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That stack of old margarine tubs has got to go.

And that dot matrix printer in the attic. And the wad of bread bags and tangle of used twist-ties. And while you're at it, how about that ratty orange-and-chartreuse afghan you've been hanging onto only because your grandmother made it for you?

As a new year begins, perhaps it's time to jettison some of the unnecessary stuff that's just taking up real and psychic space in your life. Use it or lose it.

"Let your life dictate what you need," advises Cynthia Townley Ewer, editor and webmaster of organizedhome.com. In a telephone interview from her home in Richland, Wash., Mrs. Ewer

counsels that clutter is like cash — it does no one any good gathering dust.

"There's something very whole about creating an environment in which everything in your life is useful," she maintains.

Casting off excess stuff is just one of the ways to satisfy the yearning for order that usually waxes as the holiday madness wanes. She and other organization and time-management gurus advise adopting new attitudes, habits, routines, and structures that can make life less hectic.

Mrs. Ewer observes that, "We as a culture have ratcheted up our 'stuff requirement.' At the same time, we

have trouble letting go of it once it's no longer needed.

"Some people simply have a Depression-era mentality," she explains. They can't get rid of something because "I might need it someday."

Other people get hung up on the value of something, she continues. They cannot part with an obsolete computer because they paid \$2,000 for it 10 years ago. They got a great deal on those canned green beans. Those stilettos are death traps, but they were a splurge in a weak moment.

"Then there are people

who are into sentimental clutter," Mrs. Ewer says. They're the parents who have squirreled away every piece of artwork their children have ever created, or the young couple who feel they have to keep a collection of hideous doo-dads left to them by a beloved relative.

Her advice in those two cases: Save the artwork that is most meaningful, that which prompts a smile or a special memory, and toss the rest. Take photos of the kitschy family treasures and pass the knick-knacks along to someone who thinks they're swell.

Sweeping away clutter is just half the job of clean liv-

ing. The other half is making sure the junk doesn't pile up again.

Mrs. Ewer uses a "one in, one out" approach — if she buys a new widget, she gets rid of one she has. She also keeps a box marked "ROK" (Random Acts of Kindness) in which she puts surplus scrapbooking materials, fabric, and books. When the box is full, she gives it to someone or someplace that can use it.

Containers such as wire or wicker baskets also help maintain order. "It makes things accessible, it makes them look better, and it also sets a limit," Mrs. Ewer says,

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More organizing and time-management ideas from the experts:

■ Designate a space in which each member of the family deposits items that go in and out of the house every day. For example, a box for school papers and permission slips, a shelf for purses, briefcases, and backpacks.

■ Establish housekeeping routines. "People hate the idea they're going to be a little '50s housewife who defrosts every Wednesday," says Cynthia Townley Ewer of organizedhome.com, but having a laundry schedule means you're less likely to run out of clean underwear.

■ Establish a "household planner" in a folder or three-ring binder. It should hold everything from soccer team phone lists to the pizza parlor flier to the Saturday cleaning checklist — all kinds of handy stuff that keeps life flowing smoothly, Mrs. Ewer says.

■ Get rid of the deadwood in your closet by hosting a surplus clothing swap meet with friends.

If you have clothing you haven't worn in a while but aren't quite ready to part with it, hang it on a rack in the attic or basement. If another year goes by without wearing it, you know it's time to let go.

■ Open your mail by a trash can. Pitch the junk right away — shredding anything that could be helpful to an identity thief — and put the rest in a file folder with slots for bills, personal letters, sales fliers, etc.

■ For a few days, keep a log of how you use your time. "This will help you determine what activities are necessary as opposed to those that do not contribute to reaching your goals," explains Renee King, a director of the National Association of Professional Organizers. "Eliminate activities that are time-wasters and

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noting that when the basket is full, it's a signal that it's time to get rid of some of it.

Brynn Parrish, lead designer for Amazing Space in Sylvania Township, says we all keep too much stuff. "We find the average is 50 pairs of shoes for women and 10 for men," Ms. Parrish reports. She's had female clients who have 300 pairs of shoes and men who have 150 to 200 ties.

