

City Room  
Blogging From the Five Boroughs

# Answers About Getting Organized, Part II

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*Barbara Reich, a professional organizer who was the subject of a recent Metropolitan article by Elissa Gootman, is taking readers' questions this week. The following are her second batch of answers to readers' questions. You can ask a question [here](#), and find previous and subsequent installments of this Q. and A. [here](#).*

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Q.

HELP! My mom just died and I am having to make decisions about all the photos, handwritten letters, mementos from her past, not to mention a family baby grand piano, dining room set and paintings which she beautifully created and framed. I am overwhelmed. I have discarded all the photos of those not identified, but what now? Do I sell or give away things of some value like silver trays, crystal, etc. which I have no use for and no one in my family wants? — *Janie Hyman*

A.

The death of a parent is an emotional time, and having to make decisions about what's left behind can be very stressful. You should absolutely donate the unwanted furnishings and paintings. Handwritten letters and photos are more difficult, but if they don't have meaning to you or your family, you don't need to save them. Remember, they were mementos of your mother's life, not yours. I always encourage my older clients to visualize their loved ones having to weed through their possessions to get them to pare down. And, I tell clients that not wanting someone else's "stuff" is not a reflection of how much they loved that person.

Q.

It's great that you can clean up and organize people's homes but I have two comments: you obviously do not give children any respect, and, to waste perfectly good items by putting them in the trash is really unbelievable. — *lakeview*

A.

My philosophy is that the best way to respect your children and teach them to respect their possessions is by providing limits. Most children, left to their own devices, would never throw anything away or put anything away. Saving every crayon scratch on paper or every broken toy is not helpful to anyone. (Unless you want to end up like the Collyer Brothers, literally buried in tons of trash.) And, since I wouldn't want to be the recipient of puzzles with missing pieces, broken toys with missing parts, or toys that are plain dangerous — I don't know anyone who would — the best place to put them is the trash.

Q.

Can you recommend specific containers (a brand or shape, etc.) that you find particularly useful in organizing clutter? I have big bins and baskets that tend to fill up with stuff without being particularly conducive to finding things faster or organizing better... — *Zoe*

A.

I'm not a fan of big bins and baskets. I find that they actually invite clutter and disorganization because the categories they house are too broad. You are better off using smaller containers. I use the clear shoe boxes and shoe drawers from The Container Store for inside closets. The clear plastic box sizes I find most helpful are the shoe box, men's shoe box, sweater box. The clear plastic drawers I find most helpful are the shoe drawer and men's athletic shoe drawer. I tend to use the boxes for things that aren't accessed frequently and the drawers for things that are used frequently.

Q.

I have difficulty managing my physical "Inbox," whether it's mail, magazines, bills, catalogues, receipts, etc. I can clear it all up and a week later it's big piles again. Can you suggest methods to more effectively manage this? — *Steve*

A.

If you spend 10 minutes a day on your physical "inbox," it won't accumulate. Try to touch each piece of paper once. And, don't open your mail without your calendar handy, a pad to make notes, your checkbook accessible, and a credit card memorized. Bills can be put in the inbox to pay once a week. Invitations can be immediately put into your calendar and discarded (or if you're visual, posted on a bulletin board until the date of the event), catalogs should be immediately discarded (and unsubscribe from them – there's nothing you can't get online that's in that catalog), and receipts can go into a small accordion file that separates them by month or topic). Magazines should be placed where they're likely to be read (bedroom night table or briefcase to be read while commuting to work). Weekly publications are discarded weekly when the new edition arrives. Ditto for daily publications and monthly publications.

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Q.

Do you have any guidelines for how much clothing and shoes an individual really needs? I cannot seem to keep the amount of clothing I have down to a manageable level, even though I often donate to charity. How can I keep my wardrobe manageable? — *Lesley*

A.

The amount of clothing and shoes an individual needs is a lifestyle and “lifespace” decision. In terms of lifestyle, it would depend on how many styles of clothing you need. Do you dress in a suit for work and then casually on the weekend? Do you go out a lot at night? When you go out at night, are you wearing formal clothes or jeans? Do you enjoy shopping? How often is laundry done?

You need to consider how much closet space and drawer space you have. In the end, your clothes and shoes will make you miserable if you have no place to put them. A good rule of thumb is: don’t buy more than you can store.

Q.

How do you solve the problem of a husband who has bought and read (sometimes re-read) thousands of non-fiction, historical, science, etc., books over the course of 50 years and a wife who wants to throw everything out? — *Michael*

A.

Built-in bookshelves that go floor to ceiling ... and a Kindle.

Comments are no longer being accepted.