



Skeletons In the Closet

A Plan Of Action For Organizing Your Home Storage

***D**o you waste time trying to find things you know you have? Do you feel you lack enough storage space? Are you on a Yo-Yo Organizing System, where you try one method after another of “getting organized” only to have to start at the beginning again? If so, here are some specific techniques that will make your storage projects simple, manageable, and attainable. This plan works **with** your personal needs and personality rather than against them. It’s a realistic look on how to “get organized” to enhance your busy lifestyle by working against it.*

It Just Doesn’t Work. . .

Most people fall into one of three groups:

- They’ve tried and tried to get organized and have never quite succeeded.
- They used to be organized (really) but something happened somewhere along the way.
- They are basically organized but are always looking for different ways to improve their system.

Whatever group you’re in, you need quick solutions. You’re interested in better storage systems in order to get on with your life. Most attempts at organizing storage start with indiscriminate purging or a shopping trip to buy containers and tend to focus on the solution rather than the problem. This action plan, however, organizes in a logical sequence from the inside out by identifying the roadblocks to long-term organizing success and focusing on customizing your space to reflect who *you* are and what is important to *you*. There are also numerous tips for storing your stuff as well as

purchasing pointers to consider before buying more organizing containers, gizmos or gadgets. This recipe for organizing helps you achieve a feeling of freedom, power, and success!

Developing a New Attitude. . .

How would you describe an organized space? Most people would say “neat and tidy” or “minimalistic.” However, being organized has less to do with the way an environment looks than how effectively it functions. You should be able to find what you need when you need it and feel happy within the space. A successful living area works for, not against, what you’re trying to achieve.

Organizing is not a mysterious talent; it’s a skill that anyone can learn by using a simple step-by-step process. It is sustainable if the system is built around the way you think and is designed to adapt with you as your life and work change. You can’t afford to be disorganized. It’s a survival skill for maintaining our busy life styles in the twenty-first century!

Three important steps must be taken for you to organize by the inside-out method. First, **analyze** your current situation, including evaluating where you are, where you're going and what's holding you back. Then, **strategize** by creating a plan of action, including a realistic schedule for making it happen. Then **attack!** Sort and arrange items for long-lasting results, and those skeletons in your closets will disappear forever!

“You Can't Fix It Until You Know What's Broken. . .”

First, analyze why there's a problem.. A professional organizer has found that although many messes look the same, the reasons vary considerably. The cause is usually not a lack of storage space, and clutter is not a result of sloppiness, laziness or incompetence. It's actually determined by:

- simple mistakes that can be easily fixed,
- environmental realities beyond your control, or
- psychological forces that may sabotage any system you set up.

Self-awareness is one of the best tools to use in getting and staying organized.

Simple Mistakes. . .

Many simple errors in organizing contribute to a clutter problem. If your space is getting out of control, consider these facts:

1. Things can't be put away if there's no place to put them. *Solution: Assign all items a single, consistent home.*
2. If it's too hard to put something away, most people simply won't do it. *Solution: Check whether items are stored near where you actually use them and whether storage units are easily accessible.*
3. You have more possessions than places to put them. *Solutions: Reduce the number of belongings by getting rid of excess items,*

add storage units or fully utilize the space you already have.

4. Complicated systems can confuse and frustrate. *Solution: Work with simple, logical systems that provide quick and easy access of any item needed.*
5. Do you leave things out as visual reminders of what there is to do? The number of items can build up and get out of control, defeating the original intent. *Solution: Create a less obtrusive system for reminding you of important things.*
6. Do you “put off” clean-up because it's boring? *Solution: Make it more enjoyable by making storage areas more attractive. Adding personal style and pizzazz will help you to maintain storage areas.*

Beyond Your Control. . .

There are times when, no matter what we do, we can only get so far. External factors create limits on how organized we can be.

1. Work overload may present a problem. Business “downsizing,” families with dual incomes and other factors create many time demands. For a week or two, keep a two-column notebook. In the left column list each task as you do it and record how long it takes to complete. In the right column list the tasks you needed to do but couldn't get to and note the time that each would have required. Then think through how many hours of work are being expected of you, how best to use your time and jobs you can delegate to others or hire an outside service to do.
2. Apply the brakes occasionally and be willing to say “no.” Perpetual motion will eventually burn you out, so be realistic about how much you can do.
3. Changes in living situations create speed bumps in our organizing systems and it takes time to process the changes. Common transitions include moving, marriage, retirement, illness or death in family, job

search and career changes. In coping with such transitions, work with a temporary system until you know your new priorities and modifications needed.

