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Experts suggest road map to cleaning the clutter

BY LYNN BREZOSKY : JANUARY 17, 2014 : Updated: January 18, 2014 2:32pm

SAN ANTONIO — Some catastrophe or near-disaster usually triggers a call to a professional organizer such as **Helene Segura** of Living-Order.

It might be forgetting to pick up a child from soccer practice. Or realizing a slam-dunk business proposal never got in the mail. For Segura, author of "R.O.A.D. M.A.P. to get Organized" (Hacienda **Oaks Press**, \$14.39), that call means the prospective client knows disorganization is causing a problem.

Once people realize chaos is causing stress, they can get to work on getting organized.

"They realize that they could do more in less time if they learned how to be more efficient," Segura said. "They see the benefit of gaining back an hour instead of just spinning their wheels for an hour. That way they can go take a Friday afternoon if they want or they can take an extra-long lunch to go see their kid's soccer game."

MORE INFORMATION

Tools for organizing

Products such as canisters for the pantry or dividers for the sock drawer should be purchased after weeding out. A few items help during the initial phases, experts say.

The FreedomFiler system can be ordered online at FreedomFiler.com. Local organizers recommend it for managing home and business paperwork.

Hanging file folders, preferably all in one color (with color-coded tab labels), can be purchased at office-supply stores.

Crate files are cheap, portable places to store files. Look for them at office-supply stores, the Container Store or Target.

Pick up clear plastic sleeves to protect documents such as birth certificates and passports at office-supply stores.

Consider purchasing a label maker to mark canisters for staples such as sugar, coffee and pasta.

Banker's boxes, available at office-supply stores, Target and Walmart, work well for holding items while sorting and reshelving.



Photo By Billy Calzada / San Antonio Express-News

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Kat Jacoby, president of Divine Organization, looks through files she helped organize in a client's home in Comfort.

For **Laci Secor**, owner of Simplify Me, the first visit with a client is aimed at identifying what caused things to pile up.

It could be a death in the family that brought in a load of inherited, emotion-charged belongings. There may have been one or more moves, leading to unlabeled boxes of who-knows-what. Or it could be a shopping addiction resulting in closets overstuffed with unworn clothing, towels, bedding sets and whatever else snapped up on sale.

Amy Volk of Virginia-based Simplified Living uses "value questions" as a guide to clearing out and better judgment about future purchases:

Do I love this? Do I need this? Does this add value to my life? Does keeping this make my life more simple or more complicated?

"What I tell people is I can come in and make everything look great, and it can be organized, but if you haven't changed your relationship with stuff, how you think about things, then it will all end up the same way in a year," Volk said.

It could mean letting go of a 10-year-old crock pot that was a gift but has never been used and likely never will be plugged in.

"I'll have them walk through, what if you needed this? Could you get this part anywhere else?" Volk said. "Because it just becomes a bunch of junk after a while."

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The next big question is where to start.

"I tell people to pick one spot — whether it's just one drawer or one room — and don't zigzag across the house," Volk said. "Finish whatever you start."

For Segura, it's "pain points," starting with the most acute area.

Marriage on the rocks? It could help to do something about encroached closet space, she said.

If clutter is making the master bedroom an obstacle course, make that project one.

The kitchen usually comes next.

"That's where people tend to congregate, and if they can't congregate there, then there seems to be this little fracture going on where people do their own thing and they don't really come in to communicate," she said.

The entryway — the first thing you see on the way in and the last thing you see on the way out — is another priority place.

Segura's rules are simple.

Organize first, then clean, then think about brightening the décor.

The nifty organizing bins and kitchen canister sets also come later, after you've sifted through that shelf or drawer and know what you need for putting contents back in an orderly way.

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She asks clients to identify their first and second goals. "Is it organizing the kitchen? Tackling paperwork? What's going to save the most energy and bring the most relief?"

If it's the kitchen, she advises attacking it in zones — such as the baking zone, the prep zone, the dish zone and the cooking zone.

"I would just encourage people to break it down into small steps, small bites, small pieces, and just start," she said.

At the start of the year and onset of tax season, clients often want to get control of paperwork.

It's a specialty for **Kat Jacoby**, owner of **Divine Organization** and president of San Antonio's chapter of the **National Association** of Professional Organizers.

Jacoby swears by the FreedomFiler system, a color-coded file label packet that uses an even-odd year format and allows filing for just about every category on the tax return, along with household and small business records. It costs about \$40. Besides occasional weeding out and rotating files, you set it up once, and you're done, Jacoby said.

"We don't perform magic, People think that we do, but we're just coming in to make people accountable," she said.

And yes, she said, an organizer can also help folks ponder their piles.

"It's not always about the stuff," she said. "Sometimes it's about deeper stuff."

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