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IDEAS

10 Organizing Steps for the Years Ahead

By Jill B. Yesko

When cleaning, decluttering, and organizing for the years ahead, first think about who you are and how you live now. My suggestions come as a certified professional organizer who has helped more than 4,000 families organize their homes, downsize, move, or transition.

One of the most important goals for organizing and decluttering is to make space for the life you live and your plans for the future. Who are you now? What do you want to be doing in five years? Does your home reflect that?

Here are some steps for organizing your home for the years ahead.

1. Make space for your life and current hobbies

Many of us live among the archives of who we once were instead of living in a home for who we are today. Over the next decade or years ahead, your home should reflect your goals and plans – intertwining into what you are enjoying right now.

For example, if you like to hike, set up a space for easy access to hiking poles, boots, and rain gear. If you want to enjoy time with your grandchildren, set up a room with toys and puzzles.



How many of us have a closet like this? This one is before decluttering help from a pro. Photo: Courtesy of Discover Organizing

2. Clean out hobbies from the past

If you are not skiing anymore, do you need to keep all your ski equipment?

Thirty years ago, when my children were young, I thought I wanted to be a quilter. I bought fabric, patterns, cutting utensils. I never got around to starting my quilting life. When I downsized a couple of years ago, I got rid of bags of fabric. We don't need to keep storing items from hobbies that we thought we'd try or represent our past good intentions.

3. Plan for the future

Part of making plans for the future means making plans to get rid of the past. We tend to look backward, which can overwhelm what we are doing now – and what we want to do next.



After help from a certified professional organizer, this basement closet is now functional.
Photo: Courtesy of Discover Organizing

4. Start small but start

Many retirees put off trying something new in their lives like signing up for a new class or trip, until they have finished the task of clearing out the basement.

Organizing doesn't have to be all or nothing. You CAN do the work AND have fun in the same week. You don't have to finish all your obligations first before making time for you.

Start small and work often. First, decide which space you want to address. Don't start with the toughest room or the garage. And don't plan to finish a room in one day. I recommend setting a timer for yourself for the amount of time you want to spend. Break that up into 30-minute chunks. Decluttering with all of the decisions to be made can be exhausting.

5. Make an appointment with yourself

You can also ask a nonjudgmental friend or family member to help you. It's good to do little bits at a time because then you build a habit.

For example, make an appointment with yourself every Tuesday morning to spend an hour sorting in the basement or the craft room. You could ask a friend over to help you keep your appointment. They can just be there reading a book while you sort in another room.

Working with a professional organizer works so well because we're an appointment that you do every week for 2 to 4 hours. When people have an appointment and spend money, they are more accountable. There are penalties for canceling. You can do it yourself – if you act like the time set aside is an actual appointment.

6. Follow the principles of organizing and decluttering

First, gather your materials like plastic garbage bags, plastic bins for storage, cardboard boxes, a notebook, and markers. Next, work in that space left to right, top to bottom, so you don't lose your path (and you can see progress!). With each item, decide whether to keep, discard, recycle, donate or sell. For items that are broken, send those to the landfill.

Check with your local charity to see what they accept for items – clothes, books, dishes, furniture? Many charities do not accept electronics or books. Be sure only to donate clean, usable items so that your donation is a gift and not a burden.

7. Choose happiness

Remove the pain ghosts. When deciding whether to keep or get rid of an item, figure out how it makes you feel. Make sure your home doesn't have objects that elicit negativity and broken dreams. Your home should have things that will support you, not bring you down. If you have to keep painful items such as divorce papers, be sure to store them in a box in the back of the basement, not in the working files that you see every day.

This does not mean getting rid of all photos or mementos of times past. I have my dog's tags in a little frame. Yes. I miss him. I have a picture of my father in my entryway. I grieve both of them. But I enjoy looking at my father and greeting him daily.

8. Keep a notebook handy

A notebook serves as a record of what to do with items. It also is a place to keep your stories. Make pages for KEEP, SELL, DONATE, and STORYTIME.

Keep list: This will create a home inventory.

Sell page: You can start researching what you want to sell it for or where to sell it, like an online auction site or an eBay consignment store.

Donate page: Keep a record of what you donated. Even if you don't use it for tax purposes later, keeping a record will help you remember what you did with that item. Didn't I have a roasting pot? Whatever happened to that?

Storytime page, or "Favorite Things" page: Sometimes, we hold onto things because they remind us of a happy time in our lives. When you are trying to release an item, write a quick story about why that item means so much to you.

Perhaps you keep the Nancy Drew novels because you remember spending summer days at your grandmother's house when you were 12 – and the afternoons reading on the sofa with a glass of iced tea next to you while your grandmother was in the kitchen. If you can share or record that memory, you can release the item.

9. Make a short book

Write a book about the things that mean so much to you – and then release them. Photograph the memorabilia or furniture items. Upload to Shutterfly. Include your notes from your storytime page.

10. Finish cooking that meal

When you cook a meal, the meal is not done until all of the dishes are washed and put away. After each organizing time, put the donation items straight into the car. Don't just haul them to the garage to sit for a year. Take the discard items to the trash can outside. Same with recycling. When you work in little bits at a time, it makes clean up easier.

The best way we can honor ourselves as we age is to align our homes with our current selves, no matter who that is. Does your home match you – or match a different person who you were 20-30 years ago?

Let's clear this space for you to live the life you want to live now and in the future.

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