

Conquer the clutter

Professional organizers help you regain control of the home

Talk to Metro Detroit's "clutter-control queens" — professional organizers — and you'll learn a lot about the joys of purging.



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You even may be inspired, as I was, to at least get started organizing your home and getting your life in order for a brand-new year. In addition to feeling somewhat liberated at the end of each project, you might find some long-lost treasures, such as the gift certificates for a spa and manicure I unearthed on a recent cleaning spree.

My closets are daunting, so I followed the advice of the clutter control queens and started with the desk in my home office. Starting small, they say, may keep you from getting overwhelmed and quitting in frustration without making a dent in your clutter.

As I waded through piles of papers, books and memorabilia, I thought about this observation from organizer Ellen Letourneau of Elevate Your Life in Bloomfield Hills:

"Your house is not a warehouse, it's a sanctuary," she said.

It should support, nurture and free you to spend time doing what you really want to do rather than constantly looking for misplaced items or feeling nagging anxiety about your unfulfilled desire to get things under control.

"Only keep that which you deem to be useful or beautiful," Letourneau advised — and start purging now.

"If some of the things you bought or received for the holidays don't fit that criteria, donate, re-gift, return them," she says. "There's really no sense in hanging on to anything you don't love

or don't think you can use."

Think about clutter or piles as "postponed decisions," suggests Letourneau, who has a master's degree in educational psychology. Whether you're merely disorganized or a dyed-in-the-wool pack rat or hoarder, there are a variety of reasons you can't or won't make those tough purging decisions. They include constraints on time or space; a family illness, inheritance or other change; shopping excesses; or even deep-seated psychological problems that are too complicated to go into here.

But one roadblock that may surface once clutter-challenged individuals start purging is "tactile sympathy," warns Betty Huotari, of Logical Placement in Fenton, and president of the southeast Michigan chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers.

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Professional organizer Betty Huotari of Logical Placement in Fenton finishes neighbor Cathy Ebert's closet, shown before at top right.

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Cathy Ebert followed Huotari's advice to stow similar items, such as photos and memorabilia, in labeled, see-through plastic bins.

something once they've touched it," she says. "It brings up an emotional attachment — 'Oh, I wore that to such and such an event' and it makes them reluctant to part with it."

That's where the services of a professional organizer — or a ruthless yet gentle friend — may help. In Metro Detroit, the going rate for a professional organizer is \$40 to \$75 per hour.



Cathy Ebert tidies up her collection of shoes and purses.

Friends presumably will settle for a drink or free lunch — if you're still talking to each other at project's end.

For Cathy Evert, a Fenton mother of four, cleaning out the walk-in closet in her bedroom was like an excavation. She got six hours of help tackling the project last weekend from Betty Huotari, her friend and neighbor.

Amid a jumble of clothes, piles of shoes and tangles of hangers, they found Evert's sixth-grade cheerleader sweater, papier-mâché pumpkins, wedding memorabilia and bulging files of family photos, newspaper clippings, birth certificates and old Christmas cards — all items Huotari said didn't belong in that closet.

"It's amazing what you accumulate," says Evert, whose children range in age from 6 to 12. "We pretty much pulled out everything, and now I can find everything. It's liberating — I feel like I've got this monkey off my back." Beyond that, her 6-year-old daughter,

Anna, got so excited by the project that they bought her a shoe rack and plan to tackle the closet in her room, on their own, this weekend.

Evert says she needed Huotari to jump-start the master closet project because it was too overwhelming on her own. Huotari came prepared with plastic garbage bags, various sized bins, labels, markers and shoe racks, as well as nine years of experience helping others get organized.

The pair reclaimed closet space by deciding what items could be moved elsewhere, what could be purged, what could be donated, what could be repaired and what could be sold.

They also re-arranged the most frequently used items to make them more accessible. For example, they moved summer shoes to an upper shelf and brought Evert's sweaters and her husband's T-shirts, socks and belts down to eye level.

"We put up a tension rod in the basement and moved a lot of summer clothes down there," Evert says. "I have a pile now of stuff that needs to be altered or had spots, things that I wasn't wearing that were hanging in the closet just taking up space."

Huotari suggested that Evert buy a small, fireproof safe for birth certificates and other important documents, and also set aside bins marked "memorabilia" to store sentimental possessions, such as her cheerleader sweater and wedding mementos.

