

SIMPLIFY MAGAZINE

· A QUARTERLY, DIGITAL PUBLICATION FOR FAMILIES ·



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An Introduction: Organization

by Elissa Joy Watts

Confession time. What drives you to organize? Are you the type who craves order? Do you dream of labeled stackable containers and tidy desk drawers?

Or do you choose to organize only when you've hit rock bottom in the clutter department, when you can't find your keys (again) and headaches are the norm?

We live in a world fascinated with household organization. Since its release in 2011, Marie Kondo's landslide hit, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, has sold more than 11 million copies. You can read it in one of 40 languages. (Or if you're more of a television person, Netflix has you covered.)

The home organization industry generated \$16 billion in 2016 and, as of 2018, was growing at 4% each year. It's safe to speculate that 2020's quarantine will kick that rate up a few notches. The pandemic bumped everyone into a nesting state. With all the unexpected extra time at home, many decided to see their spaces—to see life itself—through a new lens.

We know organization is not limited to physical spaces. Wherever there is mess, there is opportunity for order. Certain projects require more TLC—sorting a kitchen cabinet is not equal to sorting one's priorities—but either way, the goal is the same: intuitive harmony. Order from chaos. A space or process that bears witness to its purpose and promotes peace.

In an organized home, the morning rush slows to a delightful pace. Your favorite cardigan is exactly where it belongs. So are your glasses. Mismatched snack containers aren't crowding the kitchen, and routine cooking is less stormy, more breezy.

The biggest perk of organization? Some might call it margin. I call it room to breathe. Time is a finite resource, and when life itself is buried under clutter, we spend precious minutes searching for what we need. Streamlining redeems time and offers space to create and thrive.

If you're ready to breathe deeply and see life itself through a tidy new lens, this one's for you. We're exploring the concept of order within the home and beyond. Our guests are best known for inspiring millions to downsize and organize everything from socks and toys to finances and social media profiles. Each lends their niche expertise and provides practical pointers.

Roll up your sleeves and dust off your imagination. An orderly world of possibility awaits.

With you on the journey,

Elissa Joy Watts

Managing Editor

Organizing Is Easier After Minimizing

by Joshua Becker



We are a culture drowning in possessions.

We take in more and more at an unprecedented rate (holidays, birthdays, sales, Amazon). But rarely do we make commitments to discard possessions as quickly as they accumulate. As a result, our homes fill with stuff.

Often, the proposed solution to this increased abundance of personal possessions is to search for better organizational tools, skills, or ideas. We think:

If I just had the right container, this stuff wouldn't feel like clutter.

If I just knew the right way to store these, it would be easier to use this cabinet.

If my kids or spouse were better at cleaning up, this house wouldn't feel so disheveled all the time.

Or how about this one?

If I just had a bigger place, my home wouldn't feel so cluttered all the time.

In each and every case, and in countless other scenarios, we fall into a trap. The thought trap is this: *If I could just organize my stuff better, the clutter issue and stress would be gone.*

This thinking is a result of the culture we live in. Keep in mind that we are constantly bombarded with advertisements and marketing messages to purchase more and more. Virtually every advertisement promises a better, happier, or more convenient life on the other side of *this* purchase.

We buy things because we believe they will improve our life, not distract from it. Taking a step back to realize the things we've bought are not contributing to a better life requires an almost 180-degree turn from what we've been told. Even worse, it requires us to admit we were wrong. It's easier to think we were right when we bought the items...we just need a better way to store them.

So we hold stubbornly to the belief that all this stuff will make our lives better if we keep it and organize it somehow.

Now, there is nothing wrong with organizing our stuff. I recommend it highly, even producing an entire issue of this magazine dedicated to the topic. But there is an important truth that we need to embrace:

Organizing better may not be the final answer. It might not even be the first answer.

Organizing your stuff becomes simpler when you own less stuff. Or, like I said in the title, organizing is always easier after minimizing. In fact, a lot of times, once we own less, organizing almost seems to take care of itself.

Courtney Cuts Through the Confusion

Courtney Carver, author of Project 333, may have shaped my understanding of organizing more than anyone else. And she did it with two spot-on sentences. I don't remember the exact context of the quotes, but somewhere along the way I ran into them and have repeated them over and over again ever since.

1. *“Don't you think, if organizing was the solution, you'd be done by now?”*

Organizing is always, only a temporary solution. You can organize all your stuff today, only to have to organize it again tomorrow—no matter how great your system. That is one of the reasons why organizing tips and organizational tools never go out of style in

stores. As long as the possessions are still in our home, we need a place to store them—again and again, over and over.

2. *“If you have to buy stuff to organize your stuff, maybe you have too much stuff.”*

We live in a way that is entirely foreign to past generations. Never in human history have human beings owned so much stuff. We now own so much that there are entire industries and stores thriving based on the assumption that we’d rather buy more stuff to store our stuff than remove our stuff.

Have you stopped to think how crazy it is that department stores line entire aisles with plastic totes just so you have a place to store all the unnecessary stuff you’ve already taken home from the same store? It’s like we’re paying them for the privilege of keeping more and more of their stuff in our homes.

Did Courtney make you stop and think, the way she did me?

Reasons Why Minimizing Should Come Before Organizing

If you own too much, minimizing possessions is *always* better than organizing. And not just because of the reasons Courtney mentioned. There are other reasons too:

For one, *minimizing possessions is a permanent act*. Whenever something leaves our home, it frees up physical space and is gone forever. The action does not need to be repeated over and over again.

When that possession is out the door, whether it be by selling, donating, recycling, or discarding, the physical space is freed up and the mental space clears as well.

A second reason minimizing is better is that *simply organizing our stuff never benefits anybody else*. Organizing our things, moving them around from room to room, shelf to shelf, or bin to bin, affords no opportunity to help someone else.

The reality is that our excess stuff can be a blessing to somebody. The unneeded items in your home are the very things that somebody, somewhere, desperately needs. And that person may be someone right in your own community: the single mom, the recently laid-off father, the unemployed college graduate, the refugee family, or the homeless man trying for a fresh start.

If we're just moving stuff around, organizing it over and over again inside our four walls, another person's need remains unmet.

Minimizing our things and donating them intentionally, on the other

hand, gives us the opportunity to benefit people who need those things.

Most of us want to help people. We want to solve problems we see, and we want to be generous with our resources. Often, we just can't seem to find the margin to do so—there's no money left, no time left, or no energy at the end of the workweek.

But look around your home. That closet stuffed full, that drawer that doesn't close, the garage you can't park in because of the boxes—those are all opportunities to give and help! But not until you get past the thinking trap that keeping our stuff is improving our life and organizing is the answer for our excess.

A third reason organizing gets easier after minimizing is that *removing unneeded possessions from our home begins to change us from the inside*. Minimizing our things forces self-reflection in a way organizing cannot.

For me, this happened when I started taking mini-van loads of decluttered things to Goodwill. I took one van load of stuff to the donation center, dropped it off, and felt great about myself. Then I took a second van load of things to Goodwill. Still felt great to free up the space in my home. Then I took a third and a fourth...and

somewhere along the line I started to ask myself some pretty difficult questions about my life and habits. Specifically, *Why in the world did I have four van loads of things in my home that I don't need?*

I'll admit, I didn't like what I found when I started asking that question of myself. I started to realize some pretty unhealthy motivations in my heart: jealousy, envy, a desire to impress others, a fear-based mindset, and just plain ol' unintentional living.

Those truths were difficult to discover about myself, and I continue to learn more and more, but they were helpful to recognize in that moment. Organizing alone would not have revealed those things to me. Just putting things in a box and setting them on a shelf in an organized fashion doesn't prompt deep, life-changing questions like minimizing possessions will.

And last, *minimizing blazes opportunity for life change*. Just reorganizing your stuff may clear up some physical space for a little while, or make your home a bit more efficient for the time being, but it will never spark significant changes to your life.

Don't Miss This

If you struggle with clutter in your home and life, the first step I recommend is removing some of the possessions from your life. When you do, you will permanently free up space, help others, and create an opportunity for incredible self-reflection and life change. Your view of your home and possessions will change, and organizing will become easier because there will be fewer items to store.

