

Diagnosis: Clutter . . . Rx: Get Organized

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In Its Place



The “stuff” in our lives can bring us joy and comfort, make performing some tasks easier, and provide us with a sense of accomplishment. But when the “stuff” begins to pile up and overflow, it can lessen our ability to function effectively, interfere with our relationships, and make us feel miserable. Our “stuff” then qualifies as clutter.

Working with clients who are struggling with clutter and disorganization is similar in many respects to health care professionals working with patients. Both clients and patients may be experiencing pain or discomfort, frustration or anxiety, an acute change in normal functioning, or just a gradual overall sense that “something just isn’t right.” As a result, they seek professionals to help assess the situation and provide solutions and relief.

It is important to note that each client’s situation is unique. However, many “symptoms” tend to have common threads—wasted time and money, increased stress, and decreased ability to perform certain functions. Initial phone conversations with clients typically include the following complaints:

- “I’m always misplacing my keys.”
- “I can’t remember where I put my bills and end up paying late charges.”
- “It’s a mad rush to get everyone ready and out the door in the morning.”
- “I have to clear a path to get through my kids’ room.”
- “I am so frustrated and overwhelmed by the clutter that I don’t want to go in that room anymore.”

During an initial consultation, a walk-through of a client’s space provides a firsthand view of the layout, flow, and problem areas. It also provides an opportunity to assess storage and shelving availability and constraints, to gather more detailed information about what is and isn’t working, and to discuss a client’s needs and goals.

After assessing the situation and space, an action plan is developed with steps to help the client remedy the situation and attain goals. A client can then implement the plan on his or her own and/or in conjunction with the professional organizer. During a “typical” hands-on session, a client’s belongings and papers are sorted into categories such as “keep,” “donate,” “sell,” “toss,” and “recycle.” The “keep” category may then be broken down further. For example, papers and mail can be divided into “to read,” “to file,” and “requires action.” These tasks are then prioritized and times are scheduled to complete them.

The key to a successful action plan and the resulting system is tailoring them to meet a client's needs, time frame, schedule, style, and how he or she functions in that environment. The ultimate goal is for the space to work for the client and for the client to acquire the tools and skills needed to maintain it.