And she recommended Evert take individual photos of her children with their art projects and then let the kids decide which masterpieces to keep. That way, Huotari explains, "You have a photo memory of the artwork, rather than all those bulky art projects."

As for the hundreds of family photos Evert collected over the years, Huotari suggested taking a stack of photos and an album with her each time she has to wait in the car to pick up her children.

"Whenever I'm sitting in a parking lot waiting, I'll put my pictures in an album and be done with it," says Evert, with resolve.

Whether you call in a partner or go it alone, organizers say you need a plan before even setting foot in a closet. "I think most people forget about this step," Huotari says. "They just go and get containers without an idea of what they are going to use them for. Rather, ask yourself: 'What do I want this to look like? What is not working for me and why?'"

She also advises would-be purgers to:

- Carve out a dedicated time; leave the kids with a spouse or sitter.
- Bring water and supplies to avoid straying from the room.
- Turn up the music.
- Go!

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Betty Huotari's Web site, logicalplacement.com, shows how she created order out of chaos on these bookshelves.



Betty Huotari



Mark Stradtner of ShelfGenie in Troy transformed this four-shelf pantry, left, into a six-drawer closet, right. When all the food was put back, the extra space amounted to 1½ empty drawers.



ShelfGenie

A purging primer

Ellen Letourneau cites two types of "hanging on" — one to items from the past that have sentimental attachment, and the other to things that represent the life we think we might live "some day." Among the latter: clothes that don't fit, appliances, tools, machines or crafts that we think we'll use "if" or "when".... Her advice: "Keep the gems; toss the rest."

Follow these purging guidelines:

■ **Kitchens:** Let go of redundant utensils, plastic containers missing their lids, extra china that you seldom use or don't like. Pitch spices older than a year and items past their expiration date.

■ **Closets:** Purge things that are not flattering or that are in poor shape, too small, too big to be altered or out of style.

■ **Garage:** Attack one shelf or corner at a time, tossing or donating sports gear, gardening equipment and other items that are in poor condition, duplicates or that you no longer use. Then arrange by category. Do not leave piles on the floor. Try to hang bikes, garden tools, etc.; use shelving, hooks, cabinets, shoe racks.

■ **Photos:** Toss or give away duplicates, pictures that bring bad memories or are blurry, bad, unflattering or redundant, then sort by event or year — vacation, work events, weddings etc.

■ **Bathrooms:** Toss toiletries that have been open but unused for six months, expired medicines, torn or stained towels. Move items that aren't used at least weekly that really belong elsewhere, such as a laundry room or linen closet.

Resources

When other little girls were playing house or school, Standolyn Robertson was organizing her room or drawing up efficiency plans to make her life simpler. This week, as president emerita of the National Association of Professional Organizers, the Massachusetts-based organizer was involved in filming an upcoming episode of the A&E show, "Hoarders." And on Jan. 19, she'll conduct a free teleseminar on "How to Get and Stay Organized for Life." You can register on her Web site, www.thingsinplace.com, or sign up for her free monthly newsletter, "The 2-Minute Organizer."

■ Contact Ellen Letourneau of Elevate Your Life at (248) 683-9678.

■ Check Betty Huotari's Web site at www.logicalplacement.com.

■ Use clear, labeled containers unless baskets, boxes or other organizing products look better for the space.

■ Avoid impulse purchases.

■ Take inventory before making your shopping list.

■ Tackle "zones" weekly, especially in your home office. Junk mail should go automatically into the recycle bin before hitting any horizontal surface. Take out newspapers and magazines weekly.

■ Establish a family "lost and found" area for stray items; everyone must claim and return items to their "identified" homes on Sunday afternoon.

■ Do dishes nightly — keep counters clear.

■ Do seasonal purges of broken or outgrown sports gear, unused gardening items, duplicate tree stands, picnic baskets and unwanted gifts.

Start with a strategy

Ellen Letourneau of Elevate Your Life in Bloomfield Hills suggests using this handy acronym, SPACE, as an organizing mantra:

S = Sort

P = Purge

A = Assign a home

C = Containerize

E = Equalize

The latter, which basically means one item must go out when one item comes in, is the maintenance part of the equation to keep things in balance once you've reined in the clutter. Here are some additional hints:

■ Place items near where they're used; establish zones, such as an office zone, craft zone, baking zone.

■ Organize closets by item types, such as pants, dresses, blazers, and then sort each group by color. Put shoes where they can be easily seen, with a chair or stool nearby.