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The 10 Organizing Products That Will Bring You Joy at Home

by Pia Thompson



Here's a secret most people don't know. When you purchase the right organizing products for your space, the kind that function well and possess beauty that speaks directly to you, they will actually make you *want* to put things away. The things we own can deeply connect with us and give us the space to show up as the person we want to be.

Understand, however, that despite their name, organizing products won't solve a clutter issue on their own. Unless you declutter first, an organizing product will only hide the issue and become more clutter.

Before You Organize

When you're setting out to organize a space, the first step is *spending the time and energy it takes to review your items and keep only the ones that bring you joy*. The effort is worth it. Not only will you rediscover yourself and improve your ability to make choices, but you will also create mental and physical space in your life. It's like paving a yellow-brick road headed in the direction of courage, truth, and joy, and you get a tidy home as well!

The second step is *identifying which organizational product will serve you best*. Once you have a clear picture of exactly what needs to be stored, then you can determine precisely what you need. Sizes vary,

so it's important to measure before shopping. Check both the space you want the product to fit into and the items you want to store before you shop.

I'm ready to help you now with this second step.

Products You'll Love

Here are my absolute favorite products, and I recommend them to you. Most of these products are available at basic household retailers.

1. Non-slip velvet hangers

Velvet hangers are the Beyoncé of closet storage items. They protect your clothing's shape, maximize your closet space, and add to its lovely appearance, leading you directly to the organized closet of your dreams.

Think of the relief you will feel when you no longer open your closet to find your favorite shirt has slipped off the hanger. The velvety surface naturally prevents even delicate pieces from ending up on the floor, and their size makes it easy to hold wide-necked items. They also often have features such as clips, notched shoulders, hooks, and swivel necks that help to expand storage space.

Velvet hangers also have a thin minimalist design. Their slim profile helps to maximize storage space, making them an upgrade for stuffed closets. The smooth metal hook glides easily on a closet rod, which allows you to easily move them around and find what you need. Contrast that with the thickness of a plastic or wooden hanger, which increases the width of your clothing and takes up more space in your closet.

A matching velvet hanger set keeps a closet uniform and beautiful. They come in a variety of colors, which allows you to customize the look of your closet. There's also the option for chrome or copper to add even more personality. In addition, clothing sits better on velvet hangers because they line up and look neat. Mismatched hangers can have different thicknesses and heights, making even an organized closet look messy.

Here are two more facts to push you over into the velvet hanger fan club. They are extremely affordable and won't cause those dreaded shoulder bumps. The shoulder contour of the velvet hanger prevents creasing, thereby extending the life of your clothes.

2. Drawer organizers

Tired of getting lost in your drawers? Drawer organizers make it easier to sort, find, and put away items. Their versatility allows them to be used in bedroom dressers, kitchen drawers, bathroom cabinets, and desks (especially your kids' desks, where small bits always seem to end up).

When choosing a drawer organizer, consider its size, material, durability, and adjustability. A snug fit is important: organizers that shift and slide around don't use the space well and look messy.

You should still measure the drawer size, but an adjustable option offers more wiggle room. Some drawer organizers adjust to fill the drawer space completely or fit different-size drawers to provide flexible storage. Others have adjustable parts, such as removable dividers and stackable designs.

Consider the size and shape of the items to be stored and whether the material suits those items. Easy-to-clean, moisture-proof materials like plastic, bamboo, and metal are typically best for bathrooms and kitchens, due to their durability. An organizer used to store bulky winter scarves looks very different from an organizer to store kitchen utensils. For some types of storage, such as those used to display cosmetics, jewelry, or accessories, you may want to consider style as well as function.

3. Entryway storage bench

Think of all the items your family needs to leave the house for the day: shoes, keys, hats, scarves, coats, bags, and (recently) masks.

When you return home, the entryway is the natural drop zone, easily overrun with clutter and unable to do its job of welcoming you back.

To avoid this common problem, incorporate as much storage as the space can allow while staying within your overall design plan.

Entryway benches that include seating, cubbies, or baskets can lighten your load just when you need it most. Plus, they offer a permanent home to all the items you'll need before leaving the house. A storage bench will allow you to take what you need to take in and out while using little to no floor space. You can even take advantage of the space underneath to store shoes.

4. Clear stackable shoe boxes

You've likely wrestled with the question of how to store all of your precious shoes. Keeping them in their boxes just creates visual clutter, and a jumble of mismatched pairs strewn by the front door isn't any better.

Invest in clear stackable shoe boxes that either have a drop front or a side swing. Their transparent nature allows you to see exactly what's inside. Also, you don't have to unstack them to get the pair of shoes you want. They also give your closet a beautiful yet functional look. Because each box closes tightly, they keep shoes protected from dust, while small ventilation holes allow the fabric to breathe.

5. Shelf risers

With space at a premium if you live in a small apartment, or frankly if you live with anyone but yourself, mastering your shelf storage, especially in your kitchen, can seem like a Herculean task.

Change your disaster cabinet from scary to a real-life Pinterest picture with a shelf riser. They instantly double the amount of space you have, providing a stable and beautiful storage surface that fits in cabinets and on counters or open shelving. They also help keep items separated so you don't have to try to pick something out of the middle of a huge stack.

Besides helping to restore order in your kitchen, shelf risers are also versatile. Meant to be used all over the house, they can serve to organize your dresser and refresh your bathroom storage. Some are

even expandable and stackable and made to fit in a corner. They even make tiny ones for your medicine cabinet. How can you go wrong?

6. Cookware organizer

Pots, pans, and their lids are the toughest item to organize in the kitchen. The usual way—stacking them up—is everyone’s go-to, but that choice is precarious and these awkwardly shaped items will likely come crashing down.

Unless you have an extra-large pot, like a stockpot or Dutch oven, the trick is to store them vertically, like files. That way you can pull one out without having to move a whole stack. There are pot and pan organizers made to hold them vertically, so they don’t all topple and slide around. They are a great way to make your stuff more accessible and also maximize your space. You can also use them to store bakeware, mats, and cutting boards.

7. Clear fridge storage

Is there anything worse than rummaging through your refrigerator? No organization, half the food past its expiration dates, and the thing you want hiding at the back behind a mess that’s now ready to be

thrown away. When your fridge is cluttered and disorganized, it's easy to give up and just get delivery.

Clear and space-saving fridge organizers can make a massive difference to your stress level. Made of glass or acrylic, these organizers include turntables, can dispensers, stackable storage bins for your fruit and vegetables, and even containers that are made perfectly for your freezer. No more reaching to the back of the fridge and hoping for the best. A simple spin or peek, and all is within your reach!

8. Broom and mop organizer

Broom and mop holders are an easy and affordable solution for all your sweepers and dusters, to avoid having them stuck in whatever corner you can find, falling over at the slightest movement. You'd be surprised how much hassle you'll spare yourself if you invest in one.

Goodbye to leaning everything up against each other and moving a pile of cleaning tools when you need to reach anything in your utility closet. With its adjustable no-slip grips or hooks, a broom and mop organizer can fit tools of any size. They are often wall-mountable and weatherproof and can be stored in the garage or even outside. As a result, they save you room and neaten your storage area.

9. Shower caddy

Have you ever run out of a product in the shower and then had to get out and find its replacement while dripping water across the floor? A good shower organizer can eliminate this hazard and have you luxuriating like you are having a spa day.

In sizes even as large as four-tiers, you can easily find one large enough to hold all of your hair, face, and body products. Most come with hooks that will allow you to hang your washcloth and brushes. You can even find one with a special place for your razor or soap bar. My favorites are the ones with holes so you can insert your bottles upside down, ensuring you use every last drop.

10. 2-tier sliding under-sink organizer

Under the bathroom sink is one of the most disorganized spots. Why? It's deep, dark and usually small. You store everything you can think of in there—cleaning supplies, hair styling tools, and even paper products. Insert a giant pipe into that game, and you have no idea where to begin. All that combines to create the perfect space to lose things.

