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Principles to Live (and Organize) By

Here's something you might find comforting, or unnerving, or both: There are no hard and fast rules for organizing. There are some widely accepted and respected guidelines, and there are principles such as the ones I'm about to offer you, but even the most universal of organizing concepts is not one-size-fits-all. The key word here is flexibility: Everything must be customizable person by person, and if a "rule" is not adaptable to your unique needs, it's not valid.

This chapter describes eight principles that I think you'll find relevant to organizing the spaces in your home. There are seven that tell you where to start and one that tells you when to stop. (Intrigued?) Many of them apply to other types of organizing, too, such as data and time management. If they inspire you to move beyond organizing your belongings at home and into also organizing your time, your paper, or your space at work, so much the better!

Understanding these principles from the outset will give you a significant head start toward the hands-on organizing coming up in later chapters: They allow you to take a much more targeted

In this chapter:

- * Learn about the "homes" within your home
- * Begin thinking in categories and groups
- * Discern the key points of "containerizing"
- * Discover how to make tradeoffs to optimize your organization
- * Search for new storage options that defy gravity
- * Understand the importance of improving your decision-making ability
- * Prepare to develop systems to support your organizing efforts
- * Learn how to know when to STOP organizing

approach, because you're better able to anticipate the results of your efforts, and you have a global perspective to keep yourself working according to your priorities. Carry these principles with you after you've reached your organizational ideal: They'll help you make prudent choices when your systems need future updates.

note Because this chapter explains some basic principles of organizing, you won't see the typical "To Do" and "You'll Need" lists. You'll find plenty of those in later chapters, however, when we put these principles into action!



To do list

- Learn the eight principles of organizing
- Make a habit of applying the principles to your home organization efforts

Have a Home

Everything you own should have a home within your home—a place it belongs, fits, and can go to when not in use. It doesn't necessarily have to be in its home very often (think remote controls that are put away only when company's coming) but when it is time to tidy up, those reserved parking spaces must be accessible.

Adhering to this principle accomplishes two things: It makes it easy for you and anyone else in the household to put things away where they belong, and it forces you to decide, for every last thing you own, where it should be stored.

Choose a small area that is always cluttered in your home and look at each of the objects on that surface. Ask yourself where each of them belongs. If you don't know or have never decided, well, there's the problem: How can you put something away when it doesn't actually *belong* anywhere?



Figuring Out Where Things Should Live

Assigning homes to every last object can be tough. Some things are easy, and they're the ones most likely to be put away on a regular basis. Other things are difficult for a number of reasons:

1. It won't fit where you store the other things like it. For example, many people have far more bath towels than they have linen closet space; it doesn't seem out of control unless you manage to get all of the laundry done at one time, and then you can't fit it all into the closet!

2. It is used frequently and getting it back out each time would be too inconvenient. This is why keys, phone chargers, remote controls, carryout menus, coffee-making supplies, calculators, and pens tend to live on the countertop instead of in a drawer, and it's why there's always a logjam of shoes by the main entryway.
3. It's a lone wolf that has nothing in common with anything else you own, so you haven't figured out where it logically belongs. Consider that back-scratcher you got from Disneyland. It's useful as all get-out and you want it handy when it's needed, but where do you store something like that?
4. It's something you will have only temporarily, and you need to remember to do something with it while it's there. A great example is a course of antibiotics: You leave the pills out on the counter to remind yourself to take them. Another example is the daily mail. In theory, you intend to process it each day. In practice, it piles up because it's a to-do, not a to-put-away.
5. When it's needed, it's needed quickly, so it tends to be never completely put away. Things like this might have kinda-sorta homes, like the fly swatter hanging from a stray nail by the back door. (Yuck.)
6. It belongs to someone else. Other people's DVDs and leftover containers often play a part in cluttering up our homes. The idea is to leave it out where you'll notice it the next time that person comes over or you go to see them, but it doesn't work that way: Their stuff becomes part of the landscape just as quickly as our own stuff does, and their visit won't be enough to prompt you: You're both likely to walk right by it as they head for the door.

