

Making Decisions about Our Things

I recently helped my youngest son, a third grader, to organize his bedroom. After a summer of neglect, the space was crowded with unordered collections of toys, Lego creations, "precious" collectibles, drawings and books. After numerous unsuccessful directives to clean his room, I realized that he needed my help to sort through the piles and decide what to do with everything. He was having a hard time figuring out how to make cuts, which was necessary to create space in his room. **Available storage or display space in our homes or offices is commonly limited, and making decisions about what to keep (vs. what to display) is often the hardest part of any organizing project.**

At first glance, we favor and value every item equally. If you find yourself having a hard time letting go of things, see what happens when you ask yourself these questions the next time you tackle a tough pile: **When did I use that last? Do I like it? Why am I keeping this? How do I feel about this?** It's important to answer yourself honestly. Any gut feelings of dislike, guilt or remorse that are triggered as you review your possessions are generally an indication that you are keeping items for reasons that undermine your true objectives. **When we keep the bigger goal in mind, such as creating space for your life now, we allow ourselves to make true and positive choices about the things we own.**

As my son answered similar questions about his things, the decisions he arrived at were ultimately empowering, as he experienced the true benefits of choice. **He was able to distinguish between those items that give him great pleasure (high value) and those that do not.** His favorites are now on display, where he can enjoy them, and the piles that he created for trash, recycling and donation made him feel proud.

The topic article this issue, **Strategies for Organizing Collections**, elaborates on the decision process and offers a guide to making decisions about things you own.

Other Topics in this Issue:

- Strategies for Organizing Collections (Books, Personal Memorabilia and Other)
 - ✓ Determine Value
 - ✓ Create Space
 - ✓ Honor Your Decision

- Featured Organizing Resources

Strategies for Organizing Collections (Books, Personal Memorabilia and Other)

Clearing rooms and storage spaces of accumulated clutter and unused items creates space for current activities and storage for items we value. It's often easy to decide what objects are destined for the donation pile, and which will remain stored in the closet or on the bookshelf. But how do we best approach collections that don't necessarily fall into either of those categories? I'm referring to items we own and care deeply about, but that we don't necessarily use or routinely reference, such as books, personal memorabilia and other collectibles. **With a few basic strategies, it's easy to have the things we love and value around us without crowding us out of our space.**

1. Assess the Value you Place on Possessions

If something you own doesn't pass the "Do you love it?" test, then where does it stand in your value spectrum? Why are you keeping it? **When we explore our attachment to things, we are able make decisions that complement our intentions.**

Valuing your Book Collections

If you are an avid reader and your collection overwhelms your space (but you couldn't think of parting with even one title), think about how you refer to your books and rate them accordingly:

- Which books are your favorites?
- Are there books that you routinely reference?
- Do you own rare books or special collections?
- What books represent your past?

As you begin to identify your collection in this manner, you will find that some books more than others will resonate with you. Those that fall on the lower end of the value spectrum will be those you consider moving out. **If you tend to collect books to read "someday," make sure you have the space to accommodate them. If not, rate these titles according to your high-value categories, and limit what you bring into your space.** Track titles of interest in a notebook or on a computer-based list for future reference.

Valuing your Memorabilia and Other Collections

Almost all of us hold dear certain family mementos and special tokens of the past. There are times, however, in which our collections of memorabilia, acquired by ones' self or bequeathed by family, interfere with our ability to function in our space. **Our best decisions about how to deal with these items will come from an honest assessment of their value to us.** Again, think about how you refer to these items and rate them accordingly:

- What items do you cherish and make you feel good when you see them?
- Are there things you've been given that you just don't like?

- What pieces are perhaps beyond your current ability to repair or maintain?
- What collections are of more interest to other family members than to you?

