

Living

**Julie Morgenstern**

# Sorts out all your stuff

**You asked... and Julie answered!** Here, the organizing pro and REDBOOK columnist reveals her no-fail clutter-busting secrets for your space and your schedule.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BEN GOLDSTEIN

## ▶ How to find more room for everything

**Q** My kitchen is supersmall, with only a few cabinets and minimal counter space. Everything seems to accumulate on the counters, which leaves me with no room to prepare meals. How can I find a place for everything and keep my counters clear? —Kristina Tenney, 28, Ansonia, CT

**A** First, only items you use every day belong on your countertop. This might be a toaster or a coffee pot. That's it. Anything else should find a home on a shelf, and the things you use only once or twice a year should be stored elsewhere. Second, consider a wall-mounted shelf above the counter where you can store that coffee pot or a toaster. Third, make sure you're maximizing the cabinets you do have by adjusting shelves so there's no dead space between them. Shelves not adjustable? Purchase a few grid stacking shelves or under-shelf baskets (there are affordable options at the Container Store and organize.com) to double your storage space. Then consider buying a narrow rack with shelves that can be hooked over a door to hold cans or spices, or consider investing in a grid system you can hang over a backsplash or on a wall.

Finally, it might be time to *really* clean out your cupboards. Most people only use 20 percent of what they own in any category—that means you're probably using only a fifth of all the dishes, glassware, and pots and pans you own. If you don't use it, get rid of it! And consolidate what you do have—bulky packaging takes up a lot of room. Transfer dry goods, like cereal, flour, and sugar, to smaller containers or even heavy-duty freezer storage bags.

**Q** My house is just under 1,000 square feet, and each bedroom has one tiny closet. How do you organize a clothes closet that small? I can't even find organizers that fit! —Shelley Fraely, 43, Chattanooga, TN

**A** It's easy to create a custom closet in even the smallest of spaces. First, get a few steel-wire shelf dividers (available for \$7 at the Container Store) and place them along your top shelf to separate clothing into piles of T-shirts, sweaters, jeans, and so on. Second, don't underestimate the importance of great hangers. Plastic hangers may seem like an upgrade from wire ones, but I've found they take up far too much space and aren't good for your garments. (Because they're made for men's suits, they tend to stretch out sweaters and T-shirts.) Instead, try wood

or acrylic. I also like Huggable Hangers (20 for \$20 at hsn.com), because they're slimmer than average hangers and can really conserve closet space.

Then, group short items, like skirts and tops, at one end of your closet rod, and hang long garments, like dresses, at the other. I recommend buying a double-hang closet rod, which you suspend from your existing rod, automatically doubling your hanging space. And don't keep unused hangers on the rod! Place a basket at the bottom of the closet, and when you take a garment, throw the hanger inside. That way, you can always find a hanger quickly when you need one.

**Q** I consider myself a shoe-ista! I keep every pair of shoes and boots I own in the boxes they come in. With more than 200 pairs, how can I keep all of my favorite ones without having to designate a bedroom just for my collection? —Cheri Ambrose, 48, East Hanover, NJ

**A** This is an impossible question—you want the shoes and you want the space, but you can't have both! The key is to figure out why you have so many pairs: Do you simply enjoy collecting them, or do you truly feel like you wear them all? If it's the former, try to come up with a fun way to store the shoes so you can maximize your appreciation for them. For example, I once worked with a client who built a storage unit along her bedroom wall so she could display her shoes as a sort of art installation. It was fun for guests to look at and gave her a mental boost whenever she saw it.

If your collection is more functional, then it might be time to weed through and figure out what you truly use. First, organize shoes by category (dressy, casual, work) and by color (brown, black, red) and do a preliminary sort. You might find that you have eight or nine pairs of essentially the same shoe. Once you get rid of the worn-out ones, the ones that hurt, or the ones you never wear, you'll have a much more manageable collection. The ones you use most often can be placed on a shoe rack, while seasonal ones can be stored.

**Q** How long should you keep the boxes that come with small appliances or electronic items? I keep them in my garage, and it's time to get rid of a few of them. —Laura DuBaré-Wren, 55, Lithia Springs, GA

**A** Never keep any packaging beyond the length of time you actually could or would return an item, which is probably within the first two



### Easy organizing!

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weeks or month of owning it. (News flash: The likelihood that you'll actually find the box and pack the item in it in case you move a few years from now is next to zero!) But save the owner's manuals—even though many are available online, it can be time-intensive to track down the information you need when you need it. Better to simply store hard copies of owner's manuals in a filing-cabinet folder. Weed through it once a year and toss any instructions that are obsolete.

## ➤ How to clear up the paper piles

**Q** Between the mail and papers coming home from school, I can't seem to keep on top of paper clutter in my house. Any advice? —Alissa Witham, 33, West Dundee, IL

## 8 things you can toss without guilt—right now!

**1 Kitchen items you haven't used in a year or longer.** If you've never used your breadmaker or panini press, the odds you'll use it in the near future are pretty slim. Donate the bulky appliances and enjoy the extra space.

