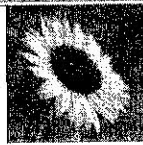


Homeowner



Know How

ORGANIZING YOUR HOME, ONE STEP AT A TIME

BY DEBBIE HARWIN

Life is hectic. For most of us, every day is a juggling act between work, errands, appointments and shuttling kids to various activities. Information overload can be extremely stressful. It seems impossible to escape the never-ending flow of e-mails and phone calls.

Mail piles up, bills go unpaid, important documents are lost, plans are forgotten and closets take on a life of their own.

Spring is a time of renewal and a great time to get a fresh start. As a professional organizer, I have many practical solutions listed below that will help put you on the path to reclaiming your house to relative order and calm. Transforming your home into your castle.

Disorganization often starts as soon as you walk in the door. Imagine what it would feel like to enter an uncluttered home. I frequently advise clients to create a place for all those items that they take with them on a daily basis.

Select a spot in your house where you enter and exit daily – either the foyer near the front door or the mudroom if you have one. Either of these areas should have a place for your coat, pocketbook, workbag, shoes, keys and other necessities that go with you each day.

Little tips, big payoffs

Put your keys on a small table in a bowl or a key rack inside a coat closet or a decorative rack on the wall near a door. For umbrellas, store them in an umbrella stand in a corner in your foyer or on hooks inside a coat closet. Once an item has a "home," it is more likely that it will make it back there.

If you are fortunate enough to have a mudroom, I suggest designating a cubby for each family member, with hooks for each person's coat, jacket, backpack and a space for a basket that could hold keys, bags, sunglasses and other small items. Underneath the units you'll probably have a space for shoes and boots.

When you walk in the door, you're likely holding your mail. Open your mail over the garbage or recycling bin every day. This will allow you to eliminate the junk mail, inserts and unwanted catalogs immediately. The papers that you keep go directly into your action folders (see home office section). If you tackle the mail on a daily basis, you will prevent the infamous "mountain" of papers from forming.

Picture a place for your photos

Designate one area in your house for photographs. Even with the popularity of digital photos, most homes are still full of piles, envelopes and boxes of photographs. Buy archival safe photo boxes to store your photos, until, one day, you have the time to organize them in albums. Alternatively, you could label the pictures by event and date and keep them permanently in the photo boxes, eliminating that huge photo album project from your list!

Purge your closets for more space

Your bedroom closets should not assault you when you open them. No matter how large or small they should not be overwhelming, with so many clothes inside, you can't find anything.

Statistics show that you wear 20 percent of your clothes 80 percent of the time. To make the most of your closet space, identify the 20 percent that you wear on a regular basis. These are the clothes that fit well, are comfortable and generally make you feel good about yourself when you wear them.

For the "keepers," group similar items together on uniform hangers facing the same direction. Make sure that all items are visible and accessible. You can't wear what you don't see!

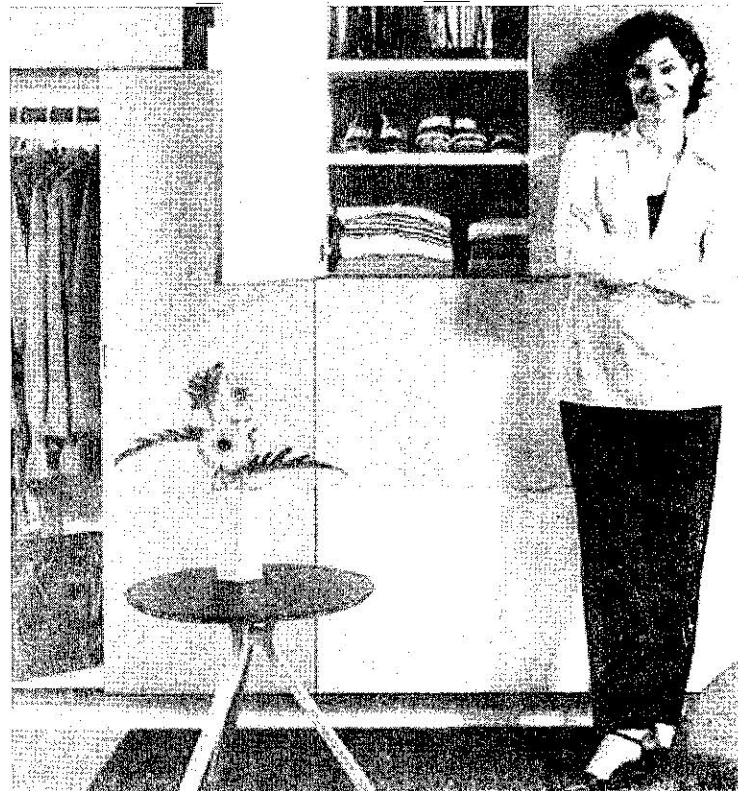
With regard to the other 80 percent, get rid of the mistakes (bargains and gifts that you never wear or that don't fit your style). These items can be donated, brought to a consignment or thrift shop or given to friends or family.

