



# clearing out

Getting organized  
benefits your psyche as  
much as your home

BY SARA PEDERSEN  
ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN JENSEN

**A**s a professional organizer, I love spring. It brings out the desire to de-clutter. Clients call me with requests to reclaim kitchen counters, fine-tune coat closets, and manage the mail. It's the perfect time for a fresh start, free of the messes that accumulated all winter long.



For five years, I have helped Twin Cities residents discover new ways to manage the mess. I have dug my fingers deep into their kitchen cupboards and unearthed everything from un-cashed and totally forgotten thousand-dollar savings bonds to cashed-in baby teeth. I've coached family managers—also known as stay-at-home parents—in the fine art of filing important papers and ridding themselves of the junk mail that often covers kitchen counters and tables.

Now that spring is here, tackle the problem areas in your own home. Turn over a new leaf by organizing your belongings. You will reap many benefits, including creating time to do the things you love, rather than cleaning, searching, and stressing over your possessions. Getting rid of clutter not only reduces housework, but also gives your home a pleasing appearance. According to an independent survey sponsored by The Soap and Detergent Association, when Americans visit a home for the first time, they notice how clean and clutter-free it is more often than they notice the décor.

## What is clutter?

The first step to getting organized is identifying the clutter in your life. The word clutter actually derives from the Middle English word *cloteren*, meaning to clot. Think stagnant, accumulated ... stuck! When clutter invades our homes and offices, we become disorganized. We lose things, forget to pay bills, procrastinate, and waste time.

Some people are more prone to clutter than others. They may have inherited the pack rat syndrome from their parents, keeping things they might need "someday." Keeping clutter also might be a symptom of one's need to hide from relationships or to fill a void. Whatever the reason, clutter can be conquered, and the reward is both physical and mental.

It's easy to identify clutter by asking three easy questions: Is it beautiful? Is it useful? (Don't confuse this question with, Will it be useful *someday*?) Is it loved? If you can't answer yes to at least one of these, the object is probably clutter. You will find that as you inventory your possessions, you may be able to answer "yes" to two or even three of these questions. These are



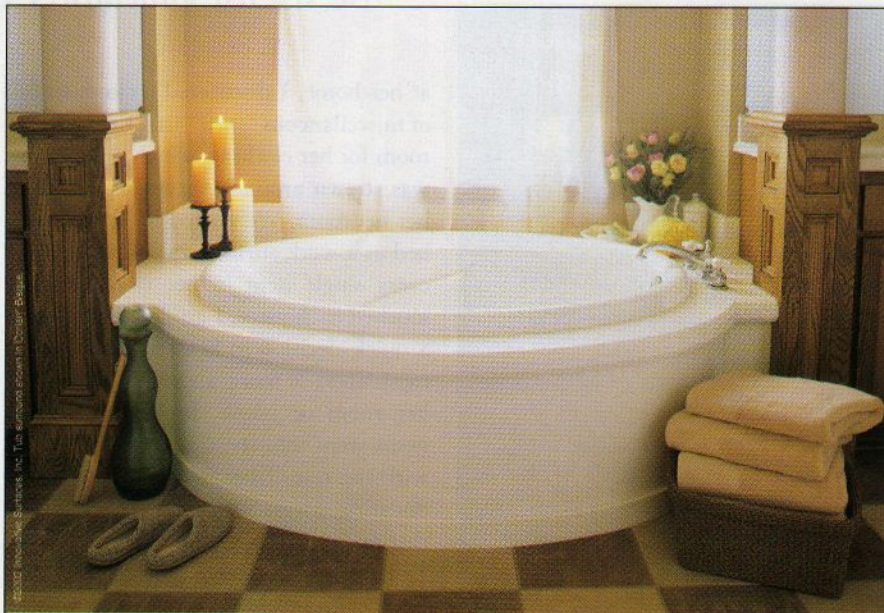
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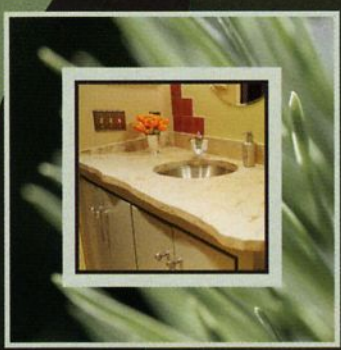


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the things that are most valuable to you. Remember, the goal of de-cluttering is not to get rid of everything; it's simply to keep only things that you truly appreciate and use.

## Closet organizing made easy

A great place to start de-cluttering is your closet. The following process of purging, sorting, rearranging, and maintaining can be achieved at your own pace. It can also be applied to many areas of the home or office, from the tiniest linen closet to the largest three-car garage.

A couple years ago, I took part in an amazing closet transformation of a 13-year-old girl named Jenny. Upon arrival

next session to reflect light and provide a solid neutral background for her clothing. They also gave the room a good dusting and vacuuming.

