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Putting your house in order

By Melinda Sacks

for the Mercury News

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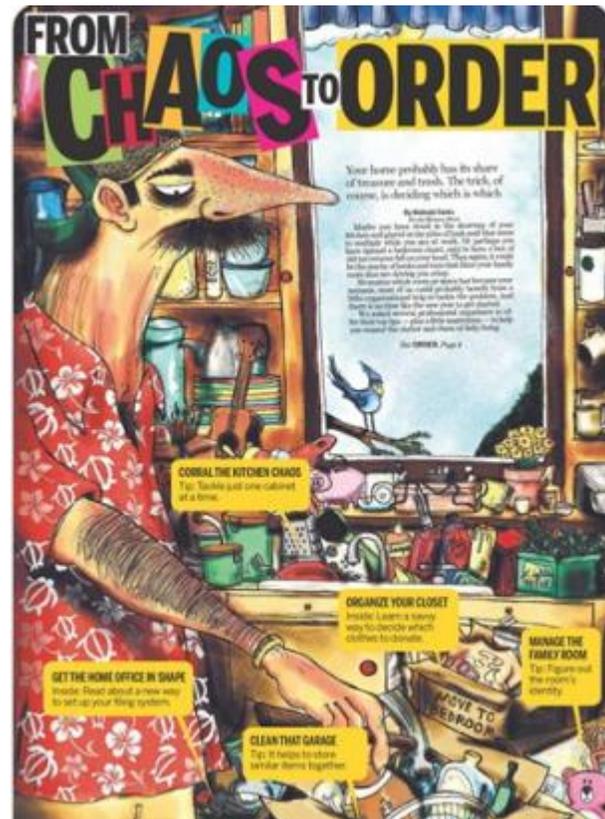
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For the Mercury News

Maybe you have stood in the doorway of your kitchen and glared at the piles of junk mail that seem to multiply while you are at work. Or perhaps you have opened a bedroom closet, only to have a box of old tax returns fall on your head. Then again, it could be the stacks of books and toys that litter your family room that are driving you crazy.

No matter which room or space has become your nemesis, most of us could probably benefit from a little organizational help to tackle the problem. And there is no time like the new year to get started.

We asked several professional organizers to offer their top tips — plus a little inspiration — to help you master the clutter and chaos of daily living.



## CLEANING OUT THE CLOTHES CLOSET

Catherine O'Brien, founder of rePurpose; What to trash, what to treasure ([www.whattotrash.com](http://www.whattotrash.com))  
Catherine O'Brien's new Palo Alto company focuses on helping people evaluate, eliminate and integrate their possessions.

"My goal is not to help people keep and organize things they don't need," she says. "It is not about organizing systems. It is about organizing principles." Based on the idea that "people own too many things," O'Brien believes in whittling down belongings to what you really love and like to wear or use. Repurpose the rest, she suggests, by giving them away, selling them or re-gifting them.

While her approach can work for any room or space, here are O'Brien's tips for whipping your closet into shape:

The first step is to empty the whole closet so you can make a full assessment. That's right, everything. Shoes, purses, clothing, and whatever else has lived there all those months or years. Put it on your bed, some chairs, even the floor.

Make a small investment in slim, flocked hangers. These allow you to neatly hang twice as many clothes, and nothing will slip off onto the floor. Find them at Target or Bed, Bath & Beyond. Recycle all the bent wire and plastic hangers that clutter your closet.

Go through each item before you decide its fate. If you aren't sure, try it on. If you don't love it, get rid of it. Be brutal. If you are a softy, have a friend help with this task.

Things that you aren't keeping go into a labeled box or bag: "Mend, clean or alter," "resell" and "donate to charity."

Now rehang clothes you are keeping by categories that work for you. Some people put similar items, such as sweaters, together; others prefer to organize by color or function, such as work clothes, weekend clothes. Put like with like.

Hang as much as you can. Clothes in drawers are hard to see and don't get worn.

As you hang your clothes, reverse the direction of the hanger so that the hook points forward. Each time you wear something, put it back on the hanger the normal way with the hook pointing away from you. At the end of the season or six months, whichever items are still hung with the hook pointing toward you should be repurposed!

Scarves can hang over the bar of your new hangers so that you can actually see them.

Put fabric softener sheets inside your shoes for a fresh smell to the shoes and your closet. Consider painting your closet or getting new door pulls. Whatever you can do to make the space more attractive will make the experience of getting dressed more pleasant.

Motto: People hang onto things "just in case." As far as your closet goes, if it doesn't fit or make you feel good, get rid of it.

## TACKLING THE FAMILY ROOM AND THE GARAGE

Christine Palen and Amy Siu, co-founders of Chaos Control and Life Artistry ([www.lifeartistry.com](http://www.lifeartistry.com), <http://chaos-control.com/>)

Palen and Siu are partners in two organizing businesses, Chaos Control, based in Woodside and Sausalito, and Life Artistry, based in Orinda. Their services range from "office overhauls" to time management consultations and creation of what they call a "Home Haven," which is accomplished by supporting clients to "conquer clutter with ease and style."

"To us, organizing is about freedom," Palen says. "Freedom to find what you need in 30 seconds or less, freedom to do the things that you want to do because your time and space are managed well, freedom to relax and enjoy life because you're no longer stressed about that room or space."

Applying these principles to the living room or family room, Palen and Siu offer these hints:

Determine the function of the room. Then look at products and furniture to support this function. For example, if you have the big comfy chair in the living or family room for reading, then have a container nearby that would accommodate your reading materials.

To store your CDs and DVDs, consider using binders. You can purchase binders made for this purpose, or you can buy three-ring binders and insert pages. Lose the jewel and plastic cases for your discs, and you will gain oodles of space in your home.

