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Getting Organized

An e-newsletter of organizing tips for faculty members. December 2005.

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"Joy is not in things; it is in us."

-- Richard Wagner, composer

"Homes are an orgy of consumption."

-- Peter Walsh, psychologist and organizational consultant
 (also seen on TLC's *Clean Sweep*)

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Biohistory of Clutter

This time of year is all about abundance and indulgence. By the time the new year rolls around, it's no wonder we start flogging ourselves out of guilt and making those resolutions. Two of the biggest resolutions each year are losing weight and getting organized, but being overweight and having too much clutter can be related.

A recent [Associated Press article](#) outlined how issues with clutter and being overweight are related to basic biology. AP Science Writer Joseph B. Verrengia points out that the hunters and gatherers we evolved from thousands of years ago were genetically programmed to eat everything to survive harsh living conditions. Long before the days of SuperTarget and Wal-Mart, our ancestors also saved anything and everything because it might be useful to them.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, the average American was able to buy cheaper, mass-produced goods, and as Verrengia writes, "the biological need to save everything morphed into a desire to acquire." Today, our modern day culture of buffet restaurants, shopping malls, and Internet sites such as [Amazon](#) and [eBay](#) makes it much easier to delight and feed our genes and deepest desires. As a result of living with constant abundance, we continue to stuff ourselves and our homes and offices.

We do pay a heavy price for our clutter and overshopping. We waste money buying stuff that we never use. We waste time looking for things that we can't find. And if we can't find it, we buy it again and again. We are so overwhelmed with decisions that we decide to make no decisions at all and let everything pile up.

However, you don't have to succumb to ancient biology. You make the decisions about how you want to live your life and what you would like in it.

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Managing Overabundance

It's not about the stuff, but how you think of your stuff. As an organizer, one of the biggest issues

my clients deal with is a four-letter word: fear.

They're afraid of not keeping something. They're afraid of hurting someone's feelings by getting rid of a bad present they received five years ago. They're afraid of not having enough after perhaps spending a lifetime doing without. They're afraid they'll actually see the unfinished stuff on their desk. They're afraid to finish something because it may not be "good enough." They're afraid of dealing with an emotional issue, such as old memories or a deceased loved one.

Most of all, they're afraid of feeling like a failure.

Fear loves clutter. It feeds on it. Fear loves to weigh you down with piles of stuff. To deal with fear, it's best to face it head on. It's even better when you carry a very big club. Okay, at least a big recycling bin.

Four ways to deal with your overabundance:

- Find out what you're afraid of
- Stop the flow at the door
- Shop smarter
- Purge what you already have

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Who's Afraid of Clutter?

The first step to managing an overabundance of clutter is to ask yourself: What am I afraid of? What's making me keep this? Is it fear or is it guilt? What's the worst that can happen?

Let's say you had to write a letter asking someone for something, such as an increased budget or a reference, what's the worst that can happen? They can say no. Is it the end of the world? Not necessarily. It could sting, but then what would be your Plan B?

Stemming the Tide

Put aside your fear to make those decisions when things come into your life. Stopping the flow at the door will help you eliminate clutter.

For example, send junk mail to the shredder or trash can when it first appears, rather than pushing it aside and dealing with it later.

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While Shopping

'Tis the season to go overboard. While shopping for the holidays, stick to your list and your budget. I know it's so easy to go a little crazy with shopping, but you won't be sorry if you stick to your guns.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself when you're considering bringing something into your life:

- Do I really need it or do I want it?
- Do I already have something like it?
- How will I use it? Where will I use it?
- If it's clothes or shoes, how many outfits can I wear this with?

→ Can I really afford this?

If I charge it, how much more will it really cost me?

→ Are there any hidden costs?

Will I need to buy something additional today? Down the road?

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At Home

To deck the halls, you may need to purge the halls first. To make room for gifts, clear out some things you no longer want. Use the holidays and the new year as an opportunity to clear the cobwebs and the closets.

I always tell my clients to think of their offices and home as prime real estate. Everything you have should be important to you, your job, and your family. Some tips:

Start in one room and keep working on it until you're finished organizing that space. Have a box handy for items that need to go to another room, but wait until you're finished for the day. Otherwise, you may distract yourself in another room and never get back to where you were.

Ask yourself: Do I still love it? Or do I keep it because it has been a habit?

If you're not sure if you want to get rid of it, box it and date it. See if you open it within the next six months. If not, toss it.

In children's rooms, let the kids help decide which toys stay and which toys can go. If they hear about other children who don't have any toys, their altruistic side will kick in so you can donate their old toys to charity.

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Coming Up Next Month

→ What do you do when you're organized and others are not, and vice versa.

Life. Organized. Seminar

The National Association of Professional Organizers-Houston Chapter presents *Life. Organized. Houston's Organizing Forum* on January 20-21, 2006 at the Sheraton Brookhollow, Highways 290 and 610.

The first day of the seminar is for professional organizers and those interested in becoming organizers, and the second day is for anyone who is interested in becoming more organized. Barry Izsak, author of *Organize Your Garage in No Time*, and Donna Smallin, author of *Organizing Plain and Simple*, will be the keynote speakers during both days.

For more information and registration, check out the [NAPO Houston](#) website.

Got Clutter?

I have developed 15-minute, 30-minute and 45-minute presentations on organizing and time management. Moving to a new building? I also have a 15-minute presentation on preparing for a move for your department.

I also do one-on-one sessions in your office and help you come up with a solution. To schedule a presentation or a one-on-one appointment, call (713) 792-8061 or e-mail [Janice Simon](#)

(jsimon@mdanderson.org).

Happy Organizing! And Have a Peaceful Holiday Season! Happy New Year!

-- Janice

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