

Clutter busters

• You can get rid of all that stuff you haven't touched in years, but be warned: even the pros say the mess will get worse before it gets better.

By Kelly Shiers
Features Writer

Time to 'fess up. After all, you're among friends.

The reason you don't open the hall closet is because you're afraid all that stuff in there will topple out. Your junk drawer is so full of twist ties, school notices, Scotch Tape and old envelopes that you can't fit another thing in it. The only time your dining room table isn't piled sky-high is when company's coming.

Or, at work, there's not one bit of space left on your desk for another pile of papers.

It's enough to leave you stressed out, frustrated and overwhelmed.

Maybe it's time to de-clutter your surroundings.

"By simply living in a more orderly environment, we feel better. That's the truth," says Halifax clinical psychotherapist Larry Loomis, who adds it can be difficult to convince really overwhelmed people of that.

For those people, he said, starting small might be a good idea.

"Not the closet, but simply picking stuff up off the floor."

For many of us, though, there simply comes a point when we decide enough is enough. It's time to take action.

Just remember, it's going to get worse before it gets better.

"I always tell people that," says professional organizer Jane Veldhoven of Halifax, who gets called mostly when folks reach their wit's end with the clutter around them.

"I say, 'Be prepared. It's going to be messy.'"

Take, for example, a man we'll



Illustration by Vincent Walsh

GETTING ORGANIZED

Jane Veldhoven of Get Organized Professional Services has tips for people who want to take clutter out of their space:

- Make sure everything has a home. Have a specific spot to store new batteries, bills and school notes. File your paperwork.
- Get things off the floor. Hangers, filing cabinets, storage bins, baskets and containers are your best friends.
- Sort, purge, sort again. Don't hang on to things you don't

call Joe. Joe works from home.

By the time Veldhoven's Get Organized Professional Services got his call for help, Joe had a decade's worth of papers lying around—in closets, on the dining room table and on the floor. Here, there and everywhere.

"The No. 1 reason people get into a mess in the house and in the office is because things have no home," Veldhoven says.

"You pick up a battery, where do you put it in your house? It doesn't have a home, so that's why it's in a pile of stuff on the floor."

She says she's known people

use, things that don't fit, that don't suit you or you haven't looked at or read in years.

- Always have a box for giveaways and one for garbage on hand.
- Divide your spaces into zones. For example, a living room can have a children's play zone, a television zone and a work-area zone with the addition of a cabinet to keep toys out of sight in one corner and a desk in another spot. Built-ins can help make organizing this way much easier.

with so many piles of paper on their desks, there's no room to work.

"In the office, it usually means the person doesn't have a good filing system," she said.

Once you've decided what you're going to tackle—a closet, a desk or a drawer—empty it out. Throw everything into one big heap where you can see it all, Veldhoven says.

For Joe's family, seeing the huge pile was a bit of a shock.

"They were ready to have a heart attack," she says. "We had stuff all over the floor for two days."

Now isn't the time to throw in the towel.

"That's the scary part. You put it all in one place, it looks worse."

With courage, and a few boxes in hand, it's time to start sorting. No need to get too specific at this point in the process. Use broad categories, such as personal stuff, work stuff and things that are sort of related to each other.

You may be able to do a mini-purge at the same time. That doll with no hair is garbage, so toss it into a box marked garbage. You know your pregnant friend needs baby clothes, so toss those items in a box with her name. Put items you plan to give away into a box for charity.

Once you finish sorting, it's time for an all-out purge.

"This is when you really have to start throwing things out," Veldhoven says, adding clients often need a supportive, yet firm, push to get through the next step.

"That's when you start to realize, 'I didn't know I had this, I haven't touched it in years,' or 'Good Lord, I have five copies of this,' so you keep one and throw the other four in the garbage."

She's heard from one person with hundreds of magazines, for example.

"If you haven't read them in a year, throw them out," she says.

Be ruthless, but take your time. Allow two days for the work, depending on how cluttered you are.

And once you have finished, it's time to sort again. This time, see what logically goes together.

Group clothes by colour and type: T-shirts in one box, white blouses in another, jeans in another, she suggests.

Batteries go together, twist ties in another pile, and screws and nails in yet another.

Paperwork requires a bit more effort. Take a sheet, decide where you'd look for it if it were filed, and mark a file folder for it. Toss it into a box, and repeat with the rest of your papers. In no time, you should be picking up papers and discovering they belong in one of those folders you've already made. File accordingly.

Congratulations. You've finished sorting and purging. You know what you have. But leaving everything in boxes in the middle of the floor is not an option.

"Now you have to put it away," Veldhoven says. "This is the part of the process where you often have to buy stuff."

Perhaps you suddenly realize you have 40 shirts and only 10 hangers. No wonder they're always on the closet floor.

"The biggest thing to stay organized in the house is to get containers or hangers or things to get stuff off the floor."

But don't skip the sort-and-purge stages and head for the nearest department or home improvement store. Your fancy

new containers would likely end up unused with the rest of the clutter.

At the office, buying larger filing cabinets, a new desk, file folders and magazine boxes can often keep the workspace clutter-free, Veldhoven says.

If your appetite is whetted by the success you've just had, maybe it's time to think about the way you use your space.

Veldhoven says even the smallest home or office can be divided into zones to help ensure that everything you have has a proper place.

In the kitchen, everything involved in food preparation—including fridge, knives and counter—should be in one area. Everything for cooking—stove, pots and pans, and spices—should be in another work zone. The cleanup zone should include not only the dishwasher but the cupboard for storing dishes.

In the living room, you may want a zone for watching television, a corner cabinet to store children's toys as a play zone and a desk in another corner for the adults to use as a workspace.

"Absolutely anything is possible, even in a small space," Veldhoven says, suggesting built-in cabinetry may be one answer for those trying to make the most of the room they have.

"Zones are essential, or you're going to be cluttered."

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