

Clear out the Clutter

"Experts say you can decrease your housework by 40 percent with less clutter."

Organizer Betty Huotari



Photo by CYNDI LIESKE

Betty Huotari, of Tyrone Township, uses this media center to keep all of her family's movies, magazines, games and other items neat and organized.

By Cyndi Lieske | Livingston Life

This is a busy time of year for professional organizers like Betty Huotari of Tyrone Township. While all of us are indoors staring at our cluttered shelves, counters and laundry rooms, Huotari is out helping homeowners dig themselves out of their accumulated piles of stuff.

"Experts say you can decrease your housework by 40 percent with less clutter," Huotari said.

If you'd like to become more organized, Huotari, who is one of Michigan's first professional organizers, has a few tips.

Breakdown tasks

Set aside a few hours one Saturday a month to tackle a problem area such as an overstuffed spare room or messy closet.

"One thing I hear a lot from people is that they try to organize a whole house in a weekend, which is overwhelming," she said. "The better thing is to create a list of what you are unhappy about in your home. From there, break things down."

If people are going to do an organizing project every weekend for six weeks they are setting themselves up for failure. "It doesn't keep it fresh and it doesn't keep it fun."

Shop last

Don't bring home 20 organizing bins just because your favorite store has them on sale this week.

"A lot of times we get excited walking into a store, but we don't really have the reasoning behind the product or the solution," she said. "What is this product going to do for us? How are we going to use it? What do we need?"

Take time to measure the space you are considering and decide if the container works in the space.

File it

Paper is one of the biggest causes of clutter. Many people do not want to file papers because they are afraid of losing something.

"They might not have a lot of confidence in their filing system," Huotari said. "I encourage them to create files and a master file folder list. It empowers other family members to use the filing system."

It is especially helpful with elderly family members who may take many different kinds of medications.

If all the medications are on one list and filed then anyone can access the information.

Set a date

If you set a date to get organized, stick to it.

"Tell yourself, 'Saturday morning between 9 am. and noon I will be cleaning out the closet,'" she said. "If we schedule it in our calendar and make the appropriate arrangements for young children, then we can really focus on this particular project."

Find a home for everything. Make sure you have a set place for incoming papers, keys, purses, briefcases and electronic gadgets, she said. When those "homes" are designated, stick to it.

Work off a list

The secret to organizing success is a working list.

"People really can accomplish more when they work off a list rather than just going from off the top of their head," Huotari said. "Sometimes doing a list electronically is helpful." If you come across a project you can't do on your own, enlist a professional.

"If you find a particular project you are not that excited about doing and if that is not one of your strengths," she said. "We would encourage you to outsource that project."

Keep tools near

Pay the bills in your kitchen? Set up a small bill paying center and keep everything in that place. Do your kids do homework at the kitchen table? Keep a pencil case with all their school tools in a nearby cupboard.

"As soon as things are not where you expect them to be, it is very easy to get distracted," Huotari said.

She encourages families to keep a "family binder" as a central location for school schedules, sports practice schedules, neighborhood or school directories, and even the menus for favorite restaurants. Include a separate index for each family member.

Start replacing

Streamline your life by always replacing instead of adding on something new, Huotari said.

Buy a new white T-shirt? Get rid of the old one. Bring home a book? Find a new home for one on your shelf.

"If you are looking at purchasing a particular item, maybe wait 24-48 hours before you buy it," she said.

"If you really need it and have taken the time to do the research on it, then you can give yourself the approval to get it."

What do you do with all of the clutter?

By Cyndi Lieske | Livingston Life

Now that you've tackled the job of cleaning up, where can you get rid of the fried computer, old paint or broken-down couch?

In Livingston County, the correct answer to the question might depend on your municipality. For a fee, many people with curbside pickup can have large items tagged and hauled off to the landfill with their trash. Also, some municipalities have large-item pick-up days in the spring.

But what if you can't or don't want to put it out with your trash?