**2 The entire contents of your junk drawer.** There's a reason you call it that! Think you might have some useful items stored there? Empty the whole drawer into a box, and any time you use an item, place it back in the drawer. At the end of the month, toss whatever's left in the box and rename the newly functional drawer.

**3 Clothes that no longer fit.** They make it more difficult to search your closet to find the things you do wear. If you truly believe they'll fit at some point in the near future, then box and store them until then.

**4 School work from high school or college.** The material is most likely outdated, and the chances you'll refer to it again are slim. Save

your favorite papers in an archival box, but toss the notebooks, texts, and handouts.

**5 Baby gear.** Safety standards change so quickly that car seats and cribs are generally outdated just a few years after they're manufactured. Plus, they take up a lot of room. Keep only if you're already working on baby number two.

**6 Random receipts.** If you don't know what they're for, or if they're for basic items (groceries, toiletries, lunch) that you don't need to record for taxes or expenses, get rid of them.

**7 Half-used bottles of shampoo, conditioner, or makeup you tried only once.** If you don't like the product enough to use it every day, you won't like it in a few months' time.

**8 Books you've never read, or books that you'll never re-read.** Donate them and save space on your shelves for the books that speak to your soul.

**A** Paper clutter isn't an organizing problem; it's a time-management problem. Why? Because most paper represents a task: something to read, digest, or make a decision about. So the solution is to build time into your schedule to process, respond to, and file the papers that come into your home—whether via the mail or in your child's backpack. These are your home office hours, and you can break them up how you want. Maybe it's 15 minutes each day or two hours on a weekend, but you do need to deal with the influx on a regular basis so it doesn't build up. To make the process easier, designate a home information center where you have room to write and spread out papers. And—this is key—make this the spot where you actually open the mail! Get two trays—one for incoming mail and one for outgoing papers that need action, such as bills to be paid and field-trip forms to be signed—and one portable file box. Create hanging folders for each family member, subdivided into folders for category (for example, your daughter might have folders for camp info, dance classes, etc.), then go through those folders every season, tossing outdated material.

**Q** Since my husband and I combined our stuff, we can't agree on how to file documents. For example, do your bank statements go under "Bank" or "Chase"? —Melanie Shannon Hill, 32, Culver City, CA

**A** Most people get confused when they try to combine their filing systems, but, contrary to popular belief, there is no "right" way to file. So the person who deals with the most paperwork should be in charge of creating a filing system, as well as creating a one-page filing index that explains that system. This index should be placed in a clear sleeve and stuck to the outside of the filing cabinet, so a spouse can easily file without asking for directions. Finally, if paperwork is a chore for both of you, try giving your files more meaningful names. For instance, switching the name of a folder from *Financial Planning to Wealth* or from *Future Vacation Plans to Living the Dream* highlights your emotional connection to the goals the papers represent, and might inspire you both to keep them in order.

## ➤ How to straighten up after others

**Q** I have four kids ranging in age from 4 to 19. Three play instruments—including the tuba!—and the 4-year-old has

**toys scattered around the house. How do I organize my house so everyone can find everything?** —Erica Orloff, 45, Richmond, VA

**A** Think of a kindergarten classroom—those rooms are packed with kids doing different things, yet they're very orderly: There's a place for art, a place for blocks, and so on. The same idea can apply in your home. Since most of your kids play instruments, you could set up a music zone in one corner of the family room, where everyone stores their instruments and sheet music. In another corner you could set up a game zone, where everyone—including the 19-year-old—keeps their toys, video games, or whatever else they might use in a communal area. You might also want to consider a labeling system where everyone is assigned a shelf, or a certain color sticker to be placed on his belongings, so anyone can tell in an instant whose stuff is whose.

**Q** My guy is a pack rat who keeps everything, including CDs and posters from college. How do I coax him to get rid of it all?

—J.L. Scott, 29, Brooklyn, NY

**A** Clutter is never just junk—every item represents an attachment to a person or a memory or perhaps

a plan for the future, and it's important to respect that when it comes to your guy's possessions. Just like you can't make someone quit smoking or go on a diet, you can't make someone want to get rid of his stuff. He's a pack rat and you prefer a streamlined space? Come up with a compromise: Let there be certain rooms where he has the freedom to display and store his stuff, and you have the freedom to close the door. Then you can also designate some areas in your home that are neutral, communal spaces where both of you must agree on the decor. Start with a conversation where you explain how finding extraneous things strewn all over the house actually affects you and your interactions with him. Saying something like, "I understand why these things are important to you, but it's hard for me to relax and enjoy your company when our home seems cluttered to me; let's come up with a solution that doesn't affect either one of us or our relationship negatively," is one way to open up a dialogue about what you both need.

**Q** How do I keep my wild child's room organized? She has little plastic boxes for each pair of earrings, bracelet, or necklace, but everything still ends up on the floor! Arggh!