Now, the fun began! We sorted Jenny's clothing by type, and then grouped similar items by color. As Midwesterners, we tend to have two sets of clothing: summer/spring/fall and freeze-your-tail-off winter. Because it was early April, we shifted all her winter clothing to under-bed storage boxes. Many people can reduce the amount of clothing in their closets by half if they follow this trick. Once we had everything sorted, we purged a little more. This was one last chance to get rid of items that were no longer useful or practical.

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at her home, I discovered a closet so full of miscellaneous "stuff" that there was no room for her clothing, which, by the way, was strewn around every square inch of her bedroom. We started by clearing her bed as a work surface, and then removed every single item in her closet. As she touched each piece, I guided her to make a quick decision to keep it, donate it, or move it to a more appropriate place in her room or home. Broken or stained items went into the trash. We continued with the rest of her room. She ended up donating at least 50 percent of her clothing that no longer fit or wasn't in style.

By the end of our day, we were left with an empty closet—a professional organizer's blank canvas—and a sparse room full of neat piles. We moved the bags full of donations to her mom's car. (It's important to get them out of the house as quickly as possible to avoid "tossers regret" and to allow the client to see the fruits of her labor in a spotless space that is full of potential.) I recommended that she and her mom give the closet a fresh coat of light-colored paint before our

With plenty of breathing room for her belongings, we were ready to start returning clothing to Jenny's closet and dresser drawers. Her mom had added a double-hang closet rod since our last session, doubling her hanging space. We arranged her clothing by type and then by color, so she could easily see what she had. T-shirts, shorts, socks, and underwear went into her dresser. Button-up shirts, cardigans, pants, skirts, and dresses went into the closet. I added simple see-through containers with lids to hold accessories and keep them in plain sight on closet shelves. Shoes were placed into a shoe-rack on the back of the closet door. She learned the most basic—and important—organizing principle: a place for everything, and everything in its place.

Now Jenny's clothing is easy to find. It stays wrinkle-free because there is plenty of space. And, most important, because we designated a "home" for each type of garment, she always knows where to return clothing at the end of each day.

If you'd like to try these organizing steps in any area of your home, enlist the

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help of a friend to encourage you to make appropriate “keep or toss” decisions and to keep you motivated. Or to move along even more efficiently, consider hiring a professional organizer who can help you complete projects quickly while teaching you lasting organizational techniques.

## Paper under control

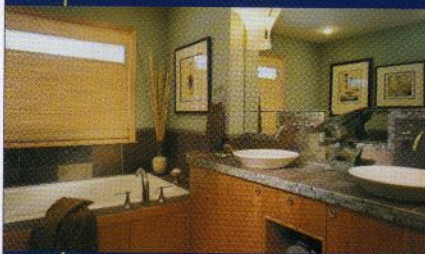
The average American executive wastes six weeks per year searching for papers and files, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. This is just one indication that paper still dominates our lives, even with the advent of computers, e-mail, and the Internet. According to a 2002 study conducted by the University of California at Berkeley, paper use is rising exponentially each year. Between bills to pay, magazines and newspapers to read, receipts, warranties, and instructions to save, each day we are bombarded with papers that need our attention.

Joe, a business owner in Lino Lakes, called me because paper was taking over his life and his office. Upon arrival, I saw piles of papers on, under, and around his desk. This man was drowning. I threw him a line by letting him know only 20 percent of the things we file will ever be retrieved again, according to common organizer wisdom. When in doubt, throw it out.

I started by asking Joe why he wanted to get organized. He told me he has attention deficit disorder and has a hard time staying on task. The papers had overwhelmed him because he didn't know what to do with them once they hit his desk. He had no filing system, just a piling system. And he was failing at his job because he couldn't prioritize his assignments. He felt stuck.

I reassured him that we could fix every single one of those anxiety-causing problems. Getting organized has its benefits, including being able to find things when you need them, allowing you to feel in control of your life, and reducing visual clutter. Investing the initial time to set up a good system is well worth the effort.

Paper management can be a simple process. The techniques Joe learned can be applied to any home or office paper situation: First, gather file folders, hanging file folders, felt-tip pens, and