Choosing homes for everything you own is hard enough. Then, getting stuff put away presents its own set of challenges. We'll look at these in Chapter 6, "Making Homes for Your Keepers."

note Everything you own should have a home within your home—a place it belongs, fits, and can go to when not in use.

Like with Like

You have enough things to remember—where your stuff is doesn't have to be among them. Give your brain a break by grouping "like with like."

When you store similar things together, you reduce the burden on your memory. Instead of memorizing where each item has been dropped randomly throughout your house, you can group things in categories and then you only have to remember where the entire grouping is supposed to be.

Here's an example from my house: Say you need a flat-head screwdriver. There are only a few places it could be: With the other screwdrivers in the garage, on the workbench in the basement, or in the mini-toolkit in the kitchen. It is 99% guaranteed to

be in one of those places. (Not 100%—organizers are human too.) So, your search is automatically much less daunting—just three possibilities instead of an infinite number of options all around the house and yard.

Some people get the concept here but are immediately overwhelmed at the idea of choosing just one category for an object. They see multiple ways to categorize any given item, so they figure that in order to choose one item's category, they'll have to categorize everything else all at once. They see the need for a Grand Plan, complete with graph paper or a computer database.

Stop. It's not that complicated. Just pick a category, put the stuff together, and if you don't like it, change it later! Accept that you have a creative mind and you will always see more than one "right" way to organize. Then, in the interest of time, just pick one and do it!



tip

Learn to think in categories and store similar things together.

Contain It

We've all heard this buzzword: boundaries. Just like your significant others, your children, your pets, and yourself, your stuff needs boundaries too. If you let it just do its thing, pretty soon it will be walking all over you, metaphorically speaking, and you'll be literally walking all over it.

How do you set boundaries for belongings? With containers! Whether you prefer things put away or in sight, some degree of container usage is necessary.

A container is anything that keeps your stuff together. It can be a drawer, a cabinet, a box, a basket—anything with edges (actual walls or implied stopping points like the edge of a shelf) that you do not allow your stuff to cross.

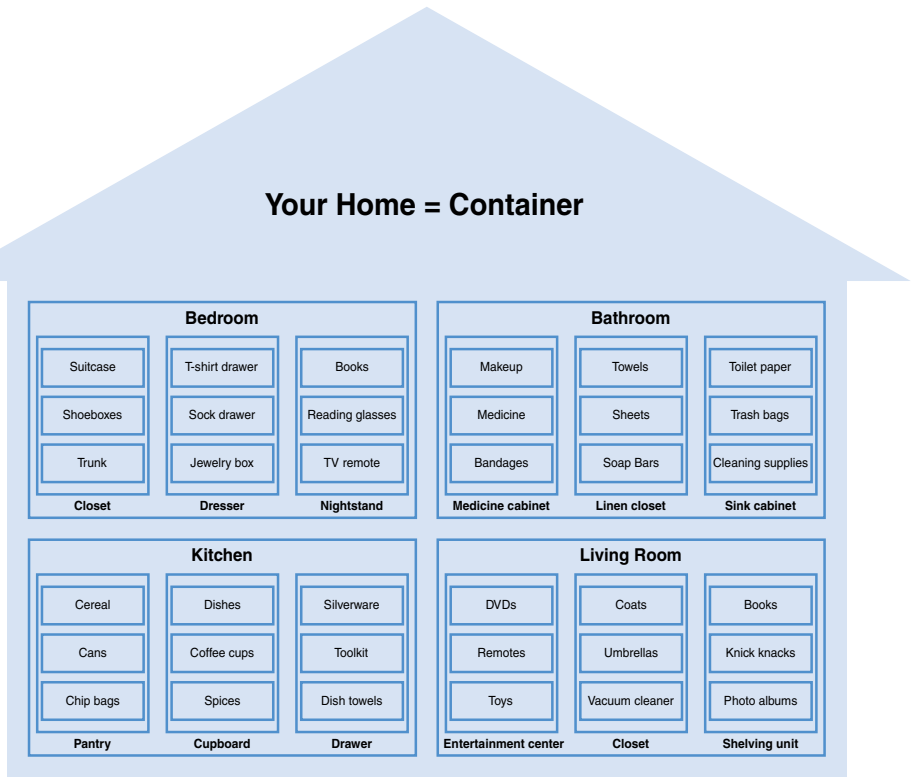
Sometimes the only "container" in your life is your home: If your stuff isn't falling out the front and back doors, it's contained (well, technically). But you want to do better than that, right? Start thinking of your home as a collection of nesting containers, like in Figure 3.1. The main one is the house or apartment. Within that are rooms, and within those are fixed storage such as closets. Within those closets are free-standing containers such as shoe boxes. Within those boxes, you might have even smaller containers such as medicine bottles or grooming products.