If space is limited, try changing your clothes seasonally. This will help to keep your closets in order and reduce the stress of choosing what to wear!

Shoes should be taken out of their boxes and placed on shelves or in cubbies. They should be grouped by category (i.e., sneakers, casual, business, formal, boots). If you choose to keep shoes in their boxes, briefly describe the shoe on the outside of the box or take a digital picture and tape it to the box.

You should rotate the coats in your entrance/coat closet on a seasonal basis. Group coats and jackets by family member. For kids' coats, place them on a low

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rod or affix a rack to the inside of the closet door. This allows kids to reach their own coats and will (hopefully) help them to hang them up!

De-clutter your kitchen

Inevitably, kitchens tend to become the dumping ground for all those items that cannot find a home anywhere else. For starters, set aside a block of time to organize your kitchen. I promise, the thought of doing so is a lot more daunting than the actual task.

Begin by emptying out all drawers, shelves and cupboards. Only keep those items that you use and like. As with clothing, get rid of the mistakes (items on sale that you'll never use, wedding gifts that you've kept but don't like).

Also, get rid of the excess. How many coffee mugs do you really need? Place similar items together and carefully consider where they should go.

The items you use most frequently (i.e., everyday dishes, glasses) should be placed on lower shelves so that they're easily accessible. Items used only a few times per year (i.e. holiday platters/objects) can be on higher shelves.

Countertops are the most valuable space in the kitchen and should hold only those items that you use on a daily basis, i.e., coffee maker, napkin/paper towel holder, toaster, telephone.

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Categorizing items in your pantry/cupboard will help you save time and money because you will not be buying items you already have. Additionally, if like items are stored together, it will be easier for other members of the family to help you put things away because it will be clear where each item goes.

Maximizing your home office

With more people working from home than ever before, home office design and location is of utmost importance. Whether you work as a professional from home or manage a busy household (and the paper that comes with it), you must choose a space that makes the most sense in your home.

Privacy and noise are two key considerations. Since you may need to separate yourself from your family for part of the day, you should find a location that is away from the usual noise and traffic of a busy household. Other factors to consider are whether or not you need a space to meet with clients, and whether you need more equipment than a computer — i.e., printer, scanner, fax, copier, extra table

Take action!

Every home office needs an area for action folders. These folders contain any papers that require some form of action. Common categories include: To Do, To Pay, Upcoming Events, To Submit to Insurance, etc. Choose names that "speak" to you (i.e., instead of "To Pay", you may want the folder to read "Pay Now" or "Bills").

Create a mail management center in your home office. This will contain your stamps, mailing labels, envelopes of various sizes, letter opener, and a checkbook and calculator for bill paying. It's much easier to tackle your papers when these items are already together.

A place for everything and everything in its place. I'm sure that you've heard this before, but it's not until you live by this mantra that you will begin to feel its effects. Once you have unburdened yourself of the excess stuff in your home, you will feel liberated, less stressed, be more productive, and, most important, happier.

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