need ever read your answers, so be completely honest with yourself.

Let's begin:

Presuming you are at home right now, take a good look around you. Walk through each of the rooms of your house and observe it all. Jot down your thoughts on:

- the overall state of your house in terms of tidiness, cleanliness and general organisation
- particular 'trouble spots'

How do you feel right now? Describe your emotions and thoughts - positive and/or negative - about the way your home is currently.

On a scale of one to ten (one being 'completely out of control' and ten being 'completely under control') how in control are you feeling on the domestic front?



How long has it been since you have felt in control at home?

Taking just the last month as an example, can you identify why the house has become out of control? What is the problem, or problems that have led to this? What are you or others doing to create this environment? What are you or others *not* doing that is leading to this?

Now, think of the last six months and answer the same questions. Has anything changed, or are they the same problems?

Think of the last two years and answer as above.

Think about how things were when you first moved out of your parental home and had your own place. How was the situation different then? How was it similar?



Answer the following questions, in relation to your personal history on the domestic front:

Looking back, I have always had a problem with... (eg. keeping on top of the washing, planning meals ahead, keeping the kitchen under control, organising bills and paperwork etc.)

Before (kids, this job, the divorce, I started studying again etc) I used to be much better at... (around the house)

I have nearly always have X under control.

X is nearly always out of control.

Describe: When I was growing up, our house was ... (always immaculate, often untidy etc).

When I was growing up, my mother ... (worked full-time, worked part-time, did not undertake paid employment etc.)

List other differences between 'then' and 'now' that make housework different these days (eg. we had fewer commitments, Mum didn't have email or internet, we have better appliances etc.)

The top three things that depress me most about the house are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The top three obstacles to fixing these are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

On a scale of one ('For genuine physical reasons I am completely incapable') to ten ('theoretically there is nothing to stop me except the usual things - time, energy or motivation') how much *opportunity do I have* to gain control or influence over my home environment, bearing in mind it doesn't have to be accomplished immediately?

Step Two: How you want it to be

Close your eyes and remember, or imagine, a time – perhaps it was just before some special visitors arrived – when your house was the most beautiful that it has ever been.

With your eyes closed, take lovely, meandering, mental walk through every room of the home. It is all just as you like it. Smell the fragrances. Notice the little touches – a vase of fresh flowers, candles, photos, books and magazines on the coffee table. Listen to what music is playing. What is baking in the oven? Who is coming over, or are you enjoying this time in perfect solitude?

Imprint as much of your 'ideal home' in your mind. Write down what you notice about it. Think in detail about how each room looks. How much 'clutter' (good and bad) do you like to have around the house? How is it stored?



With those images fresh in your mind, and the knowledge that the creation of this ideal environment is within your grasp, write down how you feel about it. At the very idea of it, what emotions are you experiencing? What senses are awakened? Do you feel calm? Invigorated? Happy? What else?

Imagine that you have achieved this already. How do you feel now about tackling other parts of your life? Do you feel more ready for things? More able to cope? More settled, relaxed and able?

Do you believe that, with some time and effort, you can achieve this outcome?

If you don't achieve this outcome, what will you be giving up?

How committed are you to achieving it? (use a scale of one to ten, with ten being extremely committed).

Who do you need on-side to achieve this?

What do you need to explain to them?

Who do you know who has already achieved an outcome similar to the one you want? What can you learn from them? What do you notice about their manner, their actions, their beliefs, strategies and choices?

Step Three – You know what you want, let's create it.

There are two ways to go about achieving the home environment that you desire:

Some people like to commit to a blitz on their home and 'just do it', pretty much all in one hit. Some even take a week off work specifically for this purpose. If that is you - you know what to do and will 'just do it' – go on to Step Four of this plan, which is about maintaining your new home lifestyle long term.

If you are someone who will be accomplishing this more gradually, follow the steps below. This will see you creating the home you desire at the pace of one room per week. If you need added incentive to stick with it, why not plan a dinner party for eight weeks' time and invite your friends to it now.

A Room a Week

Choose the order in which you would like to accomplish this. Which room would you like to tackle first, and why? (For example, kitchen first, because an organised kitchen makes me feel more in control generally, OR lounge-room because it is the easiest ... etc)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- etc.



Looking only at the first room, what is one ten-minute job that you can do right now towards making a difference? (Sometimes, it comes as a real surprise how much can be done in ten minutes. Time yourself and see what's possible.)

What else needs to be done in that room and how long do you estimate that each task will take? Include things like sorting through paperwork, filing, throwing things out, etc. Do these tasks in manageable 'chunks' – it is easy to drag everything out of a cupboard and onto the floor, then become overwhelmed and give up. Do one shelf at a time instead.

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
- etc.

Check your diary for the next week and either schedule these tasks in, or schedule in a half-hour to one-hour block each morning or night this week. As you go along, keep in mind at all stages: 'what can I do now to make this easier later?' How can I store things in a way that will make them easy to find? How can I organise the kids' toys and clothes? *Do I really need this item?*

Tell someone about this commitment. (Better yet, rope someone in to help you!)

Continue in this way over the next few weeks and watch your home taking shape, as you envisaged.



Step Four: Maintaining the lifestyle

Now that you have the home that you want, how do you keep it going long-term? Think about the following. In order to keep the house like this:

List the tasks that need to be accomplished on a daily basis.

List the tasks that need to be accomplished on a weekly basis.

List the tasks that need to be accomplished fortnightly.

List the tasks that need to be accomplished monthly.

List the tasks that need to be accomplished six-monthly or annually.

If you can, estimate the time each task will take and write this beside it.

For those who live with others, whether they be flatmates, friends, a partner or children, have a conversation about the lists of tasks that you have created. (Some times, others in the household are unaware of how much work there is to do and seeing it written down may help.) How can some of the tasks be shared more fairly? Who can do what? (For children, it can help to involve some kind of reward system or pocket money linked to chores.)



When you have an understanding of what needs to be done and how often, ask yourself (about your own chores, whether they are some or all of the chores on the list):

Do I prefer to do most of this early in the morning, after work, or early in the evening?

What do I need to buy to be able to do this (cleaning products etc)

What will I commit to doing as a minimum before I sit down to relax or do something else? (For example, when I come home from work each day from Monday to Thursday, I will wash the lunch boxes, make tomorrow's lunches, prepare dinner, do any required clothes washing for the next day, then relax).

When I drop the ball (because nobody is perfect!) what will my attitude be? (Pick it up again or give up and let things slide?) What are the implications of my attitude? Are my standards realistic?

It takes time to embed new habits and behaviour, but it is much easier to keep things going domestically when you have achieved a state of organisation that is close to how you want to live most of the time.

Living less chaotically is a choice within your grasp. Let's get this done so you can focus on more interesting things in your life.

Over to you now...