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for Good

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# How to Get and Stay Clutter-Free

*Seven Steps to Success!*



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# Why Live a Clutter-Free Life?

Have you had the experience of spending precious time to organize a space, perhaps a room, a drawer, a closet, a desk top, only to find it in shambles days, hours, even minutes later?

What happened? How do you feel about what happened? Mad, discouraged, hopeless, irritated, out of control. . . Any of those feelings can occur when, *one more time* you have lost the battle to maintain order in your space-- especially after you have expended effort to create order in the first place!

## **So, why bother trying to live a clutter-free life?**

- To avoid spending vast amounts of time and energy to get organized again.
- To avoid feeling like a failure when disorder returns.
- To maintain an environment that communicates calm, order and a sense of being in control.
- To be able to find what you need *when* you need it.
- To maintain an environment that is a wonderful greeting for you whenever you return home, instead of being a place of chaos that continuously screams, “Take care of me!” or “Fix me!”

# Getting Organized/Staying Organized

*Staying* organized is really a very different animal than *getting* organized. Getting organized is the process of creating order in an area. The order that must be maintained if you are to stay organized. It is usually time-limited; accomplished as a single event or a series of events. When you are done, you can step back and feel a sense of accomplishment at having created an organized space.

**Staying organized**, unlike getting organized, requires a commitment to *Daily Action* to *Maintain* the order you created when you got organized. That means, you must do the same actions day after day after day after day . . . in order to avoid the trauma of having to reorganize chaos all over again!

So what? What's the big deal? All you have to do every day is pick up things, put them away, throw them away or give them away. That's the simple answer for how to stay organized. No big deal!

The actions you must take are not difficult. In fact, they are pretty easy once you have established an initial order. But, they are *Boring* and *Repetitive*. For those folks who are creative, fun-loving and who crave variety and stimulation, the repetitive actions required to stay organized can seem deadly.

# NOT Staying Organized

Here are some of the consequences for NOT staying organized:

- You can't find what you need when you need it.
- You hate to go home because the place feels so uncomfortable and you are surrounded by disorder that seems to shout, "There is work to be done." It's impossible to relax there.
- You don't want people to see your place. You're embarrassed.
- You start feeling bad about yourself because you feel overwhelmed, incompetent and can't accomplish your goals.
- You can't think straight and therefore can't make good decisions. The disorder is so distracting and everything seems to be demanding your attention at the same time!
- You may experience financial consequences such as late fees or having to buy things you already own but can't find.
- You experience a constant level of stress that can result in fatigue and illness.
- You may experience conflict with others you live with who are bothered by the disorder and chaos.

# What It Takes

Staying organized is not magic. For those who have never been successful at it, it may seem like magic. But, what it really requires is getting *conscious* about what you are doing to create the messes in your life and changing your behavior. In other words, it takes figuring out what you are doing to create your own nightmare and *DOING* things differently.

## So, what does it really take?

- A *conscious commitment* to **act** daily to stay organized
- Good habits—no more of this *just dropping stuff* without thinking about where it's landing and how it's a start to creating chaos
- Daily *routines* to get stuff done
- *Help* from others—everyone in the home and outside help as well
- The ability to push yourself out of your *comfort zone*
- The ability to look at your *behavior* and make changes
- The ability to tolerate *repetitive* behaviors

# Why You Don't Do It

Learning to stay organized requires *getting conscious* of what you are doing and *changing* what's not working. Change is hard. Chaos is familiar.

*You may not know how to stay organized.* Some people were never taught how to stay organized either at home or at school. If you grew up in a chaotic disorganized home, that's all you know.

Some people *lose the order* in their home following an *illness* or *accident* or a bout of *depression*, experiences that result in a lack of mobility for a period of time. It doesn't take long for stuff to back up when you are unable to take the necessary actions to maintain order.