Family heirlooms and items from our past are especially difficult things for people to decide about. Surprisingly, these items don't need to have high market values for us to hold strong attachments to them. **Many of us feel obligated to keep physical reminders of a loved one or a cherished occasion, yet in doing so we carry an emotional burden.**

When we recognize that the value we attach is not in the item but in our memories of the person or experience, we free ourselves of the obligation to the item, and feel better equipped to honor the memories in our heart. Also, as we reflect on our personal goals in this process, such as the need to create more functional space, our decision about how to treat the item is promptly validated.

2. Create Space for Collections and Use it Consistently

Create Space for Books

To reign in an overflowing book collection, and allow for long-term maintenance, **designate specific areas** where books will be stored, based on users and room function. **Note how much storage space you have available and work within these constraints.**

Re-evaluate locations for book storage, based on where you use them (office, den, bedroom, living room), keeping actively referenced books centrally located for easy access.

- Remove books as necessary to keep from overcrowding or maxing out shelves; leave at least 15% open space for future storage needs; (Bag or box selected items for donation.)
- Support designated reading areas with adequate shelving, bins or baskets to contain books where they tend to accumulate;
- Refrain from purchasing additional shelving if your collection of books overwhelms your space. Instead, reconsider your collection based on assigned value and project goals.

Create Space for Memorabilia and Collections

Just as we do for our tools and sports equipment, designate special storage areas for keepsake items or valued memorabilia and use it consistently. **Even if there is minimal effort made to organize the space, you will know what is stored there.**

- Display your collections by devoting a special section of a room, wall or display area for viewing, and keep only selected items in this space;
- Designate one or more storage spaces to house the remaining collection and be sure the location is accessible for easy rotation of display items.

- Inventory the entire collection for a comprehensive assessment of what you own.
 - This action helps you two-fold: **avoids the overwhelming need for visual cues** in your space (keeping everything out so as to remember what you have), and **offers you a comprehensive list of items for reference**, important in the event of loss or damage. Be sure to take digital photos as you compile the list.

3. Honor Your Value Decisions

In my experience with people and their things, I sometimes notice a disparity between the expressed value of items and level of care given to it. Do you really value something that is allowed to collect dust, grow mildew, sit in pet hair (or worse) or bend and crumple under the weight of other things? ***If so, show it!***

Follow through on your decision to keep something of value by honoring the item in a manner equal to its value. This level of care reinforces its meaning for you and you will feel better for having done it.

Honor your Books

- Use shelves appropriate to the size of books and use bookends or upright periodical files to protect loose-bound pieces;
- Avoid direct exposure to sunlight and dust or vacuum spines occasionally;
- Categorize your collection by genre or by author, labeling shelves for easy reference with decorative label plates (can be used on built-ins or standing shelves);
- Share your favorites with friends or family members;
- Store overflow books (worth keeping) in labeled storage boxes in a designated space and consider rotating your collection periodically.

Honor your Memorabilia and Collections

- Display items using clear acrylic cases or drawers to protect from dust and damage;
- Protect documents in acid-free archival sleeves to reduce exposure to light and moisture;
- Store papers and small items in archival document boxes, portfolios, memory books or keepsake containers;
- Label stored items for easy reference and retrieval.

Featured Organizing Resources

From time to time, Clearing House Organizing News will share websites or other online sources of information related to our featured topic. Visit the following links for alternative book donation sources and businesses that specialize in collectibles. Get motivated to reduce your collections, or to assess and maintain what you own.

Books (Donations):

- ✓ Books for America, Washington, DC – www.booksforamerica.org
- ✓ Friends of the Library, Montgomery County, MD – www.folmc.org
- ✓ Diana's Books, Fairfax VA – www.dianasbooks.org
- ✓ Yesterday's Rose, Fairfax VA – www.hometown.aol.com/yrosethrift

Memorabilia and Collectibles:

- ✓ Sloans & Kenyon Auction House, Bethesda, MD – www.sloansandkenyon.com
- ✓ Weschler's Auction House, Washington, DC – www.weschlers.com
- ✓ Container Store, various locations – www.containerstore.com
- ✓ Bags Unlimited (archival storage) – www.bagsunlimited.com

Next Issue: Managing Your Email and To-Do Lists

Best Wishes,

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