note

Whether you prefer things put away or in sight, some degree of container usage is necessary.

FIGURE 3.1

Your home is one big set of nesting containers: Pills are contained by a pill bottle, which is housed in a medicine cabinet, which is built in to a bathroom, which is a subset of the entire home.



CHOOSING YOUR CONTAINERS

Don't run out to buy an array of containers just yet. It's better to gather the stuff to be contained, then get a container that is exactly right for that grouping of stuff. For example, say you want to store your music memorabilia so you can display it when you get the basement refinished. You could just buy a big plastic tub and then round up the items, but suppose you've forgotten something odd-shaped, such as rolled posters? Now you have a container that's not long enough for the posters, so you need to either go back to the store for a better container, or crush your posters. Best advice: Assess the category of stuff, then make an educated choice for the container.

You'll learn more about your options for "containerizing" in Chapter 6.



Go Up

If you're indoors right now, look at the floor around you. You probably see some furniture, including the piece you're sitting on, and some other heavy things such as appliances, cabinets, or big potted plants. There are probably also some portable things such as a magazine rack, a file box, a trash can, a dog bed, or a footstool. And then there's the stuff that's not really supposed to be there: piles of newspapers, clothing, toys.

Now look up at the ceiling. What's there? Maybe a light fixture, a ceiling fan, some hanging plants. There might be a row of shelves high up on the walls. Perhaps there's a skylight. No matter what's up there, there's bound to be less than what's on the floor. If you could turn the room upside down and have that empty ceiling as your floor, wow, imagine everything you could do with that space!

We tend to allow ourselves to be controlled by gravity, crowding the floor with clutter and ignoring the elevated options that are there for the taking. I say, ignore the floor! Set your sights higher. Use shelves, wall-mounted racks, pulleys, nets, and anything else that will free up floor space and make good use of the empty air up there.

From now on, whenever you're looking for a place to put something, think up instead of out. Can it stack? Your stacking options improve with the right choice of container. This principle applies to not just the floor but to enclosed spaces as well. Look inside a closet with a shelf. Is there no room on the floor but empty air above the shelved items? A-ha: An opportunity to go up!

note Once in a while I encounter clients who I eventually identify as Yeah Butters. I say, "You have more clothes than you can fit in this closet," and they say, "Yeah, but I don't want to get rid of any of them." I say, "You told me you don't need these books any more," and they say, "Yeah, but they're too good to toss." I say, "Your decluttering wouldn't be so daunting if you would do a little each day," and they say, "Yeah, but I don't have time." If you're thinking "Yeah, but . . ." as you read this book, you're not ready to get organized. You will need to figure out what's blocking you before you'll see real progress.

tip Use wall and overhead space to increase your storage options.

Be Systematic



"Organized" is by definition systematic. It's not possible to be organized without some sort of system, and usually it's a game plan made up of multiple systems that work together to give you your overall level of efficiency.