A good place to find answers is the Livingston County Solid Waste Department in Howell. The department has a Web site at www.co.livingston.mi.us/SolidWaste/. The site includes instructions and contact information for items such as appliances, computers and cell phones. Calling the department at 517-545-9609, is another option.

"We try to act as a clearing house of information to try and aid and assist any residents with questions," said Robert Spaulding, Livingston County Department of Public Works/Solid Waste Coordinator. "Our goals are to try and recycle and reduce and do the right thing. Some things have to go to landfills. A landfill has its place as long as it is constructive."

Many people are looking for ways to recycle computers and other e-waste, Spaulding said.

"We are getting a lot of calls about



electronics," Spaulding said. "We are getting more calls about compact fluorescent lights. The range of calls we get

can go from people that have used motor oil that they need to get rid of, to people who need to get rid of a couch.

If they call us, we can get them pointed in the right direction."

For a fee, Recycle Livingston will take items such as computer monitors, kitchen appliances, microwave ovens and typewriters.

"The reason for the fee there is labor in dismantling these items," said Linda Berch, executive director of Recycle Livingston. "They have to be very carefully handled. They also have to haul these items, which takes gas. There is a lot of handling that is involved in electronics."

Homeowners who wish to recycle an item should always call the facility they plan to visit before dropping off an item, Spaulding said.

"They may limit what you can bring," Spaulding said. "We really stress that you don't want to surprise somebody with something. It is always easier to make a call before you get out there and start burning up gas driving and spending all your time."

At least three times a year, Spaulding's department hosts a Household Hazardous Waste collection. The first will be May 30. The department will begin taking appointments for the pickup after April 1.

"People can call our department if they have questions about what they can drop off," Spaulding said.

The department does not take electronic waste during the HHW collections.

Other good resources include: Earth911.com, www.epa.gov/epawaste/conserve/materials/recycling/donate.htm

One person's trash might be another person's treasure

By Cyndi Lieske | Livingston Life

So, you've sorted, organized and purged, and now there are assorted bags of gently used things waiting for a new home. Where can you bring them?

"If there is life left in it, we encourage you to find a way for someone to reuse it," Robert Spaulding, of the Livingston County Solid Waste Department, said. "If you are resourceful, you can find people who will use your things and help keep things out of the waste stream. Just because you don't have a use for it, doesn't mean that somebody doesn't have a use for it."

■ **The Salvation Army Thrift Store** in Brighton, has a donation center open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday and from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. For furniture and large-volume pickup, call 866-GIVE-TOO.

"We sure can use all of the donations

we can get right now," said Colleen Kinney director of community relations for the Salvation Army. "There is absolutely a greater need. We always need clothing, household goods — nearly anything that they have around the house that is in usable condition. People are turning to us in greater numbers to stretch their budgets."

■ **Love Inc.** is always in need of bedding, furniture and all kinds of clothing.

"In 2008, we served more than 2,000 adults, 1,800 children and a total of 1,400 households," executive director Katherine Janego said. "We involved over 3,600 volunteers with over 6,200 service hours from those volunteers."

Through the 41 member churches, Love, Inc., provides services to needy Livingston County residents who have been screened by volunteers, Janego said. For more information about dona-

tions, call 517-586-4007. Those who wish to leave a donation may leave a message on the machine, Janego said.

■ **The Military Order of the Purple Heart** schedules pickups in Livingston County every four to six weeks. The charitable organization mostly needs clothing for women, men, children and infants. It does also have a use for jewelry and accessories; shoes; toys; home décor items; small appliances; small furniture; and household goods like dishes and pots and pans. To schedule a Purple Heart pickup, call 734-728-4560 or visit www.donatestuff.com.

■ **The Habitat for Humanity Home Center** in Brighton, accepts many household items in good condition. A few of the items accepted include appliances, plumbing fixtures, cabinets, home interior items, furniture,

windows, lumber, flooring, paint, and other building materials. Call 810-220-9986 for more information or visit the Web site at livingstonhabitat.org.