Perhaps you are *too tired* to do one more thing after a hard day at work or an exhausting day chasing kids. Fatigue can result from working too much, sleeping too little, poor diet, lack of exercise and high stress, all common problems in our fast-paced society.

You may have *attention deficit disorder (ADD)*, a brain condition that is associated with difficulties with initiation of tasks (especially boring ones), completing tasks, creating and maintaining order, and paper management.

You may have *Scotopic Sensitivity*, another brain disorder that is associated with light sensitivity. Dealing with white paper with black writing is particularly stressful when you have this condition.

Or, you may be *right brain dominant*, a creative, fun loving individual who *hates* boring repetitive tasks.

# How You Don't Do It

## Attitudes/Thoughts

- You believe you are a *hopeless* mess.
- You believe you are overwhelmed, paralyzed and *can't* move.
- You believe you *can't* change.
- You believe daily organizing is *optional*.

## Avoidance/Resistance

- You watch *TV*, do *email*, *talk* on the phone.
- You *shop*.
- You *work* long hours.
- You *stay away* from home.
- You think organizing is *beneath* you.
- You may be avoiding clearing up your space because the chaos is a *distraction from a painful reality* like a job you hate, a troubled marriage, or an unfulfilling life.

## Too Much Stuff

- The *more stuff* you keep, the more work you have to do to maintain it.
- Stuff is always *coming in*, but is just dropped and not deliberately given a home.
- You have no regular process for *letting go* of stuff.

## Too Much To Do

- *Everything else* is a higher priority than staying organized.
- "*Obligations to others*" take both the time and energy that could be spent maintaining your space.

### **Failing To Make Time to Organize Daily**

- Maintenance activities are not consciously part of your daily habits and routines.
- Maintenance activities are left undone if you feel tired or stressed.

### **Too Little Help from Others**

- Maintaining an organized household is often not viewed as a family commitment.
- Women often over function, choosing to do far too many of the maintenance activities themselves, perhaps because it seems easier to do them than to ask for help from others. Or, perhaps they are particular about how they want things done.
- Men often take the lead from their wives, and “if she’s not asking for help, she must not need it.”
- Some men think the effort to stay organized is not important. They aren’t bothered as much by clutter.
- Some men think it is not their job. They work outside the home or do the yard work and maintaining the home is the woman’s domain.
- Some men try to help but give up when their wives find fault with the way they do it.
- Children are not taught maintenance behaviors such as picking up their stuff and putting it away at an early age. Mom picks up after them and they never develop the habit of regularly picking up after themselves.

# Bad Habits

- Failing to make a decision about what to do with something in the moment and setting stuff aside
- Failing to create specific places (homes) for new items that come into the home
- Dropping stuff in places other than where they belong
- Cramming stuff into any nook and cranny, drawer closet, the attic or basement rather than deliberately putting something where it belongs
- Failing to put things away after use
- Failing to throw things away when they are no longer wanted or useful
- Carrying and dropping paper all over the house instead of containing it in one or two specific locations
- Procrastination—putting off doing a boring maintenance task in favor of something that in the moment is more pleasurable



# How to Make It Happen

## STEP ONE:

**Watch *Your* behavior, identify actions that contribute to the problem and commit to changing problem behaviors.** Common problem behaviors include: dropping, plopping (choosing couch potato mode before taking care of business), avoiding and procrastinating.

## STEP TWO:

**Identify SPECIFIC places in your schedule for daily organizing activities.** Work and school schedules create a structure around which to arrange routine organizing tasks. For example, there is usually a small window in the morning before leaving for the day that can be used for loading the dishwasher, putting in a load of wash, and cleaning up breakfast dishes. And, there is a window in the evening upon returning home where mail can be processed, voice mail checked, etc. There is also another window before bedtime for a final pickup of clothes and other items used during the day.

People who are retired or self-employed sometimes have difficulty staying organized because they don't have the structure provided by work and school schedules. It is even more important for them to consciously commit to specific times for getting routine maintenance chores done.