4. Sometimes there really is no more room. You've utilized your space to the fullest extent from floor to ceiling and wall to wall and have pared your belongings down to just what you use and love. The only options left may be considering a move to a larger home or utilizing offsite storage.

Hidden Reasons. . .

Are their other reasons for disorganized space? Perhaps strong hidden impulses keep unraveling your efforts.

1. A need for abundance may indicate a need for comfort, security and identity. If so, build around this desire by organizing what you have rather than trying to force yourself to throw things out. Once organized, it will be easier to see what is excessive and get rid of things gradually.
2. Do you feel at your best when dealing with and solving crisis situations? If so, you may always be rebuilding or "fixing" excellent storage systems or never quite completing them. Instead, complete and maintain your present systems and focus on more meaningful tasks for your problem-solving skills.
3. Perhaps your goals and priorities are not clear. If so, don't try to do everything at once. Focus on a few objectives first and later on select others. Feel good about accomplishing a few goals rather than having so many left undone.
4. Sentimental attachment to things can present a real roadblock to organizing success. We can wind up living in an enormous amount of clutter surrounded by items we never use. Free up storage space by letting go of the old or at least moving it to a less accessible location.

Sentimental Journey

Keepsakes such as letters, family photos, a child's christening outfit, etc. definitely have a place in your home and can trigger memories that bring you joy and some perspective on who you are. However, be selective and keep only those items that have strong emotional or financial value. Save only the best and store them in a family memorabilia center.

Protect important photos, letters and records in archival boxes or albums. Flat file boxes are handy for vacation souvenirs, and a trunk is a good place for more bulky items. Each family member may want a personal memory box to fill with such things as autograph books, cherished letters, photos of special events, a receipt from the purchase of a prom dress or first car, a state fair blue ribbon from a 4-H project or other precious items.

5. Clutter may be a protective barrier, insulating people from the outside world. If so, start with one clutter-free room using only items you use and love. Then create another similar room and another until only a single room is left cluttered. Eventually, you'll feel that you can get rid of the excess for good.
6. Disorganization may be a way of holding yourself back because of a hidden fear of success or failure. If so, make small changes and give yourself time to adjust before doing more.
7. Are you a perfectionist? Clutter may accumulate because you never have time to do it perfectly. If so, give yourself permission to be a bit less perfect. Take small steps to do something, however imperfect, to help solve the problem.

Remember...there is no one perfect organizing solution to a problem.

8. Perhaps you actually dislike the space! You may not have bothered to “settle in” because you want to be somewhere else. If so, consider moving. If this isn’t possible, brighten up the space with personal items you like. If you feel good about your space, you’re more likely to want to spend time there and maintain whatever organizing system you set up.

Organizing From the Inside Out...

Step 1: Analyze the situation

Storage areas are filled with a variety of items we use often, things once used and things we think we may use again some day. Take a good hard look at these items and keep those that are in good condition or that have practical, monetary or sentimental value. Keep it manageable.

Start by doing a personal needs assessment. Ask yourself the following questions for each organizing project, no matter how large or how small the area is:

What part of the present system is working?

Identify and build on what’s already working to save time and energy and work with, not against, your natural habits.

What’s not working or frustrating you?

List on paper everything that needs fixing so that you can solve all the problems, not just some. As you study the situation, think of responses to such questions as:

“I can never find ...”

“The clutter makes me feel ...”

“I don’t have a place to put ...”

“I’m losing money because ...”

“I’m tired of ...”

What items are most essential to you?

Focus on identifying what is important to you and finding homes for these items rather than simply getting rid of things. Your decisions on

most important things in your life will also help in the actual sorting that soon starts.

Think about what makes your own life worth living and gives you a feeling of joy and accomplishment. Follow the 80-20 guideline, which states that we use about 20 percent of what we own. The other 80 percent is made up of items we once used, feel we “should” use, or think we might use “someday.” Or imagine what you would save if there were a fire and you only had thirty minutes to rescue your most important possessions and papers. Which would they be?

Why do you want to get organized?

If you don’t feel a need to get organized, you will probably not be able to set up and maintain a new storage system. Therefore, identify and write down what you expect to achieve by getting rid of the clutter. Include such things as more time, less stress, find things more easily, gain a sense of control, reduce costs, etc. Use this motivation sheet as a reminder of your goals as you’re setting up your new system.