No matter how big or small the space under your sink, it can be organized. It's all about finding creative ways to use the space, and the genius two-tier sliding organizer will make it so much easier. Its pull-out trays prevent you from having to get on the floor to stretch your hand way into the back. That functionality also allows the tray to be brought into the light where you can easily see and access what you need.

The two tiers take advantage of the usually ignored vertical storage space under the sink. They are also skinny enough to fit two under the sink on either side of the pipe.

Believe and Do

So there you have it—the life-changing magic of organizing products! Release the idea that organizing your home can be daunting. Easily tame the clutter beast by getting the right product to store the items that bring you joy.

If you have now read this article and are standing in your home wondering how on earth it got to this state, let this list of organizing products first propel you to declutter, then go place an order!

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Pia Thompson is a truth seeker who left her career as a lawyer to become the founder of [Sweet Digs](#), a New York City–based home organization business. As a writer and speaker, she empowers people to design a home and life full of joy by way of tidying their homes. Her work has been featured in various media outlets, including the New York Times, NPR, CNN.com, RealSimple.com, and Apartment Therapy. Pia lives in Brooklyn with her 10-year-old daughter.

Mise en Place: Essential Organization for Mindful Cooking

by Ashley Rodriguez



Picture a warm Los Angeles Saturday afternoon in the early 2000s. The sun adds even more sparkle and shine to Rodeo Drive as I make my way down the street wearing fruit-stained scrubs and black clogs caked in batter. Feeling the nauseating wave of both fear and excitement, I review my mental checklist long before I open the back door to Wolfgang Puck's famed Spago kitchen.

When I started at Spago, Wolfgang Puck was a household name. He had dozens of restaurants around the world, a show on the Food Network, and canned soups stocked in nearly every supermarket. (My grandmother thought they were too salty and asked that I tell him so.)

Of all the places to start my restaurant career, Spago was quite intimidating. The show *Hell's Kitchen* started around the same time I did. Remember that one? Where Gordon Ramsey yelled at the fumbling chefs and we all watched in horror, thankful that wasn't us? That was me. I was a young, inexperienced, naive and tender soul who walked into my own version of *Hell's Kitchen*. My beginning was marked with a clatter of dishes, splattered fruit, burnt soufflés, and many tears.

It took me several months to learn the graceful dance that is a restaurant kitchen, but once I did, everything we did there made

sense. I even grew to love the yelling. It meant we were serious. Yes, I did sometimes think to myself, *It's just food!* But we all worked incredibly hard to give our diners the best experience we could, and at the end of our shift that accomplishment felt monumental and we'd beam with pride.

I'd start my day hours before the guests would arrive. Making my way through a long checklist of items, I'd prep to ensure that when the 500 diners descended on the dining room, I was ready to lightly sauté their wild strawberries, fire off a Kaiserschmarrn (an Austrian fluffy pancake made with farmers cheese), and plate an artful arrangement of nearly one dozen assorted cookies. If the first guest sat down before the prep was done, the entire shift would be scrambling, and for the next four hours I would frantically be playing catch-up.

The prep method that determined the success of my shift was called *mise en place*, which translates to “setting up” or “putting in place.” It is the process in which all of your ingredients are prepped and organized so that, when you begin cooking, the process is nearly seamless.

At Spago, it was carefully laying out the tender strawberries on a nearby cloth-lined sheet pan so they didn't bruise and were within reach. It was preparing the caramelized banana base for the soufflés

and whipping up a flawless French meringue that would hold steady in the walk-in. It was meticulously lining up stocked deli cups (the plastic containers you see neatly labeled in restaurant kitchens) with all the necessary dessert accessories.

Mise en place is about knowing where you are going before you start. In the restaurant kitchen, it's absolutely vital. Now, cooking in the quiet ease of my kitchen at home, I find it vital for another reason.

I'm no longer intricately weaving my station with dozens of ingredients to feed hundreds of people, but I continue to practice the art of mise en place. No longer am I delicately lining up my precious wild strawberries, but I am dicing an onion, mincing garlic, toasting and grinding my spices. In my home kitchen this classic culinary organization practice helps me enjoy the cooking process. I prep to be present. To create a seamless workflow so I can set my mind to the process right in front of me. It's mindful cooking.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, author and teacher of mindfulness, gave one of the best definitions of mindfulness in a conversation with Oprah. He said, "When you're stirring the pot, just stir the pot." Using mise en place in my kitchen allows me to simply stir the pot. While I am often prone to multi-tasking, when I take the time to prepare my ingredients and organize my station for cooking, I am much more aware of the

process and can bask in the gratitude that I abundantly feel for the food before me and the earth that gifted me with it.

So let's take a deeper dive and look at how this works on a practical level.

Preparing for the Rhythm

For me, the best way to walk through mise en place is to cook something together. You and I are going to make one of my family's weekday standards: Lemony Carbonara with Peas. It's a simple recipe with a short list of ingredients, many of which you probably have in your fridge and pantry.

Any time I want to feel like a hero in my family, I make some version of carbonara. Once, I made the mistake of posting a photo of our carbonara, which had frilly parsley leaves scattered on top. I was quickly corrected that the Italians would never put parsley on their carbonara, so I can only imagine their disdain for this version that uses both lemon and peas. Carbonara purists, please don't hate me, especially before you have tried this version with a bright twang of lemon and the sweetness of plump peas. If it's any consolation, there's no parsley.

The first step in mise en place is to read through the recipe entirely. It's the one thing I tell my teenage boys, both of whom have started to really get into cooking and baking (lucky me!). Before you begin, you have to know where you are going. So let's read the recipe:

Lemony Carbonara with Peas

From *Let's Stay In*

Serves 4 to 6

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6 ounces pancetta or bacon cut into 1/2-inch strips

4 garlic cloves, thinly sliced

10 ounces fresh or frozen peas

1 pound spaghetti or bucatini

Sea salt

1 cup grated Parmesan, plus more to finish

3 large eggs

1 teaspoon freshly cracked black pepper, plus more to finish

2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest, plus more to finish

3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

Add enough water to fill a large Dutch oven or stockpot halfway, then stir in enough salt to make the water taste of the sea. Bring this to a boil.

While the water comes to a boil, crisp up the pancetta in a large skillet, about 5 to 7 minutes. Add the garlic and cook until golden and crisp, about 3 to 4 minutes. Stir the peas and cook just until their color brightens, 1 to 2 minutes.

Cook the pasta until al dente, about 10 to 12 minutes.

In a large bowl, stir together the Parmesan, eggs, and black pepper until thoroughly combined.

Add the hot noodles directly to the egg mixture and stir well and quickly so as not to cook the eggs. Add a bit of the pasta water as needed to create a creamy sauce.

To the pasta, add the bacon, garlic, and peas, then stir in the lemon zest and juice.

Transfer the pasta to a serving platter, then top with more grated Parmesan, lemon zest, and black pepper.

Okay, got it? Now we see what the road before us looks like and we know our final destination. With these quick-cooking pasta dishes, it is extremely important to stay organized and have all your ingredients prepped ahead of time so the perfectly cooked noodles aren't waiting for us to zest our lemons and grate our cheese. By the time we're ready to mix, our noodles have gone from al dente to mush, and Italian grandmothers everywhere shed a tear. So let's mise en place.

Let's gather the tools we'll need for prepping. A sharp knife, a clean, sturdy cutting board, plenty of bowls for gathering your ingredients, or you can buy deli cups from a restaurant supply shop like we use in the kitchens. They are reusable, stack very compactly, and are perfect for storing leftovers. Grab a container for compostable scraps, a clean side towel or dish rag for quick clean-up, and any other special tools needed for the recipe you are working through. For example, in this recipe we'll need a microplane for zesting and grating and a citrus juicer.

Recipe writers give you the clues to putting everything in its place in the ingredient list. There is an unspoken assumption that before you start the cooking process your ingredients are all prepped as they call for in the ingredient list. If the recipe asks for an onion but doesn't tell you how it should be prepped, that step will be written into the method.

For the case of this recipe, the first ingredient is sea salt with no measurement, so just have it nearby. Next, we have pancetta or bacon. We see the quantity written out and the instructions as to how to prepare this ingredient. So before the noodles hit the water, we have our bacon cut and ready. Same goes for the rest of the ingredients. The garlic is sliced, peas and pasta are measured, Parmesan and lemon zest are grated, and the lemons are juiced.