## STEP THREE:

**Incorporate the most important organizing tasks into routines** that get repeated over and over again. Routines create a structure within which specific activities can happen. Repeating routines over and over again will make actions automatic rather than dreaded daily events.

A ***morning routine*** might include getting up, showering, hanging up wet towels, getting dressed, eating breakfast, cleaning up after breakfast, checking email, leaving for work/school.

An ***evening routine*** might include putting away any items you bring into the house (groceries, shopping bags, etc.), getting mail and processing it, checking voice mail, making dinner, cleaning up after it, helping children with homework and cleaning up afterwards.

#### **STEP FOUR:**

**Reward yourself for changed behavior.** Plan to repeat new behaviors 21 days in a row. It takes repeating new behaviors 21 days in a row before they become a habit.

Watch yourself closely every day. Notice whether you are doing the new behaviors. If not, double back and do them. Then keep going for 21 days.

When you reach the 21<sup>st</sup> day, reward yourself with something you would enjoy, a special meal or purchase. Use email, TV or a phone call to a friend as a reward for finishing your evening chores.

#### **STEP FIVE:**

**Make a deal with yourself to pay to get help** if you haven't been successful in your efforts to stay organized by a certain date. Professional organizers and professional coaches can provide the structure necessary to hold you accountable to your goals to stay organized. (Admit it; you'd pay for help if you couldn't get your car to start.)

#### **STEP SIX:**

**Hire others to do the things you hate the most and/or have the hardest time doing.** Consider paying for a cleaning service, a professional organizer, a person to pay your bills, a lawn service or a person to do your laundry/ironing.

## STEP SEVEN:

### **Make staying organized a *Family Commitment*.**

Invite family members to participate in the process of maintaining an organized, comfortable place to live. If you have a husband or wife, start with him/her. It is always easier to encourage children to participate if you and your spouse both consider staying organized a priority.

Teach children early that *picking up after themselves and participating in on-going organizing efforts is not optional*; it is essential to having a rewarding, comfortable life. It should be introduced to them as a normal part of life as soon as they are capable of throwing toys into open tubs. Be sure to reward them with praise for their on-going efforts even though they are expected to do them. *Never use getting or staying organized as a punishment*. And, remember, ***they will be watching what you do***. You are a model for behaviors they need to learn like cleaning up after themselves and regularly getting rid of things they no longer love or use.

### **Have realistic expectations for the level of organization you can maintain.**

It is fairly common for women to believe that they should keep a perfectly organized and clean house, even though they may work outside the home and/or have several children running around. That is an old standard that probably has NEVER been attainable without regular outside help. If you have children, especially under the age of 10, cut yourself some slack and shoot for relative order. As long as you keep picking up daily, regularly get rid of stuff, and you have all family members doing their part in the process, you probably can function without any major organizing challenges.

As your life changes, so too will the level of intensity of your daily organizing efforts. Efforts should intensify with the complexity of raising children and become less intense when children leave home (if you haven't replaced the obligations as a parent with other commitments).

When you reach retirement, initially, you will have much more time to get organized and stay organized. Resist the urge to drop helpful routines at retirement. Those who do so find their homes in chaos and wonder what happened!

## Routine Behaviors

### Control What Comes Into Your House

- *Evaluate **Everything*** you are bringing in because it becomes “work” once it enters your home.
- *Refuse* handouts and flyers you will never look at again.
- *Say "NO!"* to clothing, furniture, appliances, books, magazines, etc. offered to you if you don't want them, need them, or don't have room for them.
- Leave soaps, shampoos and other sundries in hotel bathrooms unless you regularly use them.
- Resist the urge to buy in bulk unless you have adequate storage space (and unless you need bulk).
- Move unwanted gifts to a donation box or re-gifting area.

