

City Room  
Blogging From the Five Boroughs

# Answers About Getting Organized, Part III

By The New York Times January 13, 2011 10:35 am



*Barbara Reich, a professional organizer who was the subject of a recent Metropolitan article by Elissa Gootman, took readers' questions this week about getting organized. Her **third and final set** of answers are found below, and previous installments in this Q. and A. can be read [here](#).*

***We are no longer accepting questions for this feature.***

Q.

What is your advice to someone looking to get into a career in professional organizing? I love organizing and decluttering (and am good at it!). My friends and family have often told me I should get into the business and although I would love to, I am not sure where to start. What is your advice to someone starting out in the field? — *Jen*

A.

I would start by joining the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO). (See what Janine Sarna-Jones, a Certified Professional Organizer says in question 153). Then, I would think about what you want your niche to be and work at meeting people who might be in a position to provide referrals. For example, if your niche is helping students, you need to impress teachers. If your niche is home organizing, you might want to focus on decorators and architects. And, be willing to work free for a brief period while building a client base.

Q.

Congratulations on forming a valuable service out of your special talent. My question is: How do I get my family to join me on this ongoing effort to live organized? My husband is very neat mostly because he's a minimalist, but our 12-year-old daughter can make her room and/or the entire house look as if a tornado has been through it in a very short time frame. This level of "chaos" was apparent in her school bag and we tackled it with organizers, which are working for her now. However, we have not conquered the messy room and clutter around the house despite frequent "declutter" and organizing sessions. Thanks. — *Samantha*

A.

Your declutter sessions need to end with a place being designated for every "thing" and piece of paper that comes into your house. Then, just as you would commit to exercise or diet, you need to spend 10 minutes a day putting everything into its place. Unfortunately, there is a constant onslaught of new e-mails, catalogs, phone calls, and consumerism that enter our lives on a daily basis. If you don't stay on top of it, it's easy for the clutter to build. I would insist that your daughter confine her clutter to her room. Although you can give her incentives to keep her room neat, you can also just close the door. And, sadly, it's going to be up to you alone to implement and maintain the system.

Q.

The questions about getting kids to part with anything they have created, or acquired in any other way, are my questions as well. Looking at clutter saps my energy, but my daughter absolutely thrives on it. I think a bare surface disorients her as much as a cluttered one destroys my concentration. Unfortunately, our apartment is small and her bedroom very small, so I can't ask her to confine it all to her room.

— *Barbara*

A.

Just as people have different learning styles, so, too, do people have different tolerance levels for clutter. If your daughter thrives on clutter, then she should have a place in your apartment that makes her comfortable. The key is that you can and must insist that it be confined to her room, especially if your apartment is small.

Q.

Once things are put away or stored, I tend not to look at it again, unless I really need to find something that was saved. Does that mean that I should have discarded the stuff to begin with? How do I save resources and magazine photos (for design inspiration) in a clever way that doesn't take up space? Not too technical, please. — *Lee*

A.

There are some things that are meant to be stored and may not be looked at very frequently — childhood mementos, sentimental letters or pictures, for example. Yet these items should be saved. Other than that, unless something is being saved for a specific purpose (that camping equipment was really expensive and we go camping once a year), you should discard what you haven't looked at after a year. It's actually a good rule of thumb.

In terms of saving resources and magazine photos, a simple file labeled “design inspiration” will do nicely!

Q.

*Mary, a reader who submitted a question too long to reproduce in its entirety, described her house as a “catastrophe of clutter” and dreamed of taking everything out to the backyard and “torching it in a huge bonfire at night and performing a pagan ritual dance in celebration of its demise.” In her passionate plea for help (read the full question here), she asserted that she would “even be willing to do it in the nude, such is the primal need for me to get rid of this stuff.”*

A.

There’s no way I would pass up answering this one, since you put so much time into your letter. And I love the idea of the bonfire with the pagan ritual dance! So where do you start?

In the kitchen, take everything out of the cabinets and do a major sort. You will almost certainly find duplicates and triplicates of utensils and kitchen tools. In these cases, pick the one you like the best and donate the rest. Then, donate all the gifts you got for your wedding and bridal shower that you never liked and don’t match your current kitchen. After that, you can do an appliance audit. Other than a toaster and a blender, a lot of what I see in kitchens is used once for the novelty and never again. So you can probably donate the bread maker, snow cone maker, crepe maker, ice cream machine, etc. Then, it’s the pot and pan audit. You get the idea. Your kitchen drawers, shelves, and cabinets will look much better with less in and on them.

In terms of the other mountains of debris, you just have to go room by room, closet by closet. Clothes never worn are low-hanging fruit. Holiday decorations are also easy. Keep what’s in good shape, donate/discard the rest. And, if you already have 10 bins of it, don’t buy any more!

Books should be audited. Anything that’s not a classic and that you didn’t love should be donated. Anything that’s been outgrown (children’s books) should be donated. Then, the books should be grouped by category: reference, biographies, fiction, self-help, etc.

Old printed material like newspapers and magazines can also be discarded unless there's something sentimental like the newspaper the day your child was born. In New York City, everyone has saved the papers from 9/11 and the New York magazine Best Doctors issue. I can understand the former, not the latter. If you or your loved one got sick, you're not finding a doctor in a magazine.

The memorabilia question is very tricky, and you can never tell someone not to feel sentimental about things. Sadly, I recommend you use an objective third party for this. I would approach it by separating the memorabilia into two categories: definitely save and maybe save. If you can get anything into the "maybe save" pile, consider it progress.

Good luck!

Comments are no longer being accepted.