

# East Valley Tribune

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Scottsdale, Arizona  
Friday, December 27, 2002

## EAST VALLEY LIVING

### **Clutter pros say: Use it or lose it**

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TRIBUNE

There comes a time in every man's life when he must look deep and ask himself difficult questions:

Why do I have 20 screwdrivers?

Will I ever wear the T-shirt commemorating the Earth Day marathon I signed up for in 1979?  
Where do we keep the light bulbs?

Is that the October power bill lying unpaid under that stack of old Entertainment Weeklies? (And then that sinking feeling: "Please, God, let it not be the power bill.")

Why am I keeping old Entertainment Weeklies?

Did I pay the November power bill?

His existence is full of clutter. And, thus, so is his mind.

"We're a world of people that like to live in abundance," said Deb McIntosh, an Ahwatukee Foothills-based professional organizer. "People have so much stuff, but half of it doesn't make them feel good, it doesn't make them happy. It's just our times of everyone wanting to have more."

You're about to get more, thanks to the holiday season. If it's anything like years past, you can expect items you didn't ask for, don't really need and are afraid to get rid of. To add to the stuff you already had that you didn't ask for, don't really need and are afraid to get rid of.

"People don't have a good idea of what's of value to them," McIntosh said.

### WHY WE KEEP THINGS

"We run across clients 17, 18 years into their marriage that still have boxed wedding gifts," said Kevin Hall of Clutter No More, a professional organizing company working in Scottsdale and California. (You registered for that fondue set, you keep it.)

They don't want to offend the person who gave them the gift by giving it away, Hall said. Or they don't remember who gave it to them, so they're afraid to try to pass it off to someone else.

McIntosh said she works with many elderly people who lived through the Depression, "when you didn't get rid of anything," and as a result hold onto every purchase with a white-knuckled grip. But times have changed, and their houses are crammed full of decades' worth of flotsam and jetsam.

People also feel guilty for letting go, McIntosh said. Maybe they feel they're dishonoring that person's memory. How can you not want to keep grandma's doilies and tchotchkes?

"It can be hard because you get that in your head from a long time ago," McIntosh said. But the fact remains: You don't need it. You don't use it.

A ratty old blanket made by your grandmother is still a ratty old blanket. If the memory of that blanket was so precious to your parents, they would still have it themselves instead of passing it on to you. Instead, they usually pass it on to the oldest daughter, "who has to deal with the onus of these 'treasures,' " Hall said.

"Just because you let go of something doesn't mean it wasn't important to you, but you have to set limits," McIntosh said. "You only have so much space."

#### THE URGE STRIKES

And then one day, something changes the family dynamic, Hall said. A death in the family, or a new baby arrives or a onetime baby heads off to college. Suddenly there's an awareness that there's an unwelcome house guest. Its name is Clutter, and it couldn't be more annoying if it sat in its underwear in the living room all day, drinking beer and finishing off the last of the potato chips.

Clutter is "going to cost you in time and space and energy," Hall said.

Professional organizers motivate their clients to make methodical, analytical choices about what stays and what goes, without the baggage that friends or relatives can inspire.

"There are no emotions involved; my only connection is to help them," McIntosh said.

logical locations for the things you keep; Containerize so things are easy to open and access; and Equalize (more on that later).

Break seemingly Herculean tasks down into manageable bites. Instead of organizing an entire room, first organize the closet, then organize the dresser drawers, and finally organize the top of the dresser.

Have containers or bins for sorting the "keeps" from the "throws." McIntosh said piles of items can devolve into messy, intermingling heaps that can be overwhelming.

"Sometime it looks worse before it looks better, because you're tearing apart the room," she said.

Stay focused on only one place or one thing. If you find a spatula in the bedroom, don't take it to the kitchen; it's too easy to be distracted. Put the spatula near the bedroom door and keep working.

Be relentless. Ask yourself: Do I need this? Why am I keeping this?

#### CLEANING OUT MY CLOSET

"Most people have way too many clothes," said wardrobe consultant Jan Arnold. "It's easy to have too many choices. You have to decide: How much time and effort do you really want to spend getting dressed every day? "

When it comes time to decide what stays and what goes, the questions are: How does it look? How does it fit? How do you feel in it?

"Leave only the things in your closet that you feel good in," Arnold said. Box up the others and "take it right out to your car. Get it out of your house."

Clothing that belonged to a special person, or other garments that people don't want to get rid of

but aren't going to wear, should be removed from the closet and placed somewhere else, she said.

What about the lose-15-more-pounds-and-I'll-fit-into-it wardrobe?

"Maybe keep one piece of clothing — only