

Law and Order: How a Pro Helps Tackle Clutter

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If you're aiming to organize a chaotic and cluttered home, the most dangerous place on earth may be the Container Store. At least that is what some professional organizers say. That is because most people leave that Mecca of boxes, bins, shelves and hooks (The stores carry more than 50 different types of CD holders alone.) without much of a plan. Armed with good intentions and a host of shiny new products, they often end up with just as much of a jumble. And even more stuff.

"It is the biggest mistake people make," says Laura Leist, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers or NAPO, a trade group. "They think if they buy something to put their things in that is going to solve the problem." (A Container Store spokeswoman says store employees—who receive more than 240 hours of training on storage and organization—can guide customers into making the right decisions about products.)

The most important part of organizing is actually throwing stuff away or "purging," Ms. Leist says. And that is where professional organizers say they can often be the most help, by gently and tactfully encouraging people to get rid of superfluous stuff.

Fantasy Closets

We've all seen magazines showing freakishly organized homes: closets with precision-stacked linens; alphabetized spices; orderly toy cubbies and designated bill-paying stations. Glossy shots like these inspired four lifelong pack rats to get organized—with a little help.

Professional organizers were asked to tackle everything from a home-office overloaded with piles of paper to a closet stuffed to the ceiling with a melange of baby clothes (the kids are teenagers), school artwork and even an old mattress and box spring. Testers in varied living situations—from a two-story house in the Atlanta suburbs to a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, N.Y.—were enlisted to hire organizers in our hometowns.

In general, we were thrilled with the outcome and were amazed at how quickly we saw results. Forced to justify what we wanted to keep, we were able to be much more ruthless in our purging. (Though, one of our testers did resort to hiding some purge-worthy note cards from her organizer's eyes.) Our organizers kept us focused and on task, and definitely got their hands dirty, digging into the depths of closets and lugging bags of trash. So we were able to avoid what Ms. Leist says is the second biggest de-cluttering mistake: getting distracted and tackling multiple projects at once, never making much headway in any. All this hand-holding didn't come cheap. We also ended up shelling out more money—one tester spent \$400—for new storage items that our organizers recommended, but the experts we worked with were sensitive to our budget concerns. Two of our organizers came to our homes for an initial consultation and then returned for the actual organizing—an approach that seemed to yield the best results.

In Atlanta, we needed serious help. A deep basement closet was packed with baby clothes, lamps, mounds of memorabilia from a decade of living in Moscow, including nesting dolls and old newspapers, a mattress and even a papasan chair wedged up near the ceiling. Another closet was stuffed with files, luggage, pet food, cases of canned tomatoes and more old newspapers. We knew we had some serious editing to do. One of the best things about the company we hired, Chaos 2 Comfort, was that it recycles or donates purged items for you. Our two-person team was very sensitive to our feelings, suggesting we take a break when we felt overwhelmed and advising us to keep those items that had real sentimental value. In the end, we had five garbage bags full of clothes and toys for our organizers, Susan Fox and Teresa Taylor, to take to a local homeless shelter.

But that night we panicked: In our zeal, we had accidentally tossed the blue sweat suit one of the kids had lived in as a toddler—and we wanted it back. So we sheepishly called Ms. Taylor. Thankfully, the items hadn't been donated yet.