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Getting Organized

An e-newsletter of organizing tips for faculty members. September/October 2007.

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"One of the great discoveries a man makes, one of his great surprises, is to find he can do what he was afraid he couldn't do."

-- Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company

→ Some pages will open in a new browser window. M. D. Anderson does not endorse external sites.

Save the Date—Hoarding Presentation.

John Hart, a behavioral therapist from Houston's Menninger Clinic, will present ***When Hoarding Becomes a Disorder*** from noon to 1 p.m., **Wednesday, October 17** in Hickey Auditorium, R11.1400. Mr. Hart will discuss the disorder of hoarding, how it affects the hoarder and their families, and how people can seek help.

Save the Date—Got Scary Clutter? Organizing Expo.

The annual ***Organizing Expo*** will be **Wednesday, October 31** in the Cancer Prevention Building, 8th Floor Conference Rooms from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Come and see new (and old favorites) organizing products from our office supply vendors. Other vendors include MD Anderson departments, professional organizers from Houston, Borders, and others. This is your chance to ask questions from the vendors themselves.

Grief and the Organizing Process

The faculty member who didn't get tenure, the time when your best friend moved away, or the transplant from California who hasn't made peace with the move to Texas. In some way, all three examples cause grief and loss in their own way. Death isn't the only cause of grief. It can be the loss felt after moving, losing a promotion or a great boss, you or a family member falling ill, and empty nest syndrome -- just to name a few. Think of the project you spent so much time and energy on which wound up being cut out of the budget and the time you moved from a really great place to one that you didn't like as much. I've encountered clients who had to grieve over the loss of their clutter, which was a comforting cocoon to hide behind.

Loss comes in all shapes and sizes, and we all deal with the accompanying grief in our own way, said Louise Kurzeka, a Minnesota professional organizer who specializes in "Grief and the Organizing Process." The stages of grief and loss are really a spiral loop. The pattern can be repeated over and over again as someone moves through the process, and no one ever goes through the grieving process the same, she said.

Working through grief is a unique process for everyone, and not all losses go through each stage for a specific amount of time. It's not a case of "It must Tuesday so I should be in the 'why me' phase." If you lose a promotion, you may skip shock and yearning and go straight to anger. Someone else can be crushed by the loss of a promotion or just shrug it off and not give it a second thought. No matter what your reaction is, it's normal, and it all trickles down to the home and office.

- **Initial Loss -- Shock and numbness.** In the initial phase, you may feel physically numb, and it's difficult to make any decisions.
- **Protest -- Searching and Yearning.** This is the "why me?" stage. You may feel the need to tell your story over and over again. "It's replaying the tape," said Kurzeka.
- **Despair -- Disorganization.** Anger can begin in this stage as well as physical symptoms related to grief. This is the phase where people can become stuck and unable to move forward.
- **Detachment -- Silence and withdrawal.** Grief goes into hiding, particularly close to an anniversary, said Kurzeka. You may think you're okay, but then the anniversary hits or some reminder pops up.
- **Reorganization -- A new kind of normal.** You may have heard this phrase bandied around many times on the nightly news after 9/11, the tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina. In all three situations, buildings can be rebuilt, but things will never be the same as they were before. We eventually move to a different kind of normal, the kind of normal that requires us to take our shoes off and put our gels in a plastic bag at the airport.

But let's take a look at the third step -- despair and disorganization -- since this is where many people become stuck. Anger and fear go hand in hand and spill over into your office or home. Let's say you didn't get a promotion. You may be angry and think to yourself, "why bother?" If you're angry, you may not file or complete your paperwork because you don't feel like it. Suddenly, you're weeks behind and feel overwhelmed.

Ask yourself:

- What have I learned from this?
- What am I keeping because it's easy?
- How can I stop being angry? How can I step away from these negative feelings and become more positive?
- What do I need to do to move forward?
- What projects/work/paperwork do I need to finish? Dump all of your unfinished action items on paper. Prioritize the list and work through them one by one. You'll feel better getting things out of your head and by making progress.

Other strategies to use:

- When de-cluttering, zero in on one category at a time. For example, deal only with clothes one day. "It's easier to make choices and decisions when you focus on one area at a time," said Kurzeka. At the office, focus on one stack of papers or cleaning up one project.
- Have a friend or someone else you trust help you make choices about what to keep or not keep. You may need to have several purging sessions to accomplish this.
- Keep a journal to record your thoughts and feelings.
- For a personal loss, create a memory box or shadow box to remember someone or a place in time. Find new homes for items. Share with others, such as relatives, friends, and charitable organizations.
- If you're unsure about getting rid of something, box it up and date it for three to six months from now. If you haven't used it in the designated time frame, get rid of the box.
- If the feelings of anger, despair and withdrawal do not go away, seek counseling.

Children of Hoarders

The children of hoarders were highlighted in a documentary and in the [August issue](#) of Marie Claire magazine. Packrat is a documentary created by filmmaker Kris Britt Montag, who documents her father's struggle with extreme hoarding behavior. In the Marie Claire article, women talked about growing up with hoarder parents and what impact it had on their home and social life. For these particular families, they described having two lives -- one with friends and school activities and another one at home, afraid someone would find out their family secrets. In both the film and the article, the children said they felt their parents loved "stuff" more than them and worried about inheriting the "hoarding gene."

The children of hoarders have their own [website](#) to provide support for one another. Cornell University's [website](#) features a list of helpful links and resources.

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Protected Time

Finding protected time is a challenge for all of us. Every two weeks, I know that I have 30 or so minutes that's all mine. I get allergy shots. Once you've had your shot, you have to wait 30 minutes to make sure you don't puff up or fall over. Since cell phones aren't allowed in the waiting room area, I use that time to write my organizing e-newsletter, thank you notes, project notes, grocery lists, etc.; read a book or journal; read email on my PDA or just sit and close my eyes. It's protected time, and it's all mine. On the rare occasion other people are waiting with me, I see them fidgeting and looking at their cell phones, the way some people look at cigarettes or chocolate. They have no idea what to do with themselves for 30 minutes.

Next time you find yourself with protected time, use it to your advantage. If you don't have regular protected time, schedule it on your calendar. Having time to yourself to think and plan is a great gift to give yourself and also increases your productivity.

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Going Green

Saving the environment has become a global cause. During my vacation to Europe (yes, I am bragging), I noticed a great deal of encouragement to reduce, reuse and recycle through TV ads and newspaper stories. Some of those green ways include:

- Not using plastic bags, particularly for small items from the grocery store and pharmacy. Street vendors selling tote bags on the side walk got into the act by posting signs on their wares, such as "this is not a plastic bag."
- If you have plastic bags, reuse them.
- Cash in your coins. Saving coins takes them out of the marketplace.
- Recycle cans, plastic bottles, and newspapers. Newspaper stands had signs encouraging people to "recycle this newspaper" after reading it.
- Coffee places asked if you wanted a mug or a "take-away" paper cup, depending if you were lingering over your coffee or dashing out.
- Use rechargeable cards for the Metro. For us here, think about the rechargeable cards you can use at Starbucks and other stores to keep you from carrying too much cash.
- Download music and videos versus buying CDs and DVDs.

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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](mailto:jsimon@mdanderson.org) (jsimon@mdanderson.org).

To subscribe to this newsletter, e-mail [Janice Simon](mailto:jsimon@mdanderson.org) (jsimon@mdanderson.org).

Happy Organizing!

-- Janice

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