

Five steps to decluttering success

I don't know about you, but I am so ready for spring! I have really been longing to get back outside to hike or bike, but I don't really enjoy these activities when it's cold outside.



Angie Hyche

One good thing about being stuck inside is that I can focus on anything inside my home that needs to be done. When it comes to organization (my favorite of all activities), I believe the top priority should always be decluttering. Decluttering simply means removing what doesn't belong in a space. Most of us would agree that we just have way too much stuff. When a space is overloaded with stuff, any efforts to organize that space are wasted.

My goal in this article is to give you a practical list of steps that you can use to declutter any area of your home. With this checklist in hand and a little bit of time, you should be able to tackle any space and make significant improvements. The list itself is from professional organizer and blogger Lisa Woodruff of Organize 365, and my comments follow each step.

But before beginning the decluttering process, you need to decide what space you want to work on. If your whole house needs to be decluttered, how do you decide where to start? There are several approaches, and it really just depends on your goals and your preference.

Many people like to start with the area that is bothering them most or is most interfering with their daily life. Another great strategy is to concentrate on the most visible areas. Walk into your front door as if you were a guest coming into your home, and focus on the areas that a guest would see. I have worked with several clients who hadn't been able to entertain in years because of the cluttered state of their home, and decluttering



AUDRA STEADMAN

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those common areas was life-changing because they were able to welcome guests into their home again. If I am asked which area to start in, I often suggest cleaning the bedroom or the kitchen because we use these spaces every day, and improvements in these rooms make a huge difference in making our home a peaceful place.

Once you've decided where to start, you need to completely empty the contents of that space. It may sound a bit extreme and possibly unnecessary, but for some reason, we look at items differently when they are removed from their normal home. For example, if I am decluttering my utensils but simply look at the items in my countertop utensil container and my utensil drawer, I may not notice that I have 11 spatulas. Only when I take them all out and group them will I realize that fact and ask myself, "Who in the world needs 11 spatulas?" (I am not making this up; a recent client had 11 spatulas.) Also, once that container and drawer are emptied, I can thoroughly clean them both; after all, that probably hasn't been done in years.

For the purpose of explanation, I am going to use the example of a linen closet as I talk through the steps. Depending on how much time you have to declutter, you may not want to do the entire closet at one time, but instead focus on one category at a time. Either way, you're going to pull the items out of the closet before beginning. Now, let's see how these steps translate into action in decluttering a linen closet.

Eliminate all trash, food and broken items. This first step is usually pretty easy because things in this category are easy to identify. You wouldn't think there would be trash or food in a linen closet, but after working with so many people, let me just say that you just never know what you're going to find. In a linen closet, you might find towels that have been there for 20 years that are frayed and ready to become rags. When we buy new towels, we often stuff the old ones into the linen closet instead of taking the time to purge them.

Sell or consign anything of value you want to sell. In a linen closet, you might find a comforter and pillow set that is valuable enough to sell. There are many options to sell your items: garage sales, consignment shops, local Facebook sale pages, Craigslist and more. However, keep in mind that this adds additional steps and time, and the items won't be leaving your home immediately. I always encourage donation if possible.

Bag up any items to donate, and deliver them to the donation center. Obviously I would recommend getting them bagged or boxed up and continuing the decluttering first, not stopping what you are doing to immediately drive them to the donation center. Oftentimes, I will go ahead and load the items in my car so that they are ready to go. I schedule the time to take the donations on my own so that I don't still have those same items in my car months later (anyone else been there, done that?)

Collect everything that goes in another room and locate it in that room. Again, it never ceases to amaze me how an item that belongs in the kitchen gets into a linen closet, but it happens. So that you don't disrupt your decluttering momentum, I suggest having a container to put items that go elsewhere in your home. At the end of the session, take those items to the appropriate place.

Make a list of any spaces that need organizers or items that need to be replaced. Only after you've gotten rid of anything that doesn't belong can you determine whether you need any organizing supplies. In a linen closet, you

might want some sort of container for different sizes of sheet sets or for a category of toiletries. If you found items that were broken, you need to make note of that so you can replace them. If you realized that although you had 27 sheet sets in your linen closet, only two were complete sets of the correct size, you probably want to jot that down on a shopping list.

What if this list sounds great, but you don't have enough time to fully declutter your spaces? I would suggest using a technique I learned from well-known organizer and author Peter Walsh called the Trash Bag Tango. I love this suggestion because it doesn't take much time; it involves the whole family, and it can achieve big results. Here is Peter's description of the process:

"Here's what you do: Every evening for one week, set a timer on your cell phone and get everyone in the kitchen. Give each person two trash bags and for 10 minutes everyone has to run around the house. In one trash bag put garbage—old magazines, torn clothing, broken toys, takeout containers; in the second bag put things you no longer need or want. At the end of 10 minutes, you're done. Put the first bag in the trash and the second in the trunk of your car for Goodwill. It's amazing."

I hope you're feeling energized and equipped to declutter. I have seen some amazing results with these techniques. I promise that you will be glad you have invested that time. As always, I'd love to hear about your results, your questions and your challenges.

Happy organizing!

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