



# Clutter-Taming Tips

## Save Time, Money and Sanity

by April Thompson

Labels abound: pack rat, clutter bug and hoarder. Just the thought of confessing that our clutter needs conquering can inspire shame, anxiety and dread. It helps to remember that it's human to accumulate, divine to purge.

**“W**e’re hardwired to be hunters and gatherers and feather our nests, but you have to consider the life energy you spend maintaining all those things. The trade-off is often huge,” says home organizing expert Barbara Tako, of Minneapolis, Minnesota, author of *Clutter Clearing Choices*.

Seventy percent of Americans feel buried under their clutter and can’t decide what to give up, according to an online poll by award-winning organizer Julie Morgenstern, of New York City. She has found that while the clutter may be physical, the process of shedding it is 80 percent mental. “Decluttering is identifying what is obsolete in your life and releasing it to make room to move forward,” advises the author of *Shed your Stuff, Change your Life*.

“Ask yourself, what am I clearing space for—more family time, a social

life or inner peace?” That higher goal is a touchstone for what to keep and what to pitch.

Following are common clutter-based roadblocks and tips from professional organizers on how to get around them.

**I’m so overwhelmed I don’t know where to start.** Tako encourages clients to start with the visible clutter, such as junk accumulated in an entryway, and take 10 to 15 minutes to tackle the area. “People are always surprised by how much they can accomplish in a short time,” she comments.

Morgenstern recommends making a checklist, starting with the areas with the most obsolete stuff and the least sentimental attachments. “The first one is the hardest, but you’ll probably find a lot of opened space if you can get through a few areas; then there is a cascading effect as you move forward.”

**I know I have too much stuff, but it all has sentimental value.** Morgenstern recommends using tools to manage memories, such as photographing an object that represents a person, and then using that photo as a contact icon on your phone. She suggests considering, “Is this the best representation of that person or time of my life, or just another example?”

**I might need this someday.** Tako encourages people to enlist a clutter buddy, “an objective set of eyes who will set you straight when you hold up a skirt that’s out of style.” Morgenstern suggests asking, “What is more important to me... this object I don’t have any immediate need for or the space I’ll have by getting rid of it?”

**I don’t have time to declutter now.** Morgenstern acknowledges most people are “time-starved”, and cleaning out their closets is the last thing they want to do with precious

free time. Yet clutter costs us time and money because, “You end up losing things, wasting valuable real estate and replacing things you forgot you had,” she notes. It also hinders our ability to focus and process information, because visual clutter divides and competes for a person’s limited attention span, according to a recent study by the Princeton University Neuroscience Institute.

For more motivation, imagine the joy of finding buried treasure. Morgenstern reports that nearly all of her clients find some form of funds, whether uncashed checks, objects with resale value or cash.

**I sorted piles a few months ago and now they’re back.** Los Angeles organizer and blogger John Trosko encourages people to be upfront with loved ones about holidays and special occasions, asking that they curtail gifts and instead give non-tangible forget-me-nots like gift certificates or favorite services. Trosko also suggests making a list before shopping and steer-

ing clear of megastores to keep impulse spending in check.

Tako and Trosko both discourage purchasing “unitaskers” such as a salad spinner that takes up significant space but rarely get used. Another good rule of thumb is, “one in, one out,” discarding something every time we purchase a new item.

Even armed with the best decluttering tips, the process can seem daunting. Morgenstern encourages us to suspend self-judgment while weeding through possessions and keep remembering our higher goals. “Your stuff is a reflection of who you are and what you aspire to,” she notes. “It’s a challenge to get it all in alignment, but an incredible opportunity, too.”

*To find a nearby professional organizer, contact the National Association of Professional Organizers at [napo.net](http://napo.net).*

*Connect with freelance writer April Thompson at [AprilWrites.com](http://AprilWrites.com).*

## Find Good Homes for Clutter

**Y**ou’ve done the hard work of decluttering. Now what? In the past, options were limited to a garage sale or local landfill. Today, we have countless ways to give new life to old things, whether selling them online, donating to charities for a tax deduction, supplying needed materials to schools or returning items to the manufacturers for recycling. Here are some more ideas.

**Books:** Consider joining the free *PaperbackBookSwap.com*. Each book mailed between members earns a credit redeemable for other books posted on the site. Or, donate books at *BetterWorldBooks.com* to help fund world literacy.

**Clothing:** Tried-and-true organizations like The Salvation Army, Planet Aid and Dress for Success always welcome clothing donations, while public and private clothes swaps present a fun, social way to thin out closets and



acquire some signature pieces. Attendees bring a minimum number of items that are arranged by organizers by type and size. Then, when the signal is given, participants excitedly rush to try on new-to-them pieces that catch their eye. *Meetup.com* lists local community swaps; make it a party theme and invite friends.

**Electronics:** Most communities hold spring e-waste drives to collect old electronics for responsible disposal and sponsor year-round drop-off sites. Otherwise, search *GreenerGadgets.org* by

zip code to find local retailers that e-cycle. Sell working electronics through *eBay.com* or *IOffer.com*. Even small items like old phone chargers often sell easily online.

**Eyeglasses:** Millions of pairs of eyeglasses are discarded annually while millions of people in developing countries need vision correction. Donate old prescription or out-of-style specs to a nonprofit like One Sight (*OneSight.org*) or New Eyes (*NewEyesForTheNeedy.org*) that will refurbish and send them to healthcare missions around the world.

**Odds and Ends:** What about that never-used yogurt maker or crimping iron? Local chapters of The Freecycle Network (*Freecycle.org*) participating in this 9-million-member virtual community facilitate posting any item, large or small, to give away to neighboring members that agree to pick it up at the donor’s door.