■ **The Howell Carnegie District Library, Hartland Crompton District Library and Brighton Area District Library** accept used books to sell at their book sales. Each library has its own schedule for selling books, but in general, the libraries are interested in books that are in good condition. They will not accept books that are moldy or water damaged. They do not accept magazines, Readers Digest condensed books or old encyclopedia sets.

■ **The Internet** has been a big help for people who are trying to find new homes for used items, Spaulding said. Visit Freecycle Livingston and Craigslist for details.



Medicines

A linen closet is a better choice for storing medicine because it is not as humid as a bathroom can be. Sort the items and store them in separate baskets. For instance, store pain relievers in one basket, bandages in another, antacids in another, etc. "Categorize your times and containerize them together," she said.

— Monica Kiefer



DVDs & CDs

To eliminate stacks of cases, remove DVDs and CDs from their original containers and store them in a CD album. They can be stored alphabetically, in order they were purchased, or by genre. In addition to freeing up a significant amount of storage space, this will eliminate the matching-the-movie-to-the-correct-case problem and piles of unstored CDs.

— Alison Glass



Laundry

To speed the process of putting away clean laundry, sort and wash items by the place where they will be returned. Wash each family members clothing as a load weekly. Then fold and return to one spot. Obviously, a few specialty loads will be necessary, but the primary bulk of the laundry can be washed by group. "This will greatly cut down on sorting and delivery time."

— Alison Glass



Recipes

Corral loose papers and recipe cards by placing them in plastic-sheet protectors in a three-ring binder. The paper is then protected, and recipes can be moved around in the book or changed out as needed. Create sections for different food categories. If a cookbook is only used for one or two recipes, make a copy of the page to add to the binder and get rid of the cookbook.

— Alison Glass

GET ORGANIZED

By Cyndi Lieske & Candy Spiegel | LL

Despite a person's best efforts, there are some areas of the home that are particularly challenging to manage.

Talk to any homeowner about what's tough to organize and you'll likely hear the same list of things — CDs, shoes, linens, mail, magazines and newspapers. All of them tend to pile up and create chaos if they are not corralled.

The first step in getting organized, according to Alison Glass, owner of Alison Glass Organized Design, is to sort out the junk.

"In my opinion, the best way to store stuff is to let go of what is no longer really needed or really wanted and create more space for living," Glass said.

Barbara Flanagan, author of "Flanagan's Smart Home," agrees. Flanagan, an architectural and product designer, condensed life's necessities and pleasures down to 98 items, with encouraging words for recovering pack rats in her book.

"I started to ask myself: 'How much stuff do you really need to live a good life?'" she said.

"The act of throwing something out can be painful," she says, but there is no shortage of places that give old items new life.

Monica Kiefer, an organizing consultant

from Fowlerville, recommends that when weeding through the clutter, items be removed from the house as soon as possible. Whether marked to sell, donate, recycle or throw out, if they don't leave the house quickly, they may find a way back into closets, cupboards and drawers.

Kiefer shares some additional helpful tips to get and stay organized:

Mail

Mail can end up on the kitchen counter, the dining room table or even the family room depending on the person who hauls it in and what day it is, Kiefer said.

"Pick one area and come to an agreement that no matter who picks it up, the mail will always be left in that location," she said. "Then when you are ready to process it, it will be in one spot."

Reading Time

If you subscribe to magazines and newspapers, make sure you leave 15 minutes a night to look at the information you want to read or save. When a new month's magazine arrives, recycle the old one. An even better solution is to check your local library to find out if they carry your favorite maga-

Maximize space

Here are some tips to get the most out of your closet space:

- If you haven't worn it in a year, let it go.
- Get a friend to help you decide what goes and what stays.
- Group clothes by season, color or style.
- If possible, move coats, formal dresses and other items not worn often to another closet.
- Double rods, built-in drawers and pull-out storage bins and boxes can help maximize your closet space.
- Over-the-door shoe hangers and floor units can help organize shoes. You also can organize shoes on shelves.

SOURCES: Lowes.com and Kate Parker, home editor with Real Simple magazine

zine. Then set aside time each week to stop by and read it there.

