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NEAT TRICKS

No need for marathon organizing—just a few minutes here and there can take your family home from chaotic to clutter-free. BY LESLEY PORCELLI

IF YOU HAVE...
5 minutes

Clear out the spice rack. Toss anything that's discolored, lost its scent or flavor—or is more than one year old. Keep a permanent marker handy to date spices. "And if you prefer, try a shoe box instead of a shelf system," says Julia Wright of geniusorganizing.com. "That way, you can pull the box out like a drawer to locate what you need."

Set up automatic bill pay. When a monthly expense arrives, find the company website where you can sign in and designate the payment option. Once the amount is scheduled, you no longer have to think about it, says Meryl Starr, host of *Let's Get Organized* on VoiceAmerica Variety Channel.

Set up an inbox and outbox on your desk. "Everything that needs attention goes on top in the inbox," says Nicole Abramovici of geniusorganizing.com. Put what you want to hold on to in the outbox on the bottom and recycle the rest. Pro tip: Wait until the outbox is full before filing.

See Jane Work Paper Board Letter Trays, officedepot.com, $7 each

Photos: (from left) Marty Baldwin, Bryan McCay

family room to dishes and glassware in the kitchen.

Spiff up the laundry room. Consolidate half-empty bottles and wipe away any drips. Mount a storage rack over the washing machine. "My favorite, Whitney Design's Over The Washer Shelf, needs no installation," says Wright.

Lock & Lock 5-Piece Slender Pantry Storage Set, qvc.com, $20

STOP JUNK MAIL AND UNWANTED CATALOGS. "Register online at the Direct Marketing Association," suggests Barbara Reich, a New York–based pro organizer. If there are still a few you want to receive, just click on your choices.

Stage a pantry mini makeover. "Arrange cans of tomatoes together, soups with soups and so on," says Wright. "Next, transfer rice and pastas from boxes and bags into clear labeled Tupperware so you can quickly assess when you need to stock up."

Clean out the junk drawer. "Dump the contents on top of a wire cooling rack," says Wright. Too-small items like nails, paper clips and buttons will fall through onto the counter. Toss anything that's broken or unidentifiable. Put things that belong elsewhere in a separate pile: Pliers, for example, go back to the toolbox and nail clippers to the bathroom. Return useful everyday items—such as scissors, pushpins and glue sticks—to the drawer.

Design Ideas Squish Drawer Storage Organizers in Blue and Green, organizeit.com, $10/set of 2

Photos: (clockwise from top left) Anthony Masterson/Getty Images, Bryan McCay (4).

Neaten the hall closet. Designate a single small bin for family gloves and mittens, one for hats and another for scarves, recommends Andrew Mellen, author of *Unstuff Your Life!* If you have an additional five minutes, hang outerwear according to type and length—shorter casual jackets on one side and longer dressy styles on the other—so they're easy to find. Check that a few extra hangers are on hand for company.

Stripes Large Bucket in Teal/Gray, chewingthecud.com, $22

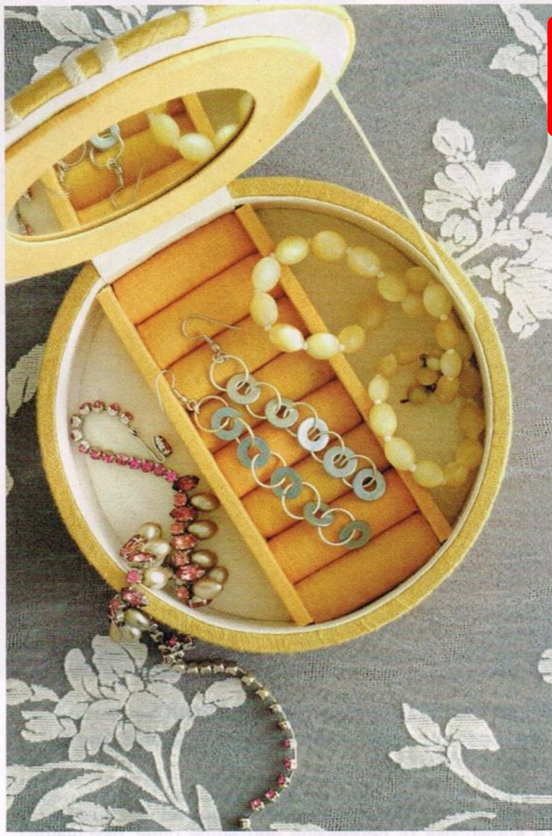
Do a quickie clothes closet makeover. "Face all hangers in the same direction to reduce wardrobe search time," advises Wright. "And group like items together—pants, shirts and so on."

