



12 Ways to Unclutter Your Life

By Andrew Mellen



Illustration: Jillian Tamaki

He's got organizational superpowers! He can bring order to your kitchen and demystify the reasons you're hanging on to things you don't need (and don't even like) in your closets, drawers, basement. He's here to help get your house, and your sanity, back. He's Andrew Mellen, a.k.a. VirgoMan.

Think of this scenario: If your house were burning and your family, pets, and purse were already out of harm's way, what else would you want to save? Probably not the blender that only works on one speed, the china you inherited but never use, or the photo in which you're not exactly looking your best. Which begs the question: If those things aren't worth taking, why are they in your home in the first place?

There's no reason to be surrounded by things that don't work, that you don't need, or that you don't even like. As a professional organizer, I help my clients figure out what they should keep and what they should kiss goodbye; then we figure out how to make what they have work for them. You can do it yourself by following the steps I've outlined:

The Ground Rules

1. Everything you own should have value, either because it's functional or beautiful or you just love it. Remember the question of what you'd grab if your house were on fire; that's your baseline for determining an object's worth.

2. Every item needs a place where it "lives." Setting things down on the coffee table or kitchen counter creates piles and confusion. My clients mock me when I say, "Where do your keys live? They live in a bowl or on a hook by the front door"—but you never lose anything when you put it where it lives.

3. Focus on one thing at a time. Multitasking is supposed to help you get more things done quickly, but when you try to do 19 things at once, everything ends up incomplete. You're trying to simplify your life, so simplify your approach to getting organized. Now let's get started.

The Crammed Kitchen

Your kitchen is a food preparation area, not a storage space. The idea here is to weed out what you're not using, then put similar items together and in the best places.

Appliances: Machines that are broken or aren't used are just taking up space. If your Crock-Pot has a missing lid that you say you're going to replace someday, or you're keeping the bread maker just because it was a gift, get rid of it.

Food containers: All your plastic storage items should have corresponding lids. If you don't have one or the other, it's a recycling item.

Pots and pans: If there isn't a lot of space in your kitchen, use a pot rack. If you have the space, hang them along the wall for fast access.

Knives: If you're short on counter space, consider the type of knife block that fits in a drawer.

Plastic bags: Everybody has a plastic bag full of other plastic bags. Use the ones you have for trash can liners, or take them back to the supermarket for recycling. Keep canvas shopping totes in the car so you don't accumulate more plastic bags. Mesh shopping bags roll up small enough to be kept in your handbag for unexpected trips to the market.

Cookbooks: Unless you're a collector or you have a lot of room, edit them. How often do you use the cookbook? If you've had it for years but it's never gotten a single stain or burn from use, donate it.

How to go from swamped to sane—now!

The Pile of Mail

If you can't finish the mail, don't start the mail. You can't slice chicken for dinner and sort your bills at the same time, so when you come in the front door with a stack of mail, put it in the basket, box, or whatever container you have handy for this purpose. You don't have such a container? No wonder there are so many piles of mail around your house.

When you're ready, take your mail basket to wherever you deal with paperwork. First, pull out the circulars and flyers and set them aside; you'll either clip the coupons or put them in the recycling bin—later. Also set aside the catalogs. If you're shopping for something specific, save them. (Caveat: no multiples. The new catalog replaces the old one, which gets recycled.) If you're getting catalogs you never wanted in the first place, pull off the pages with the mailing label and put them aside; that's an action item for later. Then separate the rest: bills, personal correspondence, time-sensitive invitations, requests for charitable donations, membership renewals, new credit card offers, and so forth.

Open the bills first because they represent a relationship that must be honored; if you want the services, you have to pay. All the stuffing that says "You've been selected to receive these free gifts" goes into the recycling bin. All you want is the bill and the return envelope.

Put any invitations aside; later on, you'll transfer those into your calendar and send your response.

If there's room in your home office, have small bins in which to stack bills, invitations, and the correspondence you're keeping.

When you're done sorting, then you can read your magazines. Or get those back pages you ripped out, call the companies that sent them, and tell them what you *don't* want—their catalogs. (You can also log on to Catalogchoice.org, a free service that will stop these unwanted mailings from being sent to you.)

The Overstuffed Closet

My clients have a lot of "someday" best. *Someday I'm going to fit into these again. Someday this trend might return. Someday I'm going to wear this.* The problem is, "someday" doesn't exist; there's only today. Here's what to do with what's being worn only by your hangers.

Clothes that don't fit: If you've gained weight, keep the smaller-sized clothes that you'll get the most use from and work on fitting into them again. If you've already lost weight, don't keep a whole closetful of big clothes as though one day you're going to suddenly be struck fat; donate them.

Trend items: If you're waiting for something to come back in style, don't. Even if it does return, it will look dated—and so will you.

Special occasion outfits: The rule that says "If you haven't worn it in a year, donate it" is a fine guide for when to say goodbye.

Sentimental pieces: You say, "I really loved this jacket." I know you did. But if you haven't worn it in ages and it doesn't work with your other clothes, it's time for it to go away. If you're saving your wedding dress, be honest—do you have the space to store it? Do you have a daughter you're saving it for, and is it a timeless classic she won't roll her eyes at? If the answers are yes, keep it. If you're short on storage space, you have only sons, or your dress has puffy sleeves, lace, and buttons up the arms because you did a kind of Linda Ronstadt circa 1974 thing, give it to a thrift store or DonateMyDress.org, which provides formal wear to girls who can't afford prom or special occasion dresses.