If you still have CD collections and haven't made the switch to downloading your music, look into the 200-plus CD players. They are like having a mini-jukebox in your home. CDs are stored and played in one location.

Dual-purpose furniture is great for these rooms. A coffee table with the shelf underneath it or with baskets below makes a quick "stash and dash" an easy task.

## NOW, ON TO THE GARAGE

To begin, pick one side, one shelf, or one area and make your way around the space in stages. Determine the "new home" location that you want for the particular items that you're keeping. Clean as you go.

Play your favorite tunes if you need a little motivational energy while you work.

Remember the principle of "like with like." More than any other room in the house, the garage will benefit from this rule. In other words, like items are stored together.

Examples of "like with like" contents of an organized garage include: financial/legal archives (if you can keep them secure); seasonal and holiday items; household goods (tools, paint, gardening, extra dishes/stemware, etc.); memorabilia (if it can be protected from the elements); recreational items; and infrequent travel items. Temporary storage could be for baby and children's items.

Choose open shelving or closed cupboards. Both work well. It's a personal choice that depends on what you prefer visually.

Motto: "Less is more. It's one thing to learn to purge, and it's another thing to set up systems. It's a whole other level when you change your attitude and behavior in deciding what to bring in and what to keep in your home."

## CONFRONTING THE KITCHEN

Tamah Vega, co-founder and consultant, Amaree Living ([www.amareeliving.com](http://www.amareeliving.com))  
Amaree Living is a lifestyle company serving the greater Bay Area from its home base in Newark.

"We don't have a cookie-cutter approach to getting people organized," Vega says. "We work with our clients to get to the root cause of their disorganization. By providing coaching services and other support, we guide our clients and work toward long-term solutions in addition to clearing up their space and making it look fabulous."

Many of Amaree Living's clients have gone through some kind of life transition that has not been dealt with, sometimes for years. It could be a new baby, a move, a career change or a loss of some kind. The clutter, both physical and mental, begins to pile up and overwhelm them, she explains, until they become immobilized.

While her tips can be applied to many rooms of the house, Vega offers these suggestions for dealing with kitchen chaos:

If paper piles are part of the problem in your kitchen, begin by quickly whipping through the piles and pulling out easily identifiable items that can go into the recycling bin: empty envelopes, catalogs, old magazines, solicitations and outdated events. Next, pull out current bills and upcoming events and take the required action. Now, with two-thirds of the pile gone, you can file the rest or create appropriate folders at your leisure.

Minimize the amount of paper you receive by reducing junk mail. Sign up for a service like <http://precycle.tonic.com> or download a complimentary "Stop Junk!" do-it-yourself kit from the Amaree site, [www.amareeliving.com](http://www.amareeliving.com).

Most people cannot completely organize their whole kitchen in a day. However, you can break the process down into smaller steps with the goal of each step being completed in a day or less.

This would depend on the size of your kitchen and how much stuff you have in it.

What you absolutely want to avoid is dumping everything out of the drawers and cabinets. If you are not able to complete your project, you're left with a huge mess, feeling more frustrated than before, Vega says. Start with only one cabinet or drawer at a time.

Step 1: For each area you tackle, first pull out anything that is clearly garbage, is expired or broken. If it hasn't been used in more than two years, dump it.

Step 2: Sort your kitchen supplies by type or use, eliminating unneeded extras along the way.

Step 3: Now that you can clearly see what you have, decide where things should be stored for easy access, and whether you need containers or shelving to improve storage space or accessibility.

Finally: Have your friends over for some fondue now that you've found the fondue pot you got three Christmases ago!

Motto: "It never happens like in the television shows, but when it's done you feel like you've lost 100 pounds!"

## WRANGLING THE HOME OFFICE

Lynn Gross-Cerf, productivity coach and owner of Organization and More ([www.organizationandmore.com](http://www.organizationandmore.com))

Based in San Jose, Gross-Cerf is a member of the National Association of Professional Organizers. She works as a consultant or coach to individuals and businesses.

Here she offers advice to organize a home office.

"My first tip is to have one — a home office, that is," Gross-Cerf says. If you don't have the space to designate a room, at least create a place in your home where you can set up your computer, have a phone and keep office supplies. This should not be the dining room table, she gently scolds.

It sounds so simple, but put all the supplies you use for office tasks in your office so that you don't have to wander around looking for what you need. Most likely this includes file cabinets, pens, paper, scissors, markers, mouse pad, and colored and manila folders.

Paper management is key. Set up a "retrieval system" rather than just a filing system. The subtle but key difference between a filing and a retrieval system is that if you have put the papers away based on how you know you will retrieve them, you have a better chance of finding them. The objective is to find the paper again, not just "get it off your desk," she says. Consider making a folder for each category, matching the way you group things in your mind. This could be by subject, geographic region or project name, whatever works for you. Label each folder and assign it a color.

Try using see-through color folders for temporary projects (those that you will finish within a month) and mark the tab with a brightly colored Post-it note so it is easy to find. Use a vertical file holder on top of your desk to keep these front and center. Now whenever you have new mail, it will have a specific "home."

Begin small. You didn't get disorganized overnight, and you won't get organized that way either. Pick one small area to begin your organizing — one set of desk drawers, one cabinet, the top of one desk.

Set aside a bit of time each day, or if you can't do that, each week, to work on getting organized. Make it a priority the way you might make working out a priority.

It can be very helpful to have a coach, or if you don't want to pay a professional, get what Gross-Cerf calls an "accountability partner" who will help you stay on track.

Motto: "Remember, it's progress, not perfection."

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