IF YOU HAVE... 15 minutes

Straighten up a shelf. "Remove everything, dust and put in groupings of like with like, weeding out as you go," says Starr. This technique works everywhere, from bookshelves in the

Pick up a room. Set aside a bin or basket to corral stray stuff. Put misplaced items into the bin and store in a closet or out-of-the-way spot. Later, carry the container room to room and put things back in their proper place. This also means you can have an in-house lost and found where family members will know to look for missing belongings.

Tackle the medicine cabinet. Toss old makeup and drugs and any duplicates, then arrange according to category—cold medicines in one place, painkillers in another. Stash supplies like cotton balls, bandages and swabs in small canisters or lidless plastic containers. Store overflow in a spare drawer or nearby closet.



➲ **Use the shredder.** Place a file or tub near your desk—or under a table where you open mail—for papers containing personal information, like a Social Security number or birth date. Wait until full to shred. Set a timer for 15 minutes. If you tackle this task in short increments, it won't be as tedious, notes Mellen.

➲ **Round up recipes.** "Gather clippings and favorite online printouts in a binder," says Abramovici. Organize by category (appetizers, desserts) with tabbed dividers. Or snap photos of recipes and upload to a folder on your computer along with web pages for dishes you find online. The service is free at evernote.com.

IF YOU HAVE... 30 minutes

➲ **Plan a weekly menu and grocery list.** "This can be done in 15 minutes once a week," says Reich, "but if you like to pore over cookbooks and computer files, you'll need the extra time." Flag any recipes you plan to try that week.

➲ **Sort digital photos.** Group them in folders—such as "summer of '09" or "family reunion"—for now. "Don't get too engrossed in the snapshots or bogged down in decisions of whether they're worth keeping," recommends Mellen. Later you can assign names and dates, and discard the ones you don't like.

*

TIDY UP THE GARAGE. "Most garages are like dumping grounds," says Starr. Reduce clutter by getting items off the floor. Hang bicycles from hooks, and stow basketballs, bats and other sports equipment in wire ball bins. Do the same with gardening gear and tools like rakes and shovels.

➲ **Organize your jewelry box.** Spread out everything on a flat surface. Set aside for donation pieces that you no longer want. Sort what's left according to type—bracelets in one compartment, necklaces in another. Put earrings or rings into tiny boxes and place a pretty ceramic dish on your dresser as a catchall for everyday accessories.

➲ **Get rid of half your closet.** "Start with what's hanging, quickly flip through each garment and pull out anything ill-fitting or that you haven't worn in a year," recommends Wright. Toss rejects into shopping bags for future donation. Arrange the rest by category and further sort by season and color. Pro tip: Your closet will look neater if you use one type of hanger.

Slim Grips Green Hangers, bedbathandbeyond.com, $15/set of 18

familycircle.com
Find more easy ideas for getting your place in order at **familycircle.com/organizing**.

READY, SET, GO Even if you only have five minutes, set a kitchen timer or the digital version on your smartphone. Nicole Abramovici's top choice is game-show worthy. When you set the dial, the number of minutes you have is represented by a red circle that disappears—think waning moon—as the time elapses. Time Timer clock from $30 and app from $4, timetimer.com