I keep all of these ingredients near the stove. Next, I'll gather my pots and cooking utensils and then I'm ready to start cooking.

Entering the Dance

This is when it feels like a dance. When I can step into that graceful rhythm of cooking where one thing easily leads to the next. My mind is free to move easily from one step to the next, because I haven't broken the rhythm by having to frantically dig into the cupboards for

a missing ingredient. Everything is within reach and ready to hit a hot pan.

In these moments created from being well prepped, I can watch in amazement as the fat on the pancetta softly puddles and scents the entire kitchen. I take a moment to inhale the fragrance of the lemon zest and am instantly transported to standing in the shade of my parents' lemon tree, marveling at its abundance. I sneak a taste of the Parmesan and feel a deep sense of wonder and awe at what milk can be with some rennet and time.

This is where I find my joy in the kitchen, in these moments of awareness, when the rest of the day fades and I'm humbled by the simple beauty that surrounds me.

Mise en place is a necessary technique whose importance gets hammered into every culinary student and restaurant chef as essential to cooking. Perhaps, too, it's part of a spiritual practice, one that frees us up to see what's right in front—and for that I'm grateful.

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[Ashley Rodriguez](#) lives in Seattle with her husband, Gabe, three children, and two dogs. She is the author of *Date Night In* and *Let's*

Stay In and the co-creator of the James Beard–nominated series, Kitchen Unnecessary. Her work has been featured in *Woman's Day*, *Food & Wine*, *The New York Times*, and *Saveur*.

How to Declutter and Organize Your Children's Toys in 20 Minutes or Less

By Dawn Madsen



Toy manufacturers spend billions of dollars to convince us that children need a large assortment of toys to have a happy childhood. If our children are bored, unable to play well on their own or with others, it's simple: we haven't found the right toy. Buy more toys to solve the problem.

But what research (and our own experience) tells us is that kids are happier, play better, are more creative and less stressed with *fewer* toys. How often do we joke that our kids play with the boxes longer than the actual toys at Christmas time? Or see them get lost in play with couch cushions and blankets? It isn't the *toys* that facilitate creative and engaging play; it's their *imagination*.

So, what do we do with all those toys?

The Day I Had Enough

We used to have a toy room that was a disaster zone. It was the place where all the toys were stored and everything got dumped.

As I look back, I realize that if I was feeling overwhelmed by it, it's no wonder my kids were overwhelmed too. They didn't play in it well, and they certainly couldn't keep it clean.

One day I just decided enough was enough. I cleared out all the toys. I boxed them up, stacked them in the garage, and resolved that even if my kids were upset, we were going to try this for a while and then I'd gradually bring back out what they asked for.

I was expecting the kids to come home and demand to know where all their toys had gone. But instead, when they saw that the room where all their toys used to be was clean, they thought it was awesome. My daughter Maggie was excited that she had room to do gymnastics. Adeline asked if we could keep it that way all the time. That was not the reaction I was expecting!

If you're overwhelmed and convinced that reducing your toy inventory would be beneficial for your family but you're not sure where to start, here is an easy way to simplify *all* of your kids' toys in 20 minutes or less.

Step 1: Create a Boundary

When it comes to decluttering, it's always helpful to create a boundary to limit how much stuff you can keep, and this is especially helpful with simplifying toys.

Decide how much space you want to allow the toys to occupy in your house. Do you want toy bins? A toy box? Cube shelves?

We got a storage unit with nine bins from IKEA. It was the perfect size because they weren't very big and couldn't hold a lot of toys.

Step 2: Select Categories of Toys to Keep

Decide what categories of toys you want to keep. Try to pick toys that are versatile, durable, and that you know they already like playing with. I recommend any kind of “open-ended” toys, like LEGOs, blocks, Magna-Tiles, Lincoln logs, toy animals, dolls, and the like.

We have two girls and two boys, and here are the toys that made the cut for us:

- 2 bins of DUPLO LEGOs
- 2 bins of building blocks
- 1 bin of trucks and tractors
- 1 bin of play food and dishes

- 1 bin of dollhouse furniture and dolls (we got rid of the dollhouse, because they never used it much anyways)
- 1 bin of baby dolls and accessories
- 1 bin of dress-up clothes

After simplifying, all the toys for all four of our kids fit in the designated storage unit.

You can get through all of your toys in 20 minutes or less, and here's the secret. Don't hold up each toy and ask: *Do the kids like it? Do they play with it? Will they miss it?* That takes way too long and can get too emotional. Instead, just ask yourself: *Does it fit in one of your categories of toys to keep?* If not, it's going into the box to be removed.

Step 3: Box Up All Other Toys

Now that you know which toys you want to keep, put all the remaining toys in boxes so you can set them aside for a while. Everything that didn't make the cut in your defined categories and boundaries needs to go.

If you can put some toys straight into a donation box and get them out of the house right away, even better!

What If Those Toys Were Gifts?

What do you do if a friend or relative will expect to see a toy that was a gift from them when they come over?

Almost *all* the toys that we boxed up were gifts!

If you have a difficult people in your life who would be offended to know that you got rid of something they gave your kids, tell them that you're rotating toys now. They don't have to know that what you're really doing is rotating them out of your house!

Having a clean and organized house is so much better than keeping all your friends and family happy. If they get frustrated about that, there probably isn't anything you can do to keep them happy anyway.

Step 4: Put Your Boxed-Up Toys in Storage

Now that all the extra toys are boxed up, put them into temporary storage—the garage, basement, or anywhere that you have some extra space.

Then over the next little while, if there's anything that your kids specifically ask for, you can still pull it out. But you'll probably find that once it's out of sight, it's usually out of mind.

The first time I boxed up our kids' toys, our oldest son asked for his combine tractor, so I went into the boxes and I got it out. But out of six boxes of toys, that was the only thing I had to retrieve.

Step 5: Donate or Sell Whatever Is Left

After about four to six weeks, you'll have a good idea if your kids miss any of the toys that you packed up. Then go ahead and donate or sell anything that's left.

If Your Kids Are Older or Have Trouble Letting Go

Our kids were ages four and under when I first decided to simplify their toys. I did it on my own. You can decide if you want to invite your kids to help, depending on how old they are.

Also, if your kids are older than ours, or they can't part with anything because everything is their favorite, try buying their toys from them. They are probably saving up for something special, so if you say you'll give them \$1 or \$2 for old toys, your kids have to evaluate what's worth more to them.

A lot of people have told me that they have had success using this method. When you offer to exchange a toy for money, it often turns out the toy is not so special after all!

You can also try making the boundaries the bad guy. You don't have to tell your kids what they need to get rid of, but they can understand that everything needs to fit into a certain space. Then it's up to them to choose what makes the cut and what can go.

Unexpected Benefits of Simplifying Toys

When I decided to simplify our toys, I was expecting a couple of benefits: I was hopeful that our house would stay cleaner and that the kids would be able to pick up everything on their own. And that definitely happened.

What I didn't expect, though, was that all four of them would play so much better together. They don't fight over things nearly as much. They rarely ask to watch TV. They play outside more willingly and for a lot longer. They're able to think of things to do on their own, and we don't need to buy any outdoor toys to keep them entertained. They find random things outside to play with, and they are so creative with the things that they come up with!

One of the biggest changes I noticed is that now our kids can keep themselves busy when we're on trips or out and about. They're able to think of ways to occupy themselves on their own, and that is the *best* benefit of all.

Beware of Your Own Bias

One last thing: I often hear parents say that they buy toys for their kids because they would have liked to have had them as a kid.

Sometimes as parents we are more emotionally attached to the toys than our children are.

If that's your situation, remember that clearing out and organizing toys is a gift you're giving to your kids. They will be less stressed and more creative and will learn how to care for their things. This is invaluable.

You can do it! It's not always easy, but streamlining and organizing toys is a worthwhile investment of time and energy.

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Dawn Madsen, also known as [*The Minimal Mom*](#), has been living life as a minimalist since 2014. Her popular [YouTube channel](#) offers practical tips to help families simplify and declutter. Dawn shares her ideas with over a million people each month and was recently featured on the *Today Show*.

