

Keeping In Touch

October 2004

The Village Employee Assistance Program

Clearing the Clutter

"Ridding ourselves of the material things that no longer serve us, gives us room, time and energy to truly enjoy the things that are most important in life."

—Christy Best, Professional Organizer, clutterbug.net

The "stuff" we can't bear to part with has spawned a multi-billion-dollar industry. According to the International Housewares Association, Americans spent roughly \$1.2 billion on closet and storage organizers in 2002, up 10.4 percent from 1997. Americans even watch people clear up their clutter on popular new reality TV shows like TLC's "Clean Sweep," and HGTV's "Mission Organization."

Now, people are recognizing the negative effect clutter can have on their psyche, and are paying professional organizers to help them clear their homes and lives of clutter. The National Association of Professional Organizers has grown by 40 percent nationwide, and now has over 2,700 members.

Clearing your life of clutter, however, doesn't require you to hire a professional organizer. If you've decided it's time get rid of some of your stuff, here are some tips from organizing expert, Pam Hix, Minnetonka, Minn.

- Begin the de-cluttering process slowly. Start with a drawer or shelf. Take each item out, asking yourself— Does this add value to my life? When was the last time I used it? Could someone else use it, or is it junk? If I am going to keep it, does it belong here?
- If an item is beautiful, useful or loved, keep it. If not, get rid of it. A good rule of thumb is "If you haven't used it in the last 12 months, you probably won't use it in the next 12."
- As you go through the process, have handy a number of boxes labeled, donations/giveaway; consignment; repair; doesn't belong here; trash; undecided.
- Immediately after you've finished, take the repair and donation boxes to the front seat of your car—not the trunk where they could languish for months.
- Decluttering is an ongoing process, so make it easier by following the "in and out" rule. Each time you bring something new into your home, force yourself to get rid of something old.

De-clutter on your own terms

If you're a packrat, and you really like all those things you've been hanging onto, don't ask a "thrower" into your home to help you de-clutter. To a thrower, everything is junk, and you're in danger of ridding your home of the stuff that comforts you. De-clutter slowly and on your own terms, making sure to keep the things that, to you, make your house feel like a home.



Cleaning Computer Clutter

As we enter the electronic age, computer clutter has increased astronomically. Old e-mails and documents, and unused programs, are all taking up space and reducing the speed of our computers.

Debbie DeSpirt, www.about.com, offers the following tips for clearing the email and document clutter on your computer.

- Delete all emails that have no relevance. If it's confirming a meeting or date, put the time and place in your day planner.
- Put electronic newsletters in a subfolder so you can find them later.
- Put contact information about people and businesses in the address book.
- Burn photos on a CD, or delete them.
- Delete your sent, out and delete box daily or weekly.
- Place all documents into appropriate folders for easy reference.
- Delete first drafts of proposals and other documents. Keep the most recent.
- Delete files you haven't looked at in a year or more.
- Keep a minimum number of shortcut icons on your desktop.

Computer continued on back

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Turning Clutter into Cash at Tax-Time

When it comes to tax deductions, non-cash donations are just as valuable as cash. Gather old clothes, kitchen gadgets, sports equipment and other closet clutter that someone else could use and you could rack up some surprisingly large deductions. Come up with \$600 worth of used items to give to your favorite charity, for instance, and you can cut your tax bill by just over \$200 if your combined federal and state tax rate is 34 percent. Cash or non-cash, you need a receipt to deduct any single donation over \$250. Receipts for non-cash donations need to be signed by the recipient. It's up to you to keep an itemized list with an estimated value for each item.

Computer *continued from front*

Technology writer Carolyn Jab's focuses on program and system clutter, and encourages computer users to clean out their computers on a regular basis by:

Scrapping unused programs.

Don't just delete these files. On a PC, use the Add/Remove function (found by clicking My Computer and then Control Panel) so even hidden bits of programming will be erased.

Cleaning out the cache. The cache is the computer's junk drawer. Every time someone visits a website, a bit of material making it easier to revisit goes into a temporary folder on the computer. Of course, many websites don't warrant a second look, so data they've left behind just clogs up the hard drive. Internet Explorer makes it easy to clean out this collection of temporary files. Click on Tools, Internet Options, Temporary Internet Files, Delete Files. While you're at it, empty the recycling bin too.

Defragging. Defragmenting a computer is like gathering up all the piles of paper from different rooms of

the house and organizing them in a filing cabinet. When a computer commits things to memory, it looks for any available space. After a while, the gaps between files make it harder to retrieve information, so it's a little like hunting for a field trip permission form when it could be anywhere in the house. Defragmenting puts files into order so they can be found expeditiously. In Windows, click on Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools, Disk Defragmenter. If this job hasn't been done recently, it can take several hours, so start defragging at bedtime.

Fighting off viruses. The more you use e-mail, the more you need software that will detect a virus before it does damage to your system. Two of the most reliable programs are Norton (symantecstore.com) and Virus Scan (mcafee.com). The basic software is often available at a discount but you'll also want to subscribe to a service that provides updates whenever new viruses appear.

Counselor Column



Barb Fix

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Question: *I need help organizing my life and my home. I am constantly on the move, which often causes my home and office to become a cluttered, disorganized mess. What are some ways to organize my life and surroundings?*

Barb Fix: Sometimes it's the "getting started" that keeps us from addressing the clutter in our lives. Asking for help in wrestling down the initial clutter can get you over the hump of procrastination—then

the maintenance isn't usually such a big deal.

I recently had a friend help with some yard work—what a treat! It helped get me going. I also used a housekeeper for a few months to help me get caught up. Now, I am keeping up on both myself. In each case, it helped to start with a clean slate. Once I'd gotten through the big mess, the maintenance became much more manageable.

Another idea is to pick one room to clean, and then focus on the maintenance. Add another room once you're comfortable you can maintain the first area. Taking it in small steps like this will make the task less overwhelming; and leads to success. A taste of success will keep you motivated to continue onto the next room.

Here are some other key ingredients for organizing your life:

- Sit down as a family to create a plan.
- Start small—one room or one small piece of the project at a time.
- Be realistic in terms of time, energy and cost.
- Try not to worry about it—because now you have a plan.
- Put your plan into action—schedule weekly family meetings to keep the routine going.
- Ask for help to get started.

Finally, give yourself a break. It won't do a bit of good to expend energy beating yourself up for the mess you live in. Hopefully, some of these tips will get you through the initial clean-up, and the rest will flow more smoothly.