What’s causing problems?

Review all of the information you’ve considered so far and take a realistic look at what’s keeping you from reaching your goals. Reasons vary from person to person and room to room so consider the problems for each space you work on.

Step 2: Plan Your Strategy

A key to convenient storage is to plan around the activities within a room or space. As you identify each activity, also think about what supplies are required and what storage units you could use to house them. (Keep in mind that the average room can accommodate three to five different activities.)

Strategy Work Sheet		
Space: <i>Living Room</i>		
<u>Activity</u>	<u>Supplies</u>	<u>Storage Needed</u>
<i>TV</i>	<i>TV guide Remote VCR tapes</i>	<i>TV storage cabinet</i>
<i>Reading</i>	<i>Books Newspapers Magnifying glass</i>	<i>Bookshelves End table shelves</i>

After listing activities and supplies needed, sketch out ideas for rearranging the space or room to create each activity zone. Plan the area around your natural habits and preferences, keeping in mind where clutter seems to accumulate. Consider, too, the interrelationships between zones (separate the TV and reading areas, etc.), architectural features, high traffic areas or other restrictions.

It's time to start moving furniture and storage units around to define your zones. How do they fit? Do you like them in this area? What adjustments are needed?

Make a time table for action. Estimate the amount of time needed for each step in setting up your new storage system. Include sorting, getting rid of things, deciding where to place the various items, filling storage units and making any final adjustments. Be realistic. Most people either greatly overestimate or underestimate the length of time needed. For instance, a small closet or bathroom may take only a few hours, but rooms in most homes take at least one to one and one-half days to complete. Allow an extra day or two for overflowing rooms and garages. Then set aside this time on your schedule to help assure it will get done. Don't plan to do it "in your spare time." Make it a priority!

Ready For Action!

Now you're ready to sort. Go through everything, even those piles of stuff in corners. Attack what's visible first to show results fast! Use a quick-sort method to keep you moving and quickly identify important items. (Refer to your answers to previous questions on what's important to you and what's needed for activities within a room or space.) Do one room completely one zone or space at a time. Don't get side-tracked and move from one zone to another or one room to another.

Take the Plunge and Purge

Decide what to save and what to get rid of...and how. Options include throwing away; giving away to friends or charities; selling at a garage sale, a consignment shop or through ads, or put it in storage.

Charitable organizations welcome items in good condition. Consider such places as homeless shelters, the library, hospitals and other care centers. Some organizations specialize in working with groups, such as abused children or women returning to the work force. Schools and senior citizen centers often welcome materials to use in crafts.

Garage sales are time-consuming but can be fun when all family members are involved or when joining together with a friend to share the work. Or sell older valuables to a dealer or through an ad in your local newspaper.

Offsite storage may be an option if you have furniture you wish to keep for a short while or important records to store. Consider costs versus benefits carefully. Wrap and label all items for safety and keep a detailed inventory of everything stored. You should also check to see that these items are insured.

Find a Home For All Items

Use logic! Store related items together with currently used items in front. Less often items can be stored in the back of storage areas. Convenience is essential for keeping your storage system working. Keep things accessible so that you can see what you have and get to it with a minimum of effort.

Containers Help Organize

Containers help to keep things separated and organized. They can be plastic or cardboard boxes, wicker or wire baskets, rattan or wooden trunks, or even plastic bags. Select containers that are attractive, sturdy and easy to handle. Double check sizes before purchasing so that you'll have enough room without overcrowding. Before your shopping trip, check your lists to see what containers are needed for each area. Then measure carefully, including:

- the height, width and depth of the items to be stored.
- the height, width and depth of space where the container will be used.
- the actual containers to be sure they'll fit both the intended contents and the space where they will be used. (Take a small tape measure with you when shopping.)

Evaluate

About two weeks after you're finished, evaluate your system. Does it seem to work well for you? Is it easy to maintain? Are there adjustments to make? If so, make them and then try it again.

Repeat the evaluations process until you're satisfied with your system. Maintain the organization by keeping it simple and putting things away at the end of each day. Then schedule occasional evaluations on what's working and what's not and plan periodic purges of items no longer used.

Some Thoughts On Possessions

Keep the beautiful and useful; get rid of the rest! (Would you pay to move the item?)

When you buy something new, get rid of something old.

Buy quality, not quantity.

Limit how much you keep of any one thing.
Less is more.

Put things away! Neatness counts!

Use the good stuff. Don't hide it or save it for "special occasions."

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