

S.I.M.P.L.E: Professionals offer suggestions on how to clear the clutter that drives you nuts

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(Journal Illustration by Jeremy Boyd)
at the Gateway YWCA. Classes cost \$20 each, and
participants can register by calling 724-6805.

Did you start the New Year yawning because you slept fitfully on a bed so piled with junk that you were forced to curl up in a little ball to fit?

Did you stumble across the floor, heading for the coffee pot, and trip over toys? Did you reach out to catch yourself and topple that stack of mail and magazines that you have been meaning to sort through?

And did you make a resolution, for the umpteenth time, to de-clutter and organize your house? If you did, you are in good company.

Sarah Hunter, who owns Simply Organized Inc., said that "In every magazine, on the cover, they will have something about getting organized." Hunter is teaching organizing classes, "You Don't Have to Retire to Downsize." The first was Thursday. The next will be 11 a.m. next Saturday

Allison Shorter, who owns Shorter Designs, said that sometimes people can be paralyzed by the amount of clutter they have accumulated and can't bring themselves to tackle it. Or they dread starting a task that, let's admit it, isn't a lot of fun. She suggests that they enlist the help of a friend, a spouse or a professional organizer to help. Knowing that someone else has made the commitment to help you will provide some incentive, she said.

She also suggests that people pick just one area - a desktop, a closet or even a drawer - to start with rather than planning to tackle the whole house at once.

"When they see success in one area, they're inspired," she said. "They want to go ahead and do another area. They see how much better it looks and how much better they feel."

Hunter has come up with an acronym, SIMPLE, to help people remember the steps they need to take to de-clutter their living spaces.

S is for sort. Start in one room or even a corner, if a whole room seems too intimidating. As you sort through your belongings, group similar things together. Put all the magazines in a pile. Gather up all the toys. As you work, formulate a plan for how you want your room to look in the end, Hunter said. Think about the things that you like having around.

Some people want their rooms filled with nothing but furniture - no knickknacks, no extras of any kind. Hunter is not one of them.

"I want some things," she said. "I'm a book lover. I want books around." When you have decided how uncluttered you want your room to be, work toward creating the image that you have in your mind. As you sort through all those things that take up space, you should be taking the next step toward de-cluttering.

I is for identify. Identify how you feel about the things that are taking over your life. Do you need them? Do you love them? Have you used them within the past year? People often cling to pieces with sentimental value - gifts, inherited pieces, things your children made when they were small.

"We've got so much that we have to kind of pick and choose what is meaningful," Hunter said. Older people might hold on to things they don't want or don't use with plans to pass them along to their children.

"It's a gift to your children, really, to rid yourself of some of the things you don't need and they probably don't want," she said. People tend to get hung up on photos especially, and they can be loath to throw them away. Often children will inherit stacks of old photographs of people they don't know because their parents didn't label the pictures and never told them about the circumstances under which they were taken.

"Pictures of you and your buddies at some picnic are not going to mean a whole lot to your children unless there's some connection," Hunter said. "On the other hand, you don't want to give away family treasures." Parents should ask their children before tossing family heirlooms or such photos as images from the day they met, she said.

"I do urge people to keep things that they feel are meaningful and will be meaningful to children later in life."

M is for making decisions. "This is where most people get stumped," Hunter said. Go through each pile and decide: Will you keep an item? Move it to another room? Sell or give it away? Or simply toss it?

Once those hard decisions have been made, move on to the next step.

P is for place. Decide where you will put what remains. If you have no room, create some. Build cabinets, hang shelves, buy baskets. Perhaps you need an armoire in your living room to hold your TV, stereo equipment, CDs and DVDs. Perhaps a set of attractive baskets can help corral your sewing supplies or your writing materials. How about moving some of the family photographs that crowd a living-room table to the bedroom?

L is for label. What good can come of putting all your clutter away if you can't find it when you need it? Mark your storage containers. Again, remember to keep like items together.

E is for enjoy. Enjoy your life in an uncluttered home.

"Life is easier when there's less to manage," Hunter said.

Some people get their lives organized then backslide, just like people who lose the same 10 pounds over and over.

"You have to have the discipline to maintain what you've already done," Shorter said. "It's easier to throw something in the closet as opposed to folding it and putting it back on the shelf. It may take only five minutes a day to keep up what you've done."

If you have managed to rid your house of clutter, vow to keep it that way. Break yourself of the habit of dropping clothes on the floor or dumping mail onto an ever-growing pile.

"Clutter breeds clutter," Shorter said. "One way to keep it from breeding is to never let it start."

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