Budget Stations: The Financial Secret I Didn't Learn in Business School

By Kumiko Love



It's funny. I graduated with a finance degree yet knew nothing about personal finance when I left school.

Sure, I knew my way around spreadsheets. I could maneuver them in my sleep. After all, the backbone of our studies taught us how to audit financial records, analyze the financial position of a firm, and dive into other technical intricacies.

But when I found myself buried in \$77,000 of student loan and credit card debt, I found myself turning to Google.

How do I get rid of my debt?

How do I organize my finances?

How do I stay motivated?

The list of so-called tips and tricks I found online ran for miles. I'm sure in most cases the principles themselves were sound, but for whatever reason, it felt impossible to stay on track for more than two or three days at a time. The mental burnout and fatigue were real.

The vicious cycle of trying to stay organized reminded me of keeping a tidy home with little ones in the house. After a good, deep clean, everything in the house is where it belongs. Then slowly, over the

course of the week, clutter builds up again. The mess returns. Before you know it, you're back to square one.

Why is it so difficult to commit to organization every single day?

The reason we struggle is because organization is a skill and many people aren't born with it. Until organization is habitual, it doesn't happen.

One of the powerful secrets of building healthy habits is to set up an environment where you can be successful. Enter the budget station.

A budget station is a dedicated space that houses everything you need to stay on top of your finances. Once I got mine up and running, it set me up for success. I paid off my debt—all \$77,000—in one year. It forever changed the way that I approach my budget.

Why Organization Matters

Before I go to the ins and outs of a successful budget station, we need to talk about why everyday financial organization is so important.

We all have financial demands and goals. The only way to take action toward your financial goals is to be acutely aware of where your money is coming from and where it is going. You can't take action if

you don't know what's going on, and without action, there can be no growth.

A good budget station will help foster good habits, help you take action, and reach your goals.

How Does a Budget Station Work?

We do our best work when we feel calm and happy. And we are the most efficient when we are in a space that facilitates those feelings.

The perfect budget station is one where everything you need to manage your finances is within arm's reach. Your pens are there. Your highlighters are there. There's a home for receipts and bills—everything.

If your budget station is set up right, you won't need to search for anything. The moment you sit down, you have everything you need to get to work.

Why is this important?

First, you're eliminating any potential hurdles to productivity. I can't tell you how many times I used to sit down on the couch with the TV on to work on my budget. Twenty minutes later, I'd be engulfed in

whatever was on the screen, finances forgotten. It's easy to get distracted if your attention is seduced or you're running back and forth. At a budget station, you are able to focus on what you're doing.

I also encourage people to create a visual element for their station, something that allows them to dream big and see a brighter future. For example, if you're saving for a trip, keep a picture of your destination next to your budgeting supplies. If you've got your eyes set on a down payment, you could use a picture of your dream home. If debt-free living is the goal, you could make a graph to track progress. Any visual cue that elicits an emotional response will work.

If your budget station is conducive to productivity and constantly reminds you of your long-term goals, then how can there be any other option than success?

Here's the best part: a budget station doesn't have to be fancy. You don't need a plush office or a built-in nook.

When I was living in my 800-square-foot apartment, my budget station was simply my kitchen table and an adjacent bookcase. You might begin with a rolling cart, then expand from there. As long as your finances have a place of their own, you're golden.

What Makes a Perfect Budget Station?

When it comes to the actual budget and your personal categories, the trick is having a system that works for you. There's a reason they're called *personal* finances. As long as your system gives you the data you need to make good choices and it makes sense to you, you're set.

Some people manage budgets with apps. I prefer tangible systems.

Whether you go digital or analog is up to you. Your budget station will ultimately look different based on your choice, but two things are essential: *something visual to help you stay motivated and every possible item you need to do your everyday financial check-in.*

My budget station is a rolling cart. It's what I started with in my tiny apartment, and it works. Even though I now have an office, I like being able to take my station with me, depending on where I'm sitting in the room.

I've personally found it helpful to organize and track my budget categories using tools like envelopes, worksheets, and workbooks. I keep it all organized in a three-ring binder.

It's important to have a dedicated space for bills and receipts. You don't have to spend money on containers to get the job done. When I was starting out, I used brightly colored empty Kleenex boxes for my receipts, and it worked like a charm.

My station has colored pens labeled for each budget category. Common categories include income, utilities, savings, housing, transportation, food, debt, insurance, personal care, entertainment, education, child care, and miscellaneous. Using a different color for each category makes it easy to see where my money is going.

I like to have fun with my budget. It's a creative outlet for me. So I stock fun stickers, colorful tape, and labels. Everything I need is organized neatly in a bin on top of my rolling cart.

Besides my binder and workbooks, these other basics have a home on my budget station too.

- A three-ring hole punch
- Envelopes for cash
- Plastic containers for highlighters and pens
- White-out

- A ruler
- A calculator
- Sticky notes
- A catch-all container for additional creative supplies

Success Is Within Reach

The happy feeling I get from knowing I'm taking action toward my dreams is enough to keep me coming back to stay organized.

When I sit down to put together each month's budget, everything is at my fingertips. At the end of each day, I can sort receipts and drop bills according to their home. I can check in on my cash envelopes. Each time I do this, I greet the visual reminder attached to my financial goals. Motivation kicks in and I happily do it all again the following day.

The goal is to know precisely where your money is and where it's going each day. That kind of knowledge is power. It's what I needed to pay off my debt and make my dreams a reality.

Without organization, your finances will certainly cause stress and overwhelm. With the perfect budget station and the will to succeed, anything is possible.

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Kumiko Love is an accredited financial counselor based in Spokane, Washington. She graduated from Eastern Washington University and has a lovely son, James. After paying off \$77,000 in debt in just eight months, she founded [The Budget Mom](#), a multimedia platform to help others take control of their financial futures.

Ditch the Filing Cabinet: How Binders Revolutionize Paper Organization

by Lisa Woodruff



Our lives can change in the time it takes to answer a phone call: no preparation, no warning. I received that kind of call 13 years ago when my father fell ill.

For nine months, my sister and I functioned as Dad's health care agents, his attorneys-in-fact, and ultimately his executors. I traveled home often in that period to spend time with my dad and take care of his medical and financial obligations.

It was on my third trip home that I faced the realization that I was now in charge of my father's affairs. How do you assume responsibility for another person? Where do you start? Nothing prepares you for logging on to your parent's computer and searching through their personal information. And then there was all the paperwork.

Alone in my childhood home, I stared at the filing cabinet. I didn't want to go through Dad's papers. I felt like I was violating his privacy. I didn't even know what I should be looking for.

When I found mail, financial accounts, or membership statements, I could make progress in settling the estate. But until those paper puzzle pieces surfaced, accounts and obligations went unnoticed.

When it came to my father's filing cabinet, I wanted a road map to guide my search and a checklist to help me see how much further I had to go. Ironically, as I found out in time, much of what I needed wasn't even in the filing cabinet. It was online, in a safe, at the lawyer's, or on Dad's computer in files.

Ultimately, what helped me most was filling a binder with the most important papers and documents and carrying it with me to doctors' offices, the lawyer's office, family meetings, and the funeral home. In my grief and exhaustion, paper was unemotional and factual. I had what I needed, and it got the job done.

I am far from being anti-paper. Paper builds confidence. Paper substantiates a claim. Paper proves an identity. Paper gives voice from beyond the grave.

Our paper is powerful. The question is, where is it going to go?

Paper in a filing cabinet is lost. Paper in a box is buried. But paper in a binder can be used to advocate in a purposeful and productive way for the people you love most in their time of need.

Once I'd made my binder, my confidence rose. It was after the meeting with my father's estate lawyer when I finally realized why.

Her off-handed comment let me know I was on to something. “Your binder is going to save you thousands of dollars in my billable hours,” she remarked.

Thousands of dollars in savings, nights of worry avoided, and less stress—all from a simple three-ring binder.

My experience with managing my father’s practical affairs in those hard months of 2008–09 demonstrated to me the potential of binders as an organizing tool. It was only several years later, however, that I realized they could become the way to organize paper.

