

## **Spring Cleaning The Feng Shui Way With Laura Benko-Ceriello**

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Laura Benko-Ceriello is something of an expert when it comes to clutter. Physical clutter. Mental clutter. Clutter caused by a need for abundance. Fear-of-success clutter. Just-in-case clutter. Clutter hidden away behind closet doors. Clutter as a distraction from larger issues. Sentimental clutter that chains you to the past. Clutter as a retreat.

Whatever category your clutter falls into, however, Benko-Ceriello, a 34-year-old Feng Shui practitioner based in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, has the same advice - let it go. Easier said than done, of course. "Sometimes it's very difficult for people to let go of their clutter," she said. "It brings up a lot of issues."

But if you're going to do it, this is the best possible time of year, as winter recedes and spring blooms. "Seasonally, you have nature in your favor, to support you," Benko-Ceriello explained. "With the changing of the season and with spring being here, it helps in clearing out and allowing the fresh winds of inspiration to come in."

Feng Shui, the ancient Chinese practice of arranging living space, offers some practical advice on how to do this. With the aim of allowing the free flow of "chi," the life force believed to be within and around us, Feng Shui is based on the continuous changes in nature and in us, Benko-Ceriello said.

"It's always changing because you are always changing," she said. "As you change and evolve, you want to change your environment as well."

### **New kind of spring 'fling'**

Whether you live in a studio in Manhattan or a McMansion in Brookville or a two-family in Bellerose; whether home is a walkup in Williamsburg or a high ranch in Wading River or a co-op in Rego Park, spring is a great time to assess your living space and your relationship to it, Benko-Ceriello said, as well as to do the kind of clearing, cleaning and maintenance work associated with the traditional Western notion of a "spring clean."

"It's a good time to do a deep clean of upholstery, to get new sheets, new bedding," Benko-Ceriello said. "It's a good time to repair any items in your home. You never want to be surrounded by broken items, leaky faucets, wobbly doorknobs. They're always on your mind as something you have to do."

Cleaning windows, painting and arranging seasonal fresh flowers makes sense in the spring, Benko-Ceriello said. "With Feng Shui, you really want to bring in nature and balance all the forces of nature in your environment."

### **Clutter Cutters**

More importantly, however, it's the time to get rid of that clutter. "In winter, we tend to hoard," Benko-Ceriello said. "We tend to stay indoors and when you do that, you tend to accumulate more." Throw out anything broken, unused or forgotten, Benko-Ceriello suggests. Give clothes or toys away to friends and charities, or have a yard sale. "If you're holding onto something and what it brings out is guilt, like, 'Oh this was bequested to me by my great-aunt and it doesn't go with my furniture, but I can't let it go,'" Benko-Ceriello said, "let it go."

Still, she said, clearing out should be done thoughtfully. "There's no reason why you need to get rid of everything and live a Zen-like existence with just a bed and a desk. But surround yourself with things you love. Surround yourself with the things you use. Anything you haven't used in the last year, get rid of it. That's always a good rule of thumb."

### **A Feng Shui Epiphany**

Benko-Ceriello came to Feng Shui at a particularly opportune time in her life. In 2001, she was diagnosed with polycythemia, a rare blood and bone marrow disorder. She took a leave from her job at an agency representing film directors. "I was walking through the bookstore, and this book literally fell on me, called 'Feng Shui and Health,'" Benko-Ceriello recalled. She bought it,

and began to implement some of the strategies it suggested at home, and "I immediately felt a difference."

She went on to work for the author, Nancy SantoPietro, studying with her for 18 months before starting her own practice in January. She believes the Feng Shui has made her healthier.

At Benko-Ceriello's own home, a small, street-level one- bedroom apartment, where she lives with her firefighter husband, John Ceriello, the need to keep clutter to a minimum is obvious - there simply isn't room for it. Despite the close quarters, however, large mirrors, warm lighting and an enormous couch upholstered in white cotton create a feeling of comfort and enough space to stretch out.

On an overcast morning last week, Benko-Ceriello showed off her organized walk-in closet, vertical files and an array of round baskets of various sizes in which she stores business cards, gifts, paperwork and knickknacks. The bedroom cannot be set up so that the bed faces the door, as it should according to Feng Shui tradition, but a mirror that reflects the door and can be seen from the bed provides a second-best alternative.

"No home is Feng Shui perfect," she said. "There's always going to be things structurally that you're limited by. It's about making the most of your home."

That's what Benko-Ceriello helped Diana Graffy and her husband, Sheldon Simon, do in their Chelsea studio apartment last spring. The changes she suggested were small but made sense, Graffy said - changing the direction of the bed, fixing leaky faucets and windows that wouldn't stay up, placing a memento of the couple's love in the "relationship" area of the apartment, which happened to be the bathroom. "It was very interesting, and we did have some noticeable changes after she did that," Graffy said. Simon, who runs his pet supply company from home, saw a surge in business, for example.

For 53-year-old Alex Garfield, space was less of a problem because he lives in the top three stories of an Upper West Side brownstone. A self-proclaimed "fashionista" who has started several national clothing labels, Garfield is following Benko-Ceriello's suggestions throughout his home.

### **Making Changes**

Because he is trying to meet a woman to settle down with, she suggested that he make room for her by clearing out his closets. She pointed out that many objects in the house were single, such as a shell and a wooden statue of a bear, and suggested that he have more pieces in couples. "She said, if a woman came into this home, even unconsciously, she'd think there wasn't room for her."

Even as he implements Benko-Ceriello's suggested changes, Garfield said he feels his life changing and a new optimism growing with the coming of spring.

"The season comes, the birds start singing, and I feel that time is coming in my life," he explained. "As long as I keep a singing bough in my heart, the singing birds will come."

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