## Keep Things Moving

- Scan rooms before you leave them for things to *take with you* to other parts of the house.
- Move items to *holding stations*, a table, basket or box where items can be placed that belong in another part of the house. It readily identifies items that need to be transported back to their homes. Whenever you *and other members of the household* pass a holding station, remove items that belong in the part of the house where you are headed.
- Take items from holding stations up/down the stairs every time you go.

## Constant Purging

- One in — one out. No exceptions! For every new item you bring into your home or office, sell, donate, or throw away at least one item of equivalent size.
- Make a donation *every time a local charity asks* by giving items clothing or household items you don't use, wear or like. Give away clothing that is more than one size too small or big, stained, or out of style.
- Process mail *daily*, sending junk mail directly to the recycle container (you really don't have to read every piece!), and immediately recycle outside envelopes.
- Give away or recycle magazines that are more than two months old.
- Give away, donate, or re-gift gifts within 30 days that you don't like or don't use.

- Throw away all receipts EXCEPT those needed for proof of warranty, tax purposes (itemized deductions or home improvements), or possible returns.
- Whenever you are looking in a file, look for paper you no longer need (*and throw it out!*).
- Recycle plastic and paper bags.
- Flatten and donate shipping boxes once you are sure you will not be returning purchased items to the store. Recycle them.
- Use garbage day as a cue to get rid of stuff that cannot be donated – broken, useless or incomplete items. Also, let garbage day be a cue to pick up loose trash (candy wrappers, scraps of paper, etc.).
- Before every birthday and Christmas clear clothing and children’s toys to make room for new items.
- When you find yourself in a messy drawer, cabinet, or closet that is really irritating and overwhelming to you, look for something to either throw away or give away.
- Set a goal of getting rid of a certain number of items per week or month (for example, 10 items per month). They don’t have to be big things. The purpose of this practice is to keep you conscious about *making stuff leave*.

### **Constant Cleanup**

If you save cleanup for once a week or for when you have a catalyst like a party or having house guests, there will be so much to do that you’re overwhelmed by the mammoth task. Many people stop having social events; getting their houses into an acceptable state is just too big a job for them. To avoid becoming buried by the buildup of things left undone, try the following:

- Take ***5-10 minutes at least once a day EVERY DAY to straighten up your home*** (throw-out trash, recycle newspapers, load the dishwasher, put dishes and clothes away). A morning and an evening cleanup are even better! Make *clutter puddles*, prime spots like the kitchen counter or the hall table, a priority for this cleanup time.
- Take ***5-10 minutes to process the mail daily***. Do this in the same location, preferably with a paper-recycling container close at hand.

Make an initial decision about every item and put all items in one of the following places:

- recycling bin,***
  - trashcan,***
  - bill tray or folder,***
  - action file,***
  - reading file or basket,***
  - filing tray,***
  - referral tray*** or
  - possibilities tray*** (for items that you want to consider but do not require immediate action).
- *Every time you do a task, put associated items away when you are finished with the task and before moving on to other tasks.*
  - When *leaving your car, scan for trash* and remove it.
  - When *returning from a trip, unpack bags* within a day.

# Good Habits

Being able to stay organized over time requires that you **Take Action Every Day**. Replace your bad habits with good habits and *staying organized* will just become part of your daily life instead of something you dread. The following are the most important ones to master.

1. **Resist the urge to postpone decisions about what to do with stuff.** Make decisions in the moment and take action. Clutter is the result of postponed decisions.
2. **If a task takes less than a minute to do, do it now!**
3. **Create homes for new items** as soon as they come into your house.
4. **Put things away immediately** after you use them.
5. **Clean up daily**, at least a 5 minute cleanup by all.
6. **Process mail daily.**
7. **Create a paper path for all paper entering the house and use it every day.** Paper should go to one or two locations only.
8. **Scrutinize everything coming into your house** and immediately throw away or give away items that you won't use or don't love.
9. **Regularly make things leave.** Trash, recycling and donation days are catalysts to purge!