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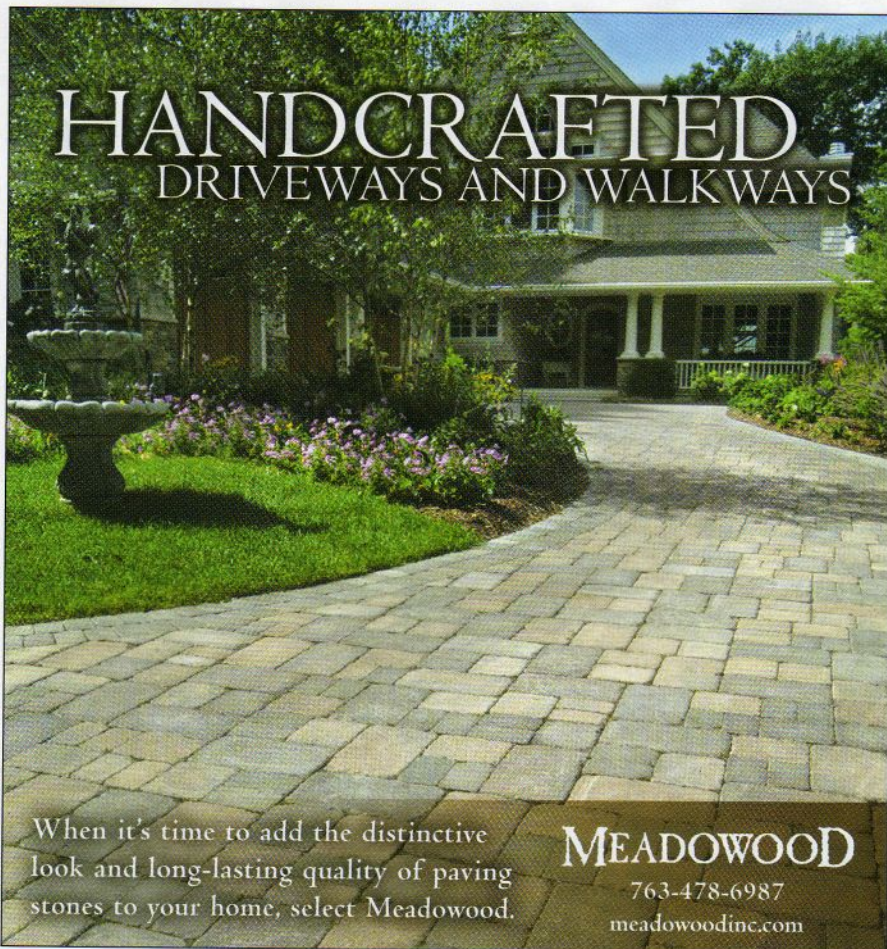
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a large garbage (or recycling) bag. Every household or office also needs an appropriate type of file cabinet or box; the size will depend on the amount of papers you must keep. Start on desktops, countertops, or urgently needed surfaces. Save the piles on the floor for later—your most recent, and usually most urgent, papers probably are not there.

Gather all the papers into neat piles. Pick up the top paper and ask yourself, "What is this? Do I need to keep it? Do I need to act on it? Or do I just need to file it in case I need to retrieve it later?" Toss as much as you can. As you encounter papers that require action, put them in a folder labeled "to-do."

### The average American executive wastes six weeks per year searching for papers and files.

This is also a good time to start a to-do list that includes due dates for all items. Whether on paper, your computer, or your personal digital assistant (PDA), this list will keep you on task and help clear mental clutter by allowing you to release the details from your brain onto a written list. This process helped Joe prioritize work tasks. And because his handwriting was horrible, and he really liked gadgets, his PDA was the perfect portable tool for his list. It's also easy to delete and rearrange action items on a computerized list. However, that's not to say a paper list isn't efficient for some people. Creative or visual people often do better with paper calendars, planners, and lists.

Anything not in the "to-do" pile should be filed if it will be referenced again someday. If not, toss it into the recycling bin, making sure to shred sensitive materials. Sort what's left into simple, broad categories that make sense to you. Home categories might include: medical, pets, taxes, hobbies, outdoor activities, utility bills, car, home improvement, credit cards, insurance, 401K, education, and projects. Write that heading on the tab of the hanging folder, and then create file



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folders for each subcategory under that heading. For example, within utility bills, you might have gas/electricity, phone, water/sewer, and cable. The file folders go in the hanging folder. Think of it as cars that go in a garage. The hanging folder holds the place for the file folders, giving them a home to return to after use.

Work on getting all furniture surfaces clear of papers using the above techniques. Then, conquer any piles that remain on the floor or elsewhere. You should find there is more in the toss/recycle category in these piles. From here on out, manage paper daily as it enters your life. Sort the mail as soon as you get it (directly over the recycling bin), discarding junk mail immediately.

Joe called me a couple months after our last appointment. He's maintained his new system by taking about 30 minutes at both the beginning and end of each day to manage his paperwork. Everything on his desk goes into the "to-do" pile, gets tossed out, or gets filed in the cabinet. Priorities for the next day are set before he goes home.

He has more energy. He doesn't feel ashamed when someone enters his office. He's better able to meet deadlines. And wonderful opportunities seem to find him now. He's not stuck anymore. Removing clutter opens space for new possibilities.

This spring, I encourage you to make room for positive changes in your life by de-cluttering and organizing. If you need help, you can contact one of the more than 60 professional organizers who are members of the Minnesota chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO). You'll soon enjoy benefits that include less stress, happier relationships, new opportunities, more time, and an office or home that's functional and beautiful. Dust off winter's cobwebs and clutter and enjoy the fruits of your labor! ■

Sara Pedersen founded *Time to Organize* in 2000 with the goal of teaching those who feel disorganized to regain control, leaving more time for the important things in their lives. She also coaches prospective and new professional organizers and offers marketing services to small business owners. She is an active member of NAPO and MN NAPO.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RESOURCES FEATURED IN THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 148.



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