The Paper Organizing Tool for Unpredictable Times

As an organizational adviser, running a company called Organize 365, I spent years helping clients purge and organize their filing cabinets. In the fall of 2017, clients evacuating from Hurricane Harvey in Texas, Hurricane Irma in Florida, and the Northern California wildfires showed me the error in my organizational ways. I was faced with the terrible realization that no matter how organized your paper files are, if they are in a cabinet, they are not portable in an emergency.

Even for the majority of us whose homes are not under threat of flood or fire, the filing cabinet is an outmoded system that does not work in

today's world. Few of us have the true secretarial skill of creating and maintaining a filing cabinet. The majority of us open our file drawers and squeeze in one more stack of paper, never to be retrieved again.

Did you know one file cabinet can hold *18,000* pieces of paper?!

Knowing the paper is there—somewhere in all those drawers and files—may give us a sense of security, but in fact the huge number of ill-organized documents only adds more work when we need the paper.

Meanwhile, we are drowning in the stuff. We keep stacks of paper on the kitchen counter, stash papers in drawers, and store file cabinets full of documents we never even look at. Studies show that 85 percent of the paper in our lives can be tossed—but which 85 percent? And how do we organize and manage the 15 percent that remains?

After the devastating natural events in 2017, I set out to see if I could replace my filing cabinet with binders. I could! I reduced all of our filing cabinet papers (minus tax documentation) to a set of six binders. And I not only used this method myself; I began teaching it to others.

My theory was soon put to the test after a few Organize 365 early adopters followed my lead. In 2018, when Hurricane Florence made landfall, clients evacuated with family, pets, *and their binders*.

Success!

In the summer of 2020, I published my book, *The Paper Solution*, as a step-by-step guide for what to shred, what to save, and how to sort what's left behind into easily accessible, structured, and manageable binders that won't take over one's life. It teaches what documents absolutely *must* be held on to, which papers can be disposed of today, and how to replace bulky filing cabinets with an efficient system of binders—making vital documents portable and handy.

It's official. I've ditched the filing cabinet for good.

All the Binders You Need

Getting a hold on your important papers gives a sense of safety and security in moments of uncertainty. Instead of being a daunting challenge in a filing cabinet, papers reduced to the minimum and organized in binders become something you can control.

Are you ready to start creating binders today? I recommend up to six binders for complete paper organization. Most people need the first three binders; the last three are more useful for parents.

1. *Financial binder.* This binder will house anything money related, including papers about your current assets, insurance forms, retirement savings information, important documents like birth certificates, and any legal documents you may have. Having learned through my father's situation, I use my financial binder to keep anything that someone else would need to assume my power of attorney or settle my estate when I pass.
2. *Medical binder.* This binder is for anything related to your health. In my medical binder, I have a short, written story about my health to date—I recommend that strategy to you as well. Also include whatever someone else would need to take over your power of health care.
3. *Household reference binder.* This one is for those documents related to your residence. Put anything your house needs for maintenance, resale, insurance, or value in this binder. You will give most of this material to a new homeowner if you move.

4. *Household operations binder.* Here you should put all the papers and ideas related to how your house is your family's home. What I mean is, things like your personal plans for holidays, cooking, entertaining, travel, pets, child events, and fun. When my children were younger, I would go through this binder each month and choose an activity or recipe to try. Now I refer to this binder a few weeks before each major holiday our family celebrates.
5. *Warrior MAMA binder.* MAMA stands for “Managing All Medical Alternatives.” This binder is usually used by the mama in the house. But don't worry—this binder is for dads too! It will contain anything related to your child's needs. I found that coordinating care for my kids' medical and educational needs was a full-time job. The portability of this binder supported my requests for additional tests and services as I advocated for their needs.
6. *School memories binder.* I made each of my kids a binder with samples of their artwork, stories, handwriting, and hard-earned school certificates. In our house, this binder has received the most love and elicited the most laughter and epic stories.

Curate your school memories collection well, and this could be the most precious binder in your house.

Your binders can be useful in ordinary and extraordinary times. Whenever you need to, grab a binder and go!

Now Is the Time

Paper gives a voice, directive, and focus to events we will all pass through one day. You *need* paper. The question is not if you need to organize your paper; the question is when will you. Now or later?

Go pro. Start today to get your paper under control and organized. Binders are the way to do it.

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Lisa Woodruff is a productivity specialist, home and paper organization expert, and founder and CEO of [Organize 365](#). Lisa is the host of the top-rated Organize 365 Podcast, where she shares strategies for reducing overwhelm, clearing mental clutter, and living a productive and organized life.

Digital House-Cleaning: Make It Easy to Get at What Matters

By Christina Crook



Our digital profiles, like our homes and workspaces, are places we inhabit. Just like with their physical counterparts, if we do nothing to organize and clean up the stuff that accumulates (contacts, accounts we follow, links, files, and more), they can and will pile up to the point where we regularly lose time and productivity wading through it all. We're overwhelmed and overworked before we even start.

To turn down the volume on your digital life, begin by organizing and tidying. When we break things down into achievable pieces, we achieve our goals, gaining momentum, confidence, and hope.

Does It Spark Joy?

The idea behind organizing is simple. We want to know exactly where everything we need is. The harder something is to find, the more likely we'll get distracted, frustrated, or bored along the way. That's when we waste time. So obviously we need to tidy up.

Yet when we really get down to work, tidying can be one of the hardest things we do in many areas of our personal lives. Just like organizational expert Marie Kondo said, we need to examine every object in our digital space systematically and ask, "Does this app, site, contact, or content serve me? Does it bring me joy? Is it healthy? Is this something I still want in my life?"

If the answer is no, then we have to have the courage to discard it—to miss out. That’s JOMO—the joy of missing out—in action.

Declutter Your Desktop

How do you feel when you open up your computer? Do you lose any time finding the thing you’re looking for? Have you ever lost a document entirely because you didn’t have a system for it?

Organizing our environment is one of the first ways we as humans begin to exert positive control over that environment. At the end of this exercise, you’re not going to have any loose shortcuts on your desktop or in your browser’s toolbar. None. The goal is to make it as effortless as possible to spend your time the way you intend to.

Create two folders on your desktop: “Important Documents” and “Spark Joy.”

Every item on your desktop will end up in one of these two folders by the end of this exercise.

“Important Documents” means exactly that: this folder contains anything important, such as a manuscript, legal information, an important project, or a list of cosplay outfits to sew. You decide

what's important to you. For me, it's family projects, our monthly calendar, and active research and work files.

“Spark Joy” is for anything and everything that brings you joy. Again, you decide. I have poems, photographs, aspirational fashion looks, and an island dream house folder. You do you.

Move every item on your computer into one of these folders or the trash.

All the content hanging around on your desktop belongs in one and only one of these folders. If you find something where you don't even know what it is or aren't sure it fits into any of these categories, say goodbye.

Scrub Social Media

Social media is where many of us lose the most time, especially on the content we consume thoughtlessly or out of habit, even if it gives us nothing at all or makes us feel outraged or depressed.

Social media channels make it extremely easy to follow an account and instantly add it to our feed, usually in one click. It's easy to understand why: the more accounts we follow, the more that shows up in our feed and notifications, if we have them, and that keeps us

coming back. If we follow enough accounts, we've got a basically endless stream of new content—much of it anxiety inducing (midnight #doomscrolling, anyone?)—demanding our response all day. So it's time for a clean-out.

For each account you follow, you're going to ask yourself three questions and answer as quickly and instinctively as possible.

1. *Who is this?* Do you know, right now, who/what this contact is?
2. *Does this feel good, or is it important?* Is your immediate emotional impression that this contact “makes me feel good” or “is important”?
3. *Do I want to bring this with me?* Is there specific value in carrying this connection forward, and can you state for yourself exactly what it is?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, unfollow. Let it go.

Rearrange Your Digital Spaces

How do you go about beating and building habits? If you want to quit eating ice cream every night, you stop putting Ben & Jerry's in the freezer. If you want to start exercising, you place your runners and workout clothes beside your bed so they're ready in the morning.

