

City Room
Blogging From the Five Boroughs

Answers About Getting Organized

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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 about getting organized. You can ask a question here or find previous and subsequent installments in this Q & A here.

Faced with the daunting task of sifting through close to 200 questions, she did what you'd expect. She organized them.

Q.

What's the first step in de-cluttering? Is it mental, or, physical?

— *Sandy*

A.

The first step in decluttering is mental. You need to make up your mind that you're ready to do it. It's like someone going on a diet; telling a person not to eat doesn't help. A person will only lose weight when they make a decision to change the way they eat. Decluttering is the same. The physical effort is less of a leap than

— *Zandy*

A.

I always encourage my clients to donate rather than discard. There are so many worthy organizations that will take children's toys and clothes as well as old furniture, books and anything else under the sun. A big issue I see is people who can't start organizing because they don't want to throw anything away. Part of what I do is to encourage clients to find homes for what they no longer need. I also encourage clients not to be the source of other people's clutter. For example, how about not giving party favors just because it's possible to order pencils, pads and lip gloss with your party theme or name embossed on it? We can all do our part in becoming a "greener" society.

Editor's note: Many readers suggested donating unwanted items.

Organizations suggested included: Freecycle, Goodwill Industries International, Inc., Junk Luggers and The Salvation Army.

Q.

I'd love to hear if you can recommend a few questions people can ask themselves to help decide whether to keep or to let go of things?

I used to be terrific at throwing accumulated clutter away, but find the older I am, the more blurry that line becomes between the significant and the insignificant. Thank you!

— *dhg*

A.

Here are some guidelines you can use to decide whether to keep or let go of things:

Is it in good condition and/or can it be repaired?

Have I used it/worn it in the last year?

Will I ever use it/wear it?

Am I holding onto it because someone I love gave it to me (but I hate it)?

Is it justifying the space it's taking up?

If I discarded it and found I needed it later, is it replaceable (e.g., could you get another extension cord at Radio Shack?)

Q.

What about those of us who want to organize what we have, and are not looking to be ridiculed into throwing things out because someone else thinks it is useless for us to keep them? Are there any professional organizers who organize what you have, rather than first discard and organize what's left?

— *Lynn*

A.

I would never ridicule someone into throwing things out because of my personal set of values, and I don't think any professional organizer would operate in that manner. My goal, as is likely the case with most organizers, is exactly what you say. I want to help people organize what they have and only have what they truly need. Sometimes, though, people need some guidance or tough love. And, an organizer that doesn't encourage you to think about why you are storing/keeping things isn't doing you a service.

Q.

My husband likes to save everything, even wine bottle corks, for example, but also more meaningful things which are just stuffed in boxes. As a result, our basement is filled to the brim with only pathways. How do I help him to clear out the so much stuff?

— *Nancy*

A.

Sometimes having the space to store things (your basement) can be as much of a curse as a blessing. It sounds like your basement storage has enabled your husband to save without ever making a decision about what's truly meaningful. I suggest you designate a "basement date night" once a week to take a trip down memory lane (bring a bottle of wine with you, cork saving optional). Often the things that seemed so important at one time in your life don't stand the test of time. As you're weeding through the boxes, think about whether what you saved would be meaningful to anyone else (e.g., your children, who will one day be cleaning out this basement). Also, consider displaying some of the "collections" if they make the cut. For example, your wine bottle corks can look very chic in a tall cylindrical glass vase.

Q.

Help, how do I store my hundreds of T shirts? Putting them up on the shelf in my closet quickly becomes a mess. Not enough drawer space for them in bedroom dresser.

— *Chell*

A.

Why do you have hundreds of T-shirts??? Clearly, you can't wear all of them. Maybe you should store the sentimental ones (e.g., your sorority pledge T-shirt, the 1987 marathon T-shirt), and only put the ones in your drawer that you actually wear. You might want to consider underbed boxes for some of the other T-shirts... or Goodwill!

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