"Check it out at the library or sit there at the library, it is quiet or a nice place to relax and it is not costing you anything," Kiefer said.



Photo Storage

Digital photos left in a camera or on the computer are in danger of being lost. Protect them by placing them on a CD or DVD. Have the photo studio print an index for the photos and store it with the discs for easy retrieval. If possible, consider printing thumbnails of the photos right on the disc. Then, place the discs in an organizer. "With a CD organizer, you hold up to 360 CDs and you can even add pages to it."

— Monica Kiefer



Kid's Crafts

Create an art center in a cabinet or closet with clearly designated containers for each type of supply. Let this area be accessible to the children using it, explain where things go, and allow kids to not only get out what they need, but also return the items when they are done. This will foster creativity and teach organizational skills and responsibility all at the same time.

— Alison Glass



School Papers

Designate a basket for each child's work, labeled by name. Find an accessible storage area for the containers. When the kids come home, quickly sort papers to trash or storage. At the end of the school year, sort through the containers, keeping only the best. Move these to longer-term storage. "Having a quick place to store all of the incoming papers keeps them from taking over every surface of the house."

— Alison Glass



Cleaning Supplies

Save space in the cabinets by eliminating cleaning chemicals. "With microfiber mops and cleaning cloths, you can clean just about anything in the house using just water." Microfiber cloths trap everything from large dirt and dust particles to bacteria and can be cleaned in a washing machine and reused hundreds of times.

"At first, I thought they were a hoax, but it's pretty miraculous."

— Barbara Flanagan

Linens

Keep no more than four sets of sheets per bedroom. Two cotton for summer and two flannel for winter, Kiefer said.

"Store the bed linens under the bed in a container," she said. "Or, store them flat between your mattress and box spring. Basically you are pressing them that way."

Bath Towels

Folding towels in the traditional way can take up more space than simply rolling them. The process is quick and easy — just fold them in half and, starting at one end, roll the towel up.

"It takes up a little less space and looks neat in your linen closet," Kiefer said. "If you have a set that is specifically for your guests, place those towels and bedding in the guest rooms, not in your linen closet."

Wardrobe

At the start of the season, turn all the hangers backward in your closet. As you wear an item, turn the hanger forward. At the end of the season, donate anything you haven't worn that season.

"That's an easy way to weed out a closet," Kiefer said.

Toiletries

Use an over-the-door pouch with several compartments made for shoes to house toiletries, hair spray, curling irons, curlers and make-up things.

Shoes

Keep shoes in the boxes you purchased them in and put a photo of the shoe on the front of the box.

If possible, store them on a shelf and sort by season and color.

Staying Organized

Monica Kiefer's recommends these five ways to stay organized:

1. Keep your goals visible
2. Clean as you go
3. Pick one area each day to straighten up
4. Schedule one time each week or month to reorganize
5. Review your goals every few months, adjust as needed.

Gannett News Service contributed to this report.

Is it too old?

By Susan Misukaitis | Livingston Life

Most food items carry expiration dates, but what about those undated items that have been sitting in your kitchen for a while? Are they safe? Or is time for them to be thrown out?

The Food Keeper is a kitchen guide developed by the Food Marketing Institute in cooperation with Cornell University that lists many foods and describes how to store and handle them. Following are guidelines for how long some shelf items in your kitchen can be stored for safety and quality after opening.

For more information, visit www.fmi.org.

White flour	6-8 months
Whole-wheat flour	one month; 6-8 months refrigerated
Granulated sugar	two years
Confectioner's sugar	18 months
Brown sugar	four months
Honey	12 months
Spices	2-3 years
Red pepper and paprika	six months
Vanilla and other extracts	12 months
Vegetable oils	1-3 months; four months refrigerated
Solid shortening	three months
Tea bags	12 months
Ground coffee	one week; two weeks refrigerated
Mustard	12 months refrigerated
Catsup	six months refrigerated
Mayonnaise	two months refrigerated