Reorganizing our space is how we protect ourselves against bad habits. By making something just inconvenient enough, adding a little bit of friction, we are forced to do it consciously instead of letting our lizard brain, addiction, or conditioned response do it mindlessly. Putting a tiny speed bump in the process of something helps our conscious mind grab the wheel and say, “Hey. What I am I about to do here? Do I actually want to be doing that?”

Let’s move some digital furniture and get your house in order.

Access email and social media only from your computer. Deleting email and social media from your phone, tablet, or smartwatch will dramatically decrease distraction and make it easier to get traction on what matters.

Alternatively, create a folder on your phone one or more swipes away from your home screen. Put all of your social media apps inside, along with any other apps you use more than you want to. Come up with a creative name for this folder that reminds you that using one of these apps is a potential time-waster or mindless activity, like “Hazardous Material,” or “Are you sure?” or “Intentional Use Only.”

This creates friction by adding another two, three, or more small steps to the process of getting to your major time sinks—nothing so

onerous that you can't use the apps if you really want to, but enough friction for you to be able to see what you're doing and ask yourself, *Do I need to check my feed now? Do I need to check that page again? Is this what I took out my phone for?*

Oh, what do you know? Your phone and desktop are suddenly sparking joy.

Unclutter Your Email

Do you let just anyone through your front door? Do you stay awake every hour day and night? Of course you don't. You maintain sleep hygiene and safety in your home.

Just like you protect your physical space and time, you can create a buffer between you and the digital world. I'm talking about email auto-responders. Most people only think of using them for vacations (remember those?), but these preset tools, used effectively, can dramatically decrease email stress by managing people's access to your attention.

Here's one of my favorite messages:

From: Jonathan Fields

Subject: In Maker Mode

Hi there! Thanks for reaching out. I'm head down working on a series of new endeavors. To do my best work, I've learned that I need to be largely in what I call "maker mode." It's about being less reactive, more intentional, and invested in doing the work I'm here to do on the level that allows me to be on-purpose, fully expressed, and in-flow. So I'll be in my inbox way less often.

*If your message requires a time-sensitive reply, kindly email
@goodlifeproject.com.

Vacation settings for your email don't only have to be used for actual vacations. Is there something you need to take a time-out for? Email will be waiting for you when you come back from taking a walk, reading a book, or spending time with your lover. Trust me.

Did you know that Essentialism author Greg McKeown doesn't access email before 4:00 pm? While this kind of boundary may be a luxury for most, it's a reminder that you decide what's essential to you.

It's in Your Hands

You control your digital consumption and clutter. Regular digital housecleaning helps you sweep away the overwhelming content that distracts, wastes your precious time, and intrudes on what you really value. Clean house and get ready to feel the joy.

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[Christina Crook](#) is a pioneer and leading voice in the field of digital well-being. As the author of the award-winning book *The Joy of Missing Out: Finding Balance in a Wired World* and the leader of the global #JOMO movement, she shares her insights in outlets like *The New York Times* and interviews other mindful tech leaders as the host of the JOMO(cast) podcast. Christina leads *Navigate*—the digital well-being membership—focusing you on the wisest investment of your time online to help you live more deliberately and experience more joy. She lives in Toronto with her family.

How to Simplify Your Email

By Mike Vardy



If you're old enough, you may remember when email was new and cool and exciting, the greatest “killer app” around. No more. Nowadays it's more like a necessary evil for most of us.

The problem is, there's just *so much* email coming at you. No matter how much you try to block and unsubscribe, the spam, scams, and phishing emails somehow still sneak into your inbox. Even the legitimate emails can get way out of hand. Many people overuse this means of communication, especially at work, so emails are constantly interrupting you, making you feel burdened until you reply. Then the more your inbox gets clogged with unhandled emails, the wearier you feel about cleaning it up.

You may wish you could kill this “killer app”—just stop using it. But that's not likely to be possible for you.

The number of email users worldwide stands at 3.71 billion in 2021 (about half of the world population over the age of 14). This number is expected to increase to 4.48 billion within three years.[\[1\]](#) So email isn't going away anytime soon. You can hardly escape it, except at the risk of annoying others and isolating yourself.

So, what do you do?

You do your best to make dealing with email as simple as possible.

But even simplicity isn't enough. You need to make sure that you put an email workflow in place that is flexible enough to evolve as your email use changes and is also durable enough to stand the test of time.

Putting this kind of workflow in place isn't impossible. It just takes the proper amount of attention to get things going in the right direction.

There's no "one size fits all" email solution out there. You'll need to figure out, over time, what email tactics serve you and your intentions the best. Then you can adjust accordingly. But you need to start somewhere.

Here are some of the tried-and-true tactics I've used to simplify my email.

The OHIO Strategy

OHIO stands for "only handle it once," and it's one of the simplest ways to approach dealing with the influx of email that lands in your inbox.

Think about email in terms of how you'd handle physical mail that you'd find in your mailbox at home. After you look at that physical mail—the bills, the flyers, the holiday cards, and so on—do you return it to your mailbox? Of course you don't. You take those pieces of mail and put them where they need to go to get the attention they require.

Bills might go in a folder you have in your office that's specifically for bills you need to pay. Flyers might go into a pile on the dining room or kitchen table to see if there are any coupons you may want to use—or they may go straight into the recycling bin instead. Holiday cards might get displayed on your mantle or hung in an archway to spruce up your seasonal decor. But they don't wind up back in your mailbox.

You need to treat your email the same way.

This is where the OHIO process comes in. Every time you scan your inbox for new email, make a decision on where it needs to go. Don't mark it as unread (you've already "read" it to some degree), and don't mark it with a flag or a star (because if you do that too much, then those flags and stars lose their meaning and value).

So, what *do* you do with it?

You could, for example, forward those new emails from your inbox to your to-do list app of choice. Some of the more powerful—and yet still inexpensive—to-do list apps have email addresses associated with them so that when you forward an email to them they convert the email into a task you can take action on when you're ready to do so.

If you want to remove even more friction from taking action on these emails once they land in your to-do list app, then rewrite the subject line in the email so that it's clear what you need to do, instead of just having the “Fwd:” or “Re:” attached to an email entitled “This Coming Week” or “Report.”

Another thing you can do with those emails is put them into email folders. But you don't want to go overboard with this either. Too many folders can result in creating more places that your email program needs to index for search.

It's far better to be deliberate about what email folders are really necessary for you to create. That way you don't spend too much time creating them or have to wait too long to find that email you're searching for because your email program's search functionality is not optimal.

Email Foldering Tactics

David Allen, the creator of the Getting Things Done methodology, had the following to say when asked about how many inboxes someone should have: “Have as many as you need but as few as possible.” That advice should be applied to email folders as well.

This is a good idea because of the search issues that email apps can come across when there are too many folders in play. It’s also a good idea because it simplifies your email workflow and keeps it durable in the process.

Take my 3Mail Workflow, for example.[\[2\]](#) I have eight email folders that I use as part of this framework. They are named after every day of the week, and the eighth one is simply named “Today.”

When I process my email inbox, I ask myself a question that gets the flywheel spinning on 3Mail: *Do I want to answer this email message today?* If I want to deal with it now, I’ll answer or deal with it. If not now but later today, then I move it to the Today folder. If not today, I move it to the folder that represents the day of the week when I want to deal with it.

So if today is Monday and I want to answer it today, I'll move it to the Today folder. If I want to answer it a week from today, then I'll move it to the Monday folder.

I work through this workflow until I'm done with all of the fresh emails in my inbox. Once they are dealt with—or OHIO'd, I suppose—I'll then go into the folder for the day of the week and process those emails in the same fashion. If I've decided to handle the email right now, I'll do that. If later today, I'll move it to the Today folder. If I'm delaying it to another day, I'll move it to that day's folder.

By the time I'm done, the only emails that need to be dealt with are those in the Today folder. From there, I can either deal with them or move on to something other than email processing, because email processing is only a small part of my life.

When you're using email folders, do your best to simplify them as much as you can. Want emails from your boss to stand out? Have an email folder specifically to hold emails from your boss. Need to keep personal emails separate from work emails? Create a folder for personal emails or—better still—use a completely different email app or email account for personal email.