If you feel the need for more organization in your life, what you're actually yearning for is one or more systems. Sure, you might chafe at the idea of having to actually follow that system, but it really is what you want and need. You might not like the

idea of following a system, but you'll appreciate the end result.

The trick to not feeling as if you've given up control is to write your own rules. Don't do what some professional organizer says just because she's supposed to be an expert. Don't just passively adopt someone else's system word for word. Instead, make it your own. Adapt it to your needs, preferences, tolerances, and priorities. Requirements that are imposed upon us can be intolerable; parameters that we establish for ourselves are a disciplined way to expedite the accomplishment of our goals. THAT is why they're good for us.

note Have systems, methods, checklists, habits, routines—whatever tools you need—and be consistent in their use.

Be Decisive

The hardest part about organizing is not the physical work, and it's not even parting with once-beloved objects. It's the actual decision-making. Everything is a choice, which is why organizing can be so exhausting: It's just one decision after another.

If I had to name the single most significant characteristic that separates organized people from disorganized people, I would say decisiveness. Those who are able to make decisions quickly and accurately have a much easier time in life than those who can't. This doesn't mean that indecisive people are inferior. It just means that they tend to get in their own way. Luckily, this is a tendency that can be adjusted once it's identified. Here are some techniques you can use to assess your decisiveness:

- Watch yourself for a few days whenever there is a decision to be made. Compare your speed to that of others. Look at mundane things such as how quickly you make up your mind at the drive-thru, how many times you equivocate about whether to buy that magazine from the checkout line, or how long it takes you to choose a movie from the video rental store.
- How much of your routine is the same each day? How much thought do you give to your breakfast or lunch? Do you drink your coffee the same way every time? Do you take the same route to work? Do you leave at the same time (or intend to)? People who follow pretty much the same routine every morning and evening often do so because they know what works and they don't want to bother rethinking it every day.
- When something new comes along, how much time does it take you to process it? If someone calls to invite you out on Saturday, do you need time to think about it, or do you open your planner and give them an answer right then?
- What kinds of decisions do you agonize over? Do you debate whether to call or email? Do you usually wear the first outfit you put on each day, or do you

try a few things? How are you with gift-buying? Can you choose something for the person and be done with it, or do you need to shop, compare, think, and shop some more?

- What would it be like for you to buy a car or house? Assuming there are a number of attractive choices available, would it take days for you to choose one, or months?
- What do friends and family say about your decisiveness? Do people in line behind you get impatient? Does anyone say, “Just make up your mind already” or “Just pick something, please”? Do you exasperate them by “changing your mind” again and again (which actually means you never really decided in the first place)?

If you're not accustomed to making decisions immediately, successfully (meaning the result is what you intended), and with finality, getting organized will be a shock to your system. But, it's my fervent belief that identifying the problem is half the battle, so if you now see indecisiveness in yourself, congratulations! You're halfway to a solution.

caution Don't defer decisions: It's a form of procrastination and a big reason for clutter pile-up.

Make Conscious Trade-offs

When you're in the process of getting organized, and later, when you've achieved the level of organization you want and you're maintaining, you will find that you are constantly called upon to make trade-offs. Here are some examples:

- More space or more stuff. Which do you want more: to own everything you want to own, or to have enough room in your home? You probably can't have both. (If you could, you wouldn't need this book, right?)
- More space or more time. Which do you want more: fewer clothes (thanks to judicious pruning of your wardrobe) with frequent laundry duties, or tons of clothes in jam-packed closets and drawers with occasional laundry marathons?
- More stuff or more money. When considering a new purchase, which do you want more: the item or the money? When considering purging an existing item, which do you want more: the object and its attendant upkeep costs (cleaning, protecting, the square footage it occupies) or the availability of that space for something else?