—Elaïne Montejano Moore, 43, Fresno, CA

**A** She has a different box for each pair of earrings? That's overly categorized and too hard to maintain for an adult, let alone a tween. Instead, try giving her a large box for bracelets, a hook or



## The de-clutter commandments

Show your stuff who's boss with these no-mess secrets that work.

**1 Take the first step.** Organizing tasks generally fall into five distinct categories: belongings, finance, contacts, information, and time. Pick the one area that drives you crazy—whether it's your jam-packed basement or your collection of Rolodexes—and begin there. Once you're done, you'll feel confident in your clutter-busting skills, and that much more motivated to move on to another category.

**2 Involve your family.** Before you begin a project, ask your family for

input: What items are they always misplacing? What would make a room easier to manage? If you establish a system that makes sense for everyone, and everyone understands how it works, they'll be much more likely to follow it.

**3 Streamline a space.** If the living room has become the dining room/home office/game zone/arts-and-crafts area/practice room, there's too much going on there—and too much opportunity for things to get lost. Designate a few primary uses for each room and stick to that list.

**4 Give your stuff the keep-or-test test.** Before you begin an organizing project, ask yourself: If everything in this room were gone tomorrow, what would I miss? Chances are, only a few items will

come to mind—those are your treasures. In the middle of a cleanup, referring back to the list can help make decisions easier. If an item isn't a treasure, it's most likely free to toss.

**5 Quit multitasking.** Multitasking has been proven to impair brain function and diminish performance. Choose the top two or three activities that are most important to include each day, and focus on getting those done, one step at a time.

**6 Prioritize PEP!** PEP—Physical activity, Escapes, and People—a.k.a., the simple joys in life that get pushed aside all too often. The whole point of taking control of your stuff and your schedule is to give yourself the time and space you need for the things that matter most.

two on the wall for necklaces, and a bowl to hold earrings. Then, to get your daughter to clean up after herself, set a timer for 10 or 15 minutes once a day, announce cleanup time, and supervise her while she does it. This way, there's no drama and the cleanup can easily be folded into her before-bedtime ritual.

## ➤ How to find more free time

**Q** How can my family get chores done and still fit in family time? Everyone gets home around 4 p.m., and bedtime is 9. It is all work and hardly ever time for play at our house. Help!

—Christi L. Clary, 28, St. Joseph, MO

**A** Take a deep breath and relax! First, who said chores needed to get done before family time begins? Maybe family time would work best right at 4, when everyone can either share a snack or take a walk and ease into their afternoon routine.

Could it be that you're spending too much time on chores? In working with clients, I've found that housework should really take no more than 15 percent of your time. A good rule of thumb: Daily chores shouldn't take more than half an hour per person, per day. Larger chores should be pushed to a block of time on a weekend morning. Ideally, the whole family would pitch in to work on those bigger projects, which speeds up the work and creates an extra block of family time.

For day-to-day tasks, I recommend applying the four D's: Delete, Delegate, Diminish, and Delay. For example, say part of your daily routine is tidying up the kitchen. Is it necessary to mop the floor each night, or can you *delete* that task or *diminish* it into a quick sweep? Can doing the dishes be *delegated* to your husband or one of your older children? And can heavy-duty cleaning, like cleaning out the refrigerator or organizing the cabinets, be *delayed* until the weekend? Once you have your answers, you'll be surprised at how much time you're able to free up.

**Q** What's the best way to get my family involved in household chores without nagging?

—Amy Nordstrom, 28, Erie, PA

**A** As parents, we often think household chores are obvious, when really, they might not be. For a second, imagine your home is a company and you're the boss. You would never expect a new hire to automatically know exactly how to do a job, and the same goes for your kids. Be concrete and specific to let your kids and your guy know what needs to be done. For example, tell them that taking out the trash really means that the bags are taken out before 6 p.m. and tied tightly, the can is disinfected, and a new trash liner is put in. Once your family learns what you expect, don't micromanage. Just like in the workforce, letting each family member take ownership of their responsibilities is a great motivational tool.

**Q** I'm a full-time teacher with three children. I want to find time to go to the gym, but how do I do that when there are so many professional and family responsibilities that I also need to handle?

—Kendal Brue, 37, West Harrison, IN

**A** First, figure out how many times a week you want to exercise, then take a fresh and creative look at your schedule. If you want to work out three times a week, you really need to find or free up three full hours. Maybe you can wake up early one weekday morning to take a walk, have your husband watch the kids while you work out to a yoga DVD one evening, then squeeze in a family exercise session on the weekend. Remember: Working out doesn't have to take place at the gym—a bike ride or long weekend walk with your family counts! Maybe you can find other coworkers who also want to exercise and set up a time during lunch or after work to work out together. The key is to look for those hidden pockets of free time in your schedule, then claim them for yourself by scheduling exercise just as if it were one of the professional or family commitments that you wouldn't break unless it were an emergency. **R**