

Swedish Death Cleaning: A Practice That Enhances Life While Preparing for Death

By Colin Adair Morgan, CELA
January 2020

As an attorney, I am typically charged with solving my clients' legal issues. In many instances, this means educating a client with respect to the legal solutions to their problems. While this is a given in my profession, I have found that I can learn in other areas, if not more from my clients during our relationship. This was the case when a client introduced me to the concept of Swedish Death Cleaning. I find this topic to be fascinating and share this overview.

What is Swedish Death Cleaning?

Swedish Death Cleaning, or "döstädning" in the vernacular, is the practice of de-cluttering your living space in contemplation of your own passing. In other words, doing away with unnecessary items around your house so your loved ones will not have to do so after your death. This practice gained notoriety with the release of "The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning" by Margareta Magnusson.

Magnusson's book focuses on the positives of a more minimalist lifestyle as well as the benefits to a decedent's family as opposed to the morbidity of death. "Life will become more pleasant and comfortable if we get rid of some of the abundance." Magnusson posits. The focus of this exercise is to contemplate one's mortality through a positive organization and simplification.

Döstädning is neither a one-off deal, nor simply a cleaning exercise. "Death cleaning is not about dusting or mopping up; it is about a permanent form of organization that makes your everyday life run more smoothly." Magnusson writes, "Visit [your] storage areas and start pulling out what's there...Who do you think will take care of all that when you are no longer here?" Magnusson writes that every person over the age of 50 should begin death cleaning and should simply be something people should engage in throughout their lives.

The lessons from Magnusson's book include methods of organization, life-long practice, collaborating with family, and making sure to keep things that have value to the individual as well as the family. Swedish Death Cleaning presents itself as more of a lifestyle choice than just a morbid exercise people should engage in while contemplating their mortality.

What Are Some Benefits?

Döstädning has a range of benefits from estate administration efficiency to overall happiness.

- Estate Administration: Eliminating clutter and unnecessary items in your house can greatly simplify the eventual administration of your estate. Cleaning out the family home can be a dangerous combination or stressful, physically daunting, and traumatic to family members coping with loss. Simplifying this process during your life can confer emotional benefits onto your heirs after your passing;
- Mental Health: Döstädning's roots lie in the minimalism movement. From a mental health standpoint, minimalism asserts that happiness comes from relationships and experiences as opposed to material items. Embracing a more minimalist lifestyle and eliminating clutter may allow for greater happiness;
- Financial: The practice of death cleaning is meant to be a life-long pursuit. Over time, focusing more on experiences and relationships can lead to less consumption which, in turn, can turn into savings. Furthermore, cleansing clutter can lead to decreased storage and maintenance expenses; and
- Preparation: Contemplating one's mortality is extremely difficult. As a concept, converting that contemplation into a positive, beneficial exercise can ease the process greatly. Going through one's possessions is a very reflective practice. This allows a person to relive their past experiences while determining the material legacy they choose to leave to their loved ones. "We must all talk about death. If it's too hard to address, then death cleaning can be a way to start the conversation," Magnusson explains.

How Do I Learn More?

There are many resources to learn about Swedish Death Cleaning. Primary among those is the aforementioned "The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning" by Margareta Magnusson. This topic is also widely reported online where you can read personal experiences from people who have tried döstädning. Lastly, speaking with a professional who specializes in the problems we face with aging can offer insight into Swedish Death Cleaning and similar practices.

In summary, Swedish Death Cleaning is a fascinating practice everyone should consider. It carries numerous benefits ranging from legal, to financial, to enhanced mental health.