The decisions you make with these trade-offs determine how organized you are and will remain into the future. Get used to making these trade-offs consciously, based on how they contribute to your organizing priorities. Here are some examples from my house:

- I have two towel racks in the main bathroom that will hold a total of eight rolled bath towels. I wanted to use wall space instead of cabinet space to store towels (applying another key concept: Go Up), so I have consciously chosen to own just eight bath towels and to do laundry more often.
- My mom gave me a new set of dishes (service for 12) for my last birthday. I decided to donate the old set, because I have no need for more than one set of dishes. I considered keeping the old set as a backup, an option that most people find tempting (even professional organizers), but I satisfied that urge in a different way. I put only eight place settings from the new set in the cabinet for regular use, and stored the other four as replacement parts for the breakage that's bound to occur eventually.
- Last year my Great-Aunt Lil passed away and bequeathed all of her furniture to me. It's beautiful and well-made, and although I already had a houseful of furniture, I wanted to incorporate these pieces, so I made some trade-offs and sacrificed some space. Now my living room is stuffed with a couch, a loveseat with two built-in recliners, two armchairs, a center coffee table, an entertainment center, two bookcases, and three end tables, and so it's less spacious than I prefer, but I value these items over the space they would free up.
- I go shopping for groceries and household supplies more often than I would like to. I choose to make more frequent trips as the lesser of two evils: I don't like shopping, but I *really* don't like schlepping dozens of bags from store to car to house, making room to stockpile months' worth of food and supplies, or spending hundreds of dollars at a time. Plus, I try to eat fresh produce every day, so I have to go to the store at least once a week anyway.

What trade-offs are you making right now that could be changed to better serve your organizing efforts?

tip

Get used to making trade-offs consciously, based on how they contribute to your organizing priorities.

Get Organized Enough



If the previous guidelines got you all wound up and anxious about organizing, here's one to bring you back down to earth: Endeavor to be only as organized as you need to be, and no more.

How do you know when you're organized enough? When you are able to function optimally (not perfectly). If you answer yes to these questions, you are probably organized enough:

- Can you find what you're looking for in a reasonable amount of time?
- Can you move through your home without the danger of tripping over clutter or knocking a stack of it over?
- Can you use all of the areas of your home for the purposes for which they were intended?
- Do you know what you own well enough to not inadvertently purchase duplicates?
- Does your home look the way you want it to look, rather than appearing too messy?

When you are organized enough, your efficiency, mobility, budget, and pride are not hampered by organizational issues.

People often ask me whether my home has a “junk drawer.” They roll their eyes in a combination of intimidation and dismissal when I answer no. Folks, I'm not doing it to be superior! For me, “organized enough” would not include a whole drawerful of miscellaneous stuff: I wouldn't be able to keep mental track of it. I need a lot of structure and categorization of my belongings. But some people are able to remember just about every item in a container of unrelated things, and so for them, having a junk drawer (maybe even more than one) qualifies as organized enough.

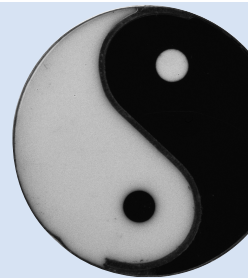
It's not a question of what's right—it's a question of what's right for *you*.

tip

Organize just enough for efficiency, then stop!

FENG SHUI

For another perspective on the benefits of decluttering, do some reading on the principles of feng shui. Often described as the ancient Chinese art of placement, feng shui endeavors to balance your chi, or life energy. Decluttering is a key component of this process, because discarding belongings that are broken, no longer used, unneeded, or associated with bad memories has a dramatic positive impact on your chi. Appendix A includes resources for further information on feng shui.



Summary

With the eight key organizing principles you've learned in this chapter, the causes of disorganization highlighted in Chapter 1, and the techniques for garnering familial cooperation in Chapter 2, you are now well-equipped to dive into decluttering! Part 2 opens with Chapter 4 on planning your attack, followed by Chapter 5, which takes you through the purging process. Throw on some comfortable clothes and some peppy tunes, and clear that clutter!