

Trade Secrets: 20 TIPS FOR CONTROLLING CLUTTER

by Margaret Foley

Rawhide bones on the foyer floor. Underpants and jean piles in your boy's room. Been thinking about getting better about living without so much clutter? You're not the only one! Oregon Home asked professional clutter-busters and designers for easy-to-adopt strategies that can help you turn your Stuff Palace into a place of order that functions well for your family.

[1. Designate storage space in a mudroom for every member of your family—man, woman, child and beast.]

If every time you come into your house, you trip over backpacks, shoes, sports equipment, dog leashes and half-chewed rawhide bones, design a system that gets those things out of the way. “When it comes to kids, I really can't emphasize cubicle storage enough,” says Libby Holah, a designer at Holah Design + Architecture LLC in Portland. “You can also think of this type of storage in creative ways. I've seen galvanized metal tubs attached to the wall with one assigned to each family member for hats and coats. You could use something like that for a dog's leashes and toys. Thinking of new uses for everyday objects can create interesting and effective storage solutions.”

Of course, no storage system will work unless you use it. “If you want your child to hang up his backpack when he gets in the door, you may have to tell him to do that every day for two weeks,” says Ellen Damaschino, a Certified Professional Organizer® whose Portland company, Neat, helps residential and corporate clients get organized. “Eventually, hanging it up will become a habit, and your space will look better.”

[2. Keep furniture free of clothes so it can remain functional.]

If your closet has exploded beyond its confines to cover your bedroom's furniture in a coating of shirts and tights and jackets, you need to regain control over your clothing to make both your closet and your bedroom functional. “Getting people to separate from their clothes is a huge thing,” says Noëlle Penn, the designer behind Noëlle Penn Interiors in Portland, who launched an additional business last year, Noëlle for Clutter, because so many of her clients couldn't upgrade their interiors until they dealt with an overload of stuff. “Get rid of your rundown shoes that you keep saying you'll fix, but never do. A lot of old houses in Portland don't have walk-in closets and people are crazed with clothes these days. If your entire closet only holds 22 things, then that's all you can have.”

Penn's solution to that problem is to have her clients label and store what they aren't using, and to rotate things seasonally. “Don't hold onto clothes you'll never fit into again,” she says. “You may be determined to keep the pants you wore in high school, but if your closet has pants from size 8 to 18, you're just wasting space with things you'll never wear again.”

[3. Establish an annual or biannual “urge to purge,” during which you donate rarely or unused items to friends or to your favorite charity.]

Knowing that your items are destined for future use rather than a landfill can make it easier to give them away. “I keep three piles: a RECYCLE OR DONATE pile, a THROW OUT pile and a STORAGE pile,” says Penn. “A lot of people want to hold on to books, and I can understand holding on to classics, but don’t keep every single paperback you’ve ever read. Take those books to nursing homes or shelters, or other places where they’ll really enjoy them.”

If you have children, use the rhythm of the school year as a way to remind yourself to sort and purge. “School breaks are great touchpoints during the year to go through schoolwork or clothes or sports gear and see what you can get rid of and what you can hand down to the next child,” says Damaschino. “Take your kids’ artwork, spread it out and let them choose their favorites. Then get rid of the rest.”

[4. Look for unused space that can become new storage areas.]

Unless you designed and built your home, the chances are good that your home’s storage doesn’t exactly match your storage needs. “Look for places to capture space,” says Holah. “The space under the staircase is a good opportunity. In a bedroom, get drawers with castors that fit beneath your bed. In a kitchen remodel in an old house, you can remove the soffit and use that space. Many old houses have a narrow space in the kitchen that once held a built-in ironing board, and you can add shelves to it to create hidden storage for your spices.”

[5. Have furniture and casework do double duty.]

Having multifunctional pieces in your house is a good way to control clutter. “Have a bench in the mudroom that has a lift top or cubicles underneath its seat,” says Holah. “In the kitchen, save appliance space with a microwave-hood combination. And ottomans with underseat storage work well in the living room.”

Built-ins and other custom solutions add design interest while solving your storage dilemmas, too. “Custom shelving creates more space for storage and keeps the space more open visually,” says Holah. “Incorporate small cubicles or bookshelves into the design of your kitchen island, which can make it function for more than one activity. The more multi-purpose built-ins are, the better they will serve you.”

[6. Under countertops, install drawers rather than cabinets.]

Even something as simple as putting in drawers rather than cabinets can help control clutter. “I’m a big fan of drawers,” says Paolo Scardina, the designer-owner of the Paolo Design Group in Portland. “When you pull open a drawer, you can see all the way to the back of it. You can access the back reaches and find things more easily. People don’t put things away in cupboards because things are harder to find when you’re looking for them.”

[7. Stock up on storage materials before you begin a decluttering project.]

You may have budgeted your time properly, but if you don't have what you need to get rid of the clutter, the project will fall apart before you've even started. "Create a staging area to look through your stuff and have boxes and labels on hand; don't just take a felt pen and write on the side of the box," says Penn. "For me, Rubbermaid and Sterilite are my friends! Clear storage bins are great because I can see through them, and they stack well."

[8. Rethink how much time it will take to make a dent in your most-cluttered space.]

If your garage is a disaster area filled with old bikes, tools, and boxes and boxes of you can't remember what, don't expect to finish the job in just the Saturday afternoon you budgeted for it. "It can be overwhelming to clean out an area of your home," says Damaschino. "The average home office alone takes between 12 and 21 hours to do. People often feel that they have to clean up a space all at once or not at all, but that's not the case. Start small. Just clear off your desk or sort through a drawer or set a goal of eliminating five files every week. Keep up that one thing for a week. Make keeping your desktop clean a habit—and then move on to the next thing."

[9. Limit the size of a collection to what you can artfully display, then upgrade it rather than increase it.]

If more than half of your collection is in your basement, then you're not enjoying it. "Collections can be great," says Damaschino, who collects milk glass. "But when you start to run out of room, you need to ask what a piece will add to your collection. Be brutally honest! I also suggest you display all of your pieces in one place because collections look better when they're grouped together and not spread throughout the house. It's less visually cluttering. I keep my milk glass collection on top of a tall buffet in my dining room. It looks good because it's all together. Your eyes go to it and it makes an impact. It wouldn't be nearly as strong if I had pieces all around the house."

[10. Keep paper under control with simple filing systems.]

With all the storage and organizing products out there, it's tempting to spend money on a complex filing and organizing system, but if it takes too much time to set up and use, you'll have wasted money and still have unorganized papers. "Simplify your filing system," says Damaschino. "Have one box or file that says FINANCIAL and one that says MEDICAL. That way, when you need an important paper, you'll know where to go to look for it. And avoid the urge to over-file. You don't need to separate bank statements from retirement statements or stock portfolios. You only need to look at them once a year, if then. The average person only looks at 20 percent of what he or she files. So if you have a complex system, you're over-organizing. When you make a filing system too complicated, it takes too much time to sort things properly, so you never do it."

[11. Increase your basement's functionality.]

While a dark basement often houses all your out-of-sight, out-of-mind objects, a properly organized basement can help your whole house function better. For example, if a doorway to the basement is near your kitchen, use the basement as a secondary pantry. “In the kitchen, dining room and living room, you should only have things you use every day,” says Holah. “Use your basement pantry to keep platters and bulk items. With a little light and some wire racks, you can turn the basement into a more useful space.”

[12. Get the whole family involved.]

Once you've gotten your home organized, make sure everybody in the family understands where things go. If you're the only one who knows where to put things, clutter will still happen. “A lot of times the organizing falls on the mom,” says Damaschino. “But everybody needs to be involved. It's not just my job to control my family's clutter. I label things in my home so everybody knows where stuff goes.” If you want your whole family to be organized, model putting away things so that your kids will follow suit. “You have to show them by example,” says Penn. “If you're constantly telling your kids to clean, yet they look at your spaces and see total chaos, they're not going to become organized. They don't understand why they have to pick up if you don't.”

[13. Analyze your routines to understand where and how clutter happens.]

If your home has storage or clutter issues, analyze what causes the problems and build in solutions to improve how your home functions. “One of the places that clutter happens is at the entries to your house,” says Scardina. “If there aren't places to store your work and the other things you've collected during the day, they end up on surfaces that are supposed to be used for something else. If you're thinking about remodeling, understanding where and how clutter happens in your home can really help your designer figure out the quantity and type of storage you need and where they should be located.”

[14. Inventory your belongings before you buy storage solutions.]

The impulse to declutter often entails a trip to the store to buy a carload full of organizing tools that, it turns out, you may not need. To avoid that, inventory what you own and what you plan to get rid of to determine your exact storage needs. “The real first step is to downsize before you spend money on built-ins or other storage items,” says Scardina. “Go through your things and evaluate each piece based on how frequently you use it. Ask the hard question of how often you really use something. If the answer is, ‘More than 50 percent of the time,’ then it's a candidate for being a keeper. If you can't say that, then the item needs to be out of your life. In the process of doing this kind of downsizing, you end up with a great analysis of what you need for storage—and where you could put things.”

[15. Don't hoard what should be tossed.]

Old spices. Empty boxes. Great boots that no longer fit you. Once you've acquired something, it can be hard to let it go. Professional clutterbusters say you have to ask yourself why you keep things. "A lot of times I'll tell a client that her house will be on fire in 20 minutes and she needs to grab what she wants and get out," says Damaschino. "Most people know what means something to them. If you're questioning whether to keep some of your belongings, that can be a sign to let them go. If you keep something, then you should honor it, value it, hang it up or use it."

The same is true for holding on to inherited items. Cull them to keep the ones that are most meaningful to you. "I had a client whose father did leatherwork and she had his tools and hundreds of scraps of leather and didn't want to get rid of them," says Penn. "I suggested she pick a couple of the tools and frame them or make a collage with them, so she could enjoy them. You may want to keep things because of the story attached to them, but you'll always have the story, even without the item."

[16. Know that small modifications can improve your organization.]

Sometimes all you need to make a space more effective is a small change that makes it easier to store and access your things. "An easy fix in the kitchen is to modify the cabinets," says Holah. "Places like Ikea sell kits that add slideouts, which make cabinets much more functional."

Once you've made spaces more functional, you will reduce your clutter. "When it becomes difficult to put away things, clutter happens," says Scardina. "You have to make convenient intentional spaces, so things get put away. You can turn something that's drudgery into a pleasure because everything has its place. Clutter goes away when you make organizing your things convenient."

[17. Have a "maybe" box.]

When sorting through items, it's almost impossible to make a rational decision about each item. "If you need to, transition things out," says Damaschino. "This works well with kids, but adults can do it also. I get a big box, and say to my child, 'Since you haven't played with this toy in a while, maybe we'll get rid of it!' Then I put it in a box, label it with the date and look at it six months later, when I make the final decision. If it's something you haven't missed or needed to use, let it go."

[18. Go vertical.]

Adding something as simple as hooks can turn the higher levels of an empty wall into usable space. "Space has three dimensions—length, width and height," says Scardina. "Most of us forget about the vertical dimension. But if you look up and down—and not just think about filling the space from side to side—there are a lot of opportunities to create more storage." Creating upper-level storage can be a great way to keep things you

need, but seldom use, or that are bulky out of the way.

[19. Don't assume that having a yard sale is always the best way to get rid of your unwanted items.]

One person's junk isn't always someone else's treasure; sometimes it's just junk. Don't go to the trouble to set up a sale, if your return will be small. "If you don't think you can make a lot of money, don't do a sale," says Penn. "But if you have collectibles and good furniture, have a sale because people will want those things. If it's just garage-sale stuff, donate it."

[20. Embrace a little disorganization in your life.]

Even if you run an organized household, it's the rare home in which nothing is ever out of place. "Your home should be comfortable for you and your family," says Damaschino. "Some people have to live with everything in order, whereas some people can live with a little bit of chaos. One of the reasons we fail to stay organized is because we set too high a standard. Can your kids find what they need in the morning quickly and efficiently? If the answer is yes, then you're organized. Being organized is being able to find anything you need in five minutes or less. There's no one right or wrong way when it comes to how things should look."