



Spring Cleaning

Professional organizers offer tips to help bring order

Though most of us aren't candidates for the popular TV show "Hoarders," we all struggle with some kind of clutter.

Maybe it's the junk mail that collects on the dining room table. Or the old toys scattered across the basement floor. How about the tightly packed closet that can't hold even one more shirt?

Whether it's a single trouble spot, or a whole house that needs to get organized, some simple tips can help. Here's some practical advice from professional organizers:

Focus

Start with the room where you live the most. That's the advice of Jocelyn Sussman, who heads Chicagoland Organizers in north suburban Glencoe. "It makes sense to kick-start your organizing in the place where you spend the most time," she says. For many people, the family room or the kitchen are the most used rooms. Then tackle the clutter in view first, and leave the closets and drawers for later. A clean line of sight can act as motivation to do more. "If you're putting your house on the market, you don't want it cluttered," says Sussman. Also, make yourself finish one

area before you move on to the next one.

Start small

Clutter can be overwhelming, so start with a small, manageable job. If paper overflow is a problem, place a smart looking recycling basket where the mail comes in so unwanted pieces can be stored immediately. Put another basket under the kitchen island, or in the basement for the kids' unwanted artwork. "Something small can make an immediate difference in your life," notes Leslie Conneely, owner of Space Simplified in west suburban La Grange. Another good place to start this time of year is in the mud room, or entryway. Get rid of mismatched gloves, old boots, and hats that are too small. "Spend just 30 minutes," says Conneely.

Consolidate

A common mistake is to keep the same type of item in multiple places. Put hats with hats and cleaning supplies with cleaning supplies. That way you know what you have and where it is, says Cindy Levitt, a professional organizer and owner of Peace by Piece, in Evanston. For example, if kitchen utensils are scattered among sev-

eral different drawers, you may not know how many spatulas you have. By putting all of them together you may realize you don't need so many.

Categorize

Separate things into three categories: keep, donate, or throw away. If you can't decide what to do with something, ask yourself a series of questions: When was the last time you used it? Do you own more than one? "There are no hard and fast rules though," cautions Sussman at Chicagoland Organizers. For example, don't keep an old TV that is rarely used. But skis that weren't used this year might be used the next, so let them stay.

Maintain

Staying organized is kind of like trying to maintain one's ideal weight after dieting. It takes constant vigilance. Before putting a new pair of pants in the closet, find an old pair to give away or donate. Don't keep old linens that have been replaced with new ones just in case a guest shows up. Instead, get rid of linens that really won't be used. "Keep a low inventory of items," suggests Sussman.

Recycle

Remember that someone may be able to use what you don't need or want. Donate unwanted items to charity. Check websites such as Earth911.com for places that will accept hard to dispose of items such as paint and electronics. Another good resource is freecycle.org, says Conneely at Space Simplified. Notices about items that can't be donated but are still usable, such as a stack of file folders, are posted online, free to whoever will pick them up.

Get help

A professional organizer can help redo an entire house, or offer coaching tips to jump start the process. Organizers charge by the hour or by the job, depending on what's required. The National Association of Professional Organizers website (NAPO.net) has a search function that locates organizers by ZIP code. An organizer will also offer emotional support along with the tips. "I try to encourage the progress," says Peace by Piece's Levitt, who believes that having too much stuff is an emotional drain on the psyche. She says: "Living with less is living with more."