I like to use both of those tactics, because I want my professional emails to have a different voice and tone than my personal ones.

The 3Mail Workflow is simple, flexible, and durable. It's exactly what I wanted in an email management workflow. It could very well be the right workflow for you too.

Don't Strive for Inbox Zero

This tip has more to do with peace of mind than pure productivity. Using the concept of inbox zero—getting the email count in your email inbox to zero as a measurement for how productive you were over the course of a day—is flawed. Unless your job revolves purely around email messaging, this scorekeeping doesn't tell an accurate story of how productive you really are on a given day.

I realize that the sight of an overflowing email inbox can cause anxiety, but I'd say that the sight of an overflowing—and, in turn, overwhelming—to-do list is more concerning. A better goal to strive toward when it comes to email is to get to Inbox Today.

Inbox Today means that every email prior to what you received today has been handled in some fashion. While you may certainly want to handle emails that arrived in your inbox today, some of them aren't

nearly as important as the tasks on your to-do list that you set out to accomplish. So leave any emails that arrived today that you don't have either the time or inclination to deal with in your inbox.

Think of it as the physical mail that arrives in your mailbox after you've checked the mail earlier in the day. That mail can keep until tomorrow. So can those emails.

Another interesting tactic to try in tandem with Inbox Today is Yesterbox.^[3] Created by Tony Hsieh, the late founder of Zappos, the core idea of Yesterbox is that yesterday's email inbox becomes today's to-do list. In essence, when you use the idea of Inbox Today alongside Yesterbox, you give yourself more bandwidth with email and can invest more of your time, energy, and attention in getting the right things done today.

You're in Control

Email isn't going anywhere. If anything, it's becoming more a part of our lives than ever. But email management doesn't have to be complex or complicated. When you step back and approach how you want to work through your email process in a mindful manner, you can bring your best to every message you receive.

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Tidying Up My Life: A Father's Story

By Tyler Moore



Three years ago, my facade would have told you that I lived a tidy life. Everything was moving along exactly as I had planned for my personal life and for my chosen career in education. I was checking off the boxes I had created for myself and I was becoming “successful.”

After teaching school for a few years, I completed a master’s degree in education at Columbia University. My wife and I lived in a two-bedroom apartment in New York City with our two beautiful little girls. I had been promoted out of the classroom and was now working as a school administrator.

At a young age, I had accomplished everything I thought I wanted.

And yet I was miserable.

I desperately wanted to feel in control of my work, but the majority of my responsibilities were reactive. Teachers and staff looked to me as the expert. They wanted me to quickly solve problems. I was often responsible for cleaning up other people’s messes. I tried to proactively prepare for work, but each day was completely different from the one before. The process of anticipating when or where the

next problem would occur sent me into an anxious downward spiral. Work left me mentally and emotionally drained.

For three years, I endured my administrative role, often working 12- to 14-hour days and yet never feeling like I'd caught up. Instead, I felt like I was drowning in a sea of problems I couldn't fix. I blamed it on my inexperience and thought that it would get better with time. It didn't.

Stress from work followed me home. Most nights I walked into the apartment and expressed judgment to my wife. I pointed out all the things she hadn't accomplished. If she had cooked dinner while the girls were playing, I'd complain that the apartment wasn't tidy. If the apartment was tidy, I'd complain that laundry wasn't done. If laundry was done, I'd complain that dinner wasn't ready.

I desired our home to be a calm respite from the chaos I experienced at school. My wife knew this and tried to be supportive, but she was juggling a toddler, a newborn, and a husband who was mentally in a bad place. My actions began to negatively impact our relationship as my angry criticisms became a daily cycle.

One morning, as I was walking to school, I reached my breaking point. Waiting for the crosswalk signal to indicate that it was safe to

cross the street, I thought, *It might be easier for me to just walk into traffic right now and end it all.* I stood on the corner and broke down in tears.

Thankfully, I immediately reached out to my wife for help. She encouraged me to start seeing a therapist.

Three weeks into my therapy journey, I made the decision to take leave from my job. The goal was to take a break to recover mentally and emotionally, spend time with my wife and daughters, and figure out the next part of my story.

I was about to learn that things have to get messier before they get tidy.

Tidying Our Home

After leaving my job, I rested for two days and then got antsy. I needed a project to help me feel like I had a purpose by being at home. That's when I decided it would be genius to provide our girls with more space to play by switching furniture and giving them the master bedroom.

While our home looked tidy to the outside observer's eye, our belongings were just hidden behind doors or jammed in drawers. For

the bedroom-switching plan, I pulled everything out. It revealed the ugly truth about how we'd been stuffing away items instead of dealing with them. We had piles and piles of things everywhere. It was raw and embarrassing.

Together, my wife and I embarked on a months-long process to tidy our space. We used the book *Spark Joy* by Marie Kondo as our guide. We read sections of the book together and then tidied accordingly.

Dealing with our new, smaller bedroom was our first project. We realized early that we needed to get our own belongings tidy first, before moving on to our girls' space. We sorted items, made decisions as a team, and tried to organize a space that would meet our needs. As a result of our work, I was able to get rid of the huge, bulky wardrobe that had once housed my clothing and move all of my clothes into a closet that measures 14 inches wide.

My wife and I found tidying our girls' belongings to be a bit more complicated. Unlike us, our daughters are constantly growing. Their needs, interests, and developmental stages are frequently changing.

We had to sort their items into smaller categories and then choose storage solutions. We methodically sorted toys, clothing, and books

and talked about what a “just enough” mentality might look like for our family.

Throughout that process, we honed our decision-making abilities, learned how to set boundaries, and developed skills to tackle harder organizing dilemmas. I learned how to share with my wife the reasons why I wanted to keep something. I learned what items had true sentimental value for me, and why. I also learned how to say goodbye to items that had served their purpose but that I didn’t need to take into my future.

Although I hadn’t anticipated it, tidying our physical space was the start of a radical transformation process that would have a lasting impact far beyond the organization and aesthetics of our apartment. I unconsciously triggered a project that would invite us to examine all the ways in which we were living.

Tidying My Life

Organizing is the process of putting things in order. It became clear to me that this process doesn’t apply only to the physical space in a home. It can also apply to our habits, routines, mental health, emotional wellness, and careers.

For instance, I was able to apply the principles I'd learned from tidying our physical possessions to my professional life. I examined my motivations for pursuing positional power at work, and my motivations for staying in a job that left me miserable, and considered what was getting in the way of my goal of spending more time with my children. I realized that choices intended to produce happiness were actually undermining my happiness.

I admitted to friends and colleagues that my life was far from tidy. I had to process the anxiety, stress, and trauma that I'd experienced and then let go.

My job promotion had served its purpose, I decided, but I no longer wanted it. I stepped down from my position, took a pay cut, and returned to classroom teaching at the same school where I'd been an administrator.

This experience taught me that sometimes you have to step back before being able to move forward—and that's a good thing.

Tidy Dad

I am still very much in the process of tidying up my life. I am confronting my personal mess and my physical mess, and realizing

that the more I tidy, the more space I create for the things that matter.

By tidying our home, we created organizational systems that can adjust to the needs of our growing family. Last spring, we welcomed our third daughter into our little space. We now have five people living in 750 square feet and work to maintain the systems that we put into place during our tidying marathon.

By returning to teaching instead of administration, I gained more hours at home each week with the girls, more time off during school breaks, and a much healthier relationship with work and self-identity. I genuinely look forward to going to school each day and am excited to teach my seventh-grade students.

The transition also created time for creative outlets. I created a website and Instagram account to share my personal journey of processing the messes of life. It keeps me inspired.

I am continuing to rewrite my personal journey, one tidy project at a time. I want to provide well for my family, but I am learning to get by with just enough. Just enough is a powerful way to live.

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Tyler Moore is a seventh-grade teacher with a passion for inspiring others to live orderly and meaningful lives. He shares his tidying journey at [The Tidy Dad.com](https://www.thetidydad.com). On [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/thetidydad), he highlights the joys of fatherhood and teaches quick strategies for making small spaces work for families.