"The first thing you need to do is just eliminate clothes you haven't worn in a year," she advises. Don't get sidetracked by telling yourself that you're going to lose weight or that go-go boots might come back in style.

Ms. Parrish says she usually cleans her closets three times a year. "It just accumulates," she admits.

She tells clients to take everything out of the closet that's being overhauled, then make a decision on the fate of each item before it's put back in. Compartmentalizing — putting shoes in cubbies for example — is one of the fundamentals of organizing, but it can be done without investing in a full closet system, she notes.

Bedroom closets often hold items that could be moved to more appropriate places, Ms. Parrish continues. Wrapping paper and luggage that are needed occasionally could be relocated, for example, making room for apparel that's used on a regular basis. Use the middle of the rod for clothing you wear frequently and the ends for garments that you don't get out very often, she suggests.

Ms. Parrish also likes to hang



THE BLADE/JETTA FRASER

Brynn Parrish, lead designer for Amazing Space, says we all keep too much stuff.

as much as possible — even sweatshirts — because, she says, it's easy to forget what you have crammed into drawers.

Beyond bulging closets, one of the ways to be organized is to establish a regular parking place for things, such as a hook for keys, a basket on the desk for bills, a drawer in the kitchen for coupons. Set it up for the way you live your life.

"My desk is not [organized], but I know where everything is," Ms. Parrish points out.

Fortify your good intentions with a plan, advises Betty Huotari, vice president of the Michigan chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers. She's the owner of Logical Placement in Fenton, Mich., just south of Flint.

Decide what area you're going to tackle first, then try to identify exactly what's wrong, she explains. Does the closet need more shelving? More rod space? Does the living room have too much furniture, too many knick-knacks, or both?

Many attempts to organize fall apart because people lack the direction that a plan gives them,

Mrs. Huotari says.

Secondly, set time aside to do the job. Give yourself a deadline, she adds. Third, don't put too many projects on your to-do list. "Don't start your list with 30 items," Mrs. Huotari advises.

"Only list three to five and pace yourself accordingly."

If the task of clearing and organizing seems too overwhelming to tackle, break that big job into more manageable pieces, advises Renee King, a director of the National Association of Professional Organizers and an associate product manager for MeadWestvaco, which manufactures AT-A-GLANCE planning and record-keeping products.

The baby-step approach "helps alleviate the feeling of being overwhelmed and will keep you moving towards completion," she explains.

In a telephone interview from her office in Sidney, N.Y., Mrs. King also advocates setting aside five or 10 minutes to plan your day. It can be done the night before or early that morning, but it will help you focus on what you need to accomplish, she explains. "I'm a big list-writer," Mrs. King adds.

A related exercise is to write down larger, longer-term goals

— buying a house within five years, maybe, or getting a promotion. Review and update the list regularly, she advises.

"Learn to be flexible," Mrs. King goes on. Lots of people write goals and to-do lists, then become unglued when real life intrudes. "Things happen that are out of our control," she observes, pointing out there's a difference between procrastinating and accepting that detours occur. "We have to go with the flow. There's always tomorrow."

In the same vein, she counsels tempering January's gung-ho good intentions with realism.

"Set goals you feel you can achieve. Don't overwhelm yourself, and don't beat yourself up if you don't make these goals."

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focus your energies on those activities that will help you reach your goals."

● Utilize the time you spend waiting. Mrs. King suggests you keep a file of magazine or newspaper articles you would like to read but don't seem to have the time for. Take the folder with you when you travel. Take mail and articles to read or note

cards to write to family or friends while you wait in the doctor's or dentist's office.

● To stay organized, "change the mentality of thinking that once it's done, it's done," Mrs. Huotari says. "It's a maintenance way of life." Establish systems to keep from getting buried, and make them simple enough so you're really going to use them, she advises. Accept that you're going to have good days and bad days.

— ANN WEBER