Now that you have a closetful of clothes that you actually wear, organize them—all the short-sleeved shirts together, all the jeans together, etc. Do the same with your shoes. If you have the space, they can be kept on shelves so you can see them immediately. If not, try stacking shelves or hanging shoe racks.

The Drawer Full of Photos

If you don't have time to put your photos in an album or scrapbook, it's okay to stop pretending you're going to do it. Get clear shoe boxes to store them in instead.

Then get a kitchen timer. Why? Because sorting through photos leads to reminiscing, and suddenly it's three hours later. But you're not looking at photos now—you're organizing them so that looking at them later will be more fun. Decide how long you have and set the timer.

Group the photos by subject—the family reunion, your trip to Istanbul. While you're grouping, you're also sorting: Is it a clear picture? Do you even know who those people are? Throw away any that don't measure up, and any in which you can't stand the sight of yourself. When you're done, label the boxes accordingly: "Family Reunion, February 2008."

The New Things That Haven't Been Used

Do you buy things because they're on sale? If you didn't need them, they weren't a bargain. Here are the three questions to ask before you buy anything:

1. **Where would this live?** A very practical consideration, especially if you're trying to declutter.
2. **What am I going to do with it?** If it has a purpose or fills a need, fine. If you already have four of them, not fine.
3. **What is it replacing?** When something is broken or you don't like the old version as much as the new one, then by all means, charge away. But be prepared to get rid of the old item when you get home.

The Inherited Items and Mementos

Your home is not a museum. Many people subscribe to the unwritten rule that you're obligated to keep your great-aunt's dishes, even if you don't like them, just because she used them. But maybe your great-aunt never liked them either and also felt too guilty to let them go. Things don't have to become yours

simply because they belonged to a relative. You're not living her life, and you're not a bad person for giving inherited items away.

If the acquired stuff is worth money, you may feel bound to it financially: "It's real silver—I can't give it away." Yes, you can. Donate it, document what it's worth, and take it off your taxes. Or give it to another family member who would really like it. Or sell it on eBay. And if you like something enough to keep it, consider it a replacement, not an addition—keep Grandma's reading lamp, but donate the one you already have.

Mementos from your own life are harder to part with because when you see them, you relive the story: To you, it's the cashmere V-neck you wore on your first date with the man who would become your husband; to anyone else, it's just an old sweater full of holes. The key to parting with items suspended in time is not to replay that story. Leave the room, come back in, and see what you're really holding on to—a sweater that's seen better days. Rule of thumb: If it serves no purpose, let it go.

The Car (Or, "The Storage Space on Wheels")

If you have to clear off the backseat for company, there's a problem.

What shouldn't be in the car: old food wrappers, toys, the dry cleaning or recycling you've been meaning to drop off for a week (just take it out of the car until you're ready to make the trip), out-of-season tools (if it's June, you can remove the ice scraper from the trunk).

What should be in the car: registration, insurance certificate, owner's manual, maps and/or GPS, extra pair of sunglasses in case of glare, small folding umbrella, headset for your cell phone (preferably you're not talking while driving, but if you are, please be hands-free), envelope with supermarket and drive-through restaurant coupons and any gift certificates you've received (it's pointless for them to be in the drawer at home).

What should be in the trunk: tool kit, flashlight, working spare tire. In winter, add ice scraper, bag of kitty litter (for traction in snow), a small blanket.

The Chaotic Computer

You don't want to spend an hour looking for a scone recipe—or your résumé—because you're searching through all the stuff on your desktop. If you can't see the pretty picture on your computer screen because it's full of icons for documents, downloads, and photos, start making folders. Color-code them: The folder for your financial documents can be green, the one for your job search can be blue. Like goes with like—all your résumés in one folder, all photos in another. Label each one clearly. Then put all your folders in "My Documents," a master folder that you have whether you're on a Mac or a PC.

You can save e-mail correspondence, but discard the one that says, "Great, see you at 12 on Thursday!" and save the one with information about what you discussed.

By the way, if you're constantly responding to e-mail, you're being pulled away from the things that you need or want to do. Try checking it hourly.

The (Shudder) Basement or Garage

Where do you start? With the bad, scary corner. First, get rid of unsalvageables. If the basement flooded and a whole bunch of stuff got waterlogged, these are no longer your possessions; they're a

mildewfest. Just say goodbye.

Once you've gotten rid of the garbage, start grouping similar items, which makes it easy to see what there's too much of and what's broken. Tackle one category at a time—the holiday decorations, the seasonal clothing, the journals you've been keeping for years. If you have enough room, spread everything out to take stock of it all.

When everything has been sorted, prune: Is this important enough to save? Is it useful? Discard what isn't.

Next, containerize what's left, but don't buy storage bins until you have an understanding of what you're putting into them. It doesn't serve you to come home with two 40-gallon tubs if what you need is 19 shoe boxes. I'm all about clear plastic storage; sure, you can label boxes, but why not be able to see the contents immediately? And if you also use your basement as a play space for your kids or to entertain, get rolling shelves that can be moved to one side of the room and perhaps even covered with drapes.

At the end of this project, you'll have accomplished three goals: There will be less stuff, what's left will be in order, and everything will be in containers that work with your space. Being organized isn't about getting rid of everything you own or trying to become a different person; it's about living the way you want to live, but better. There are enough things in the world that you can't control—but you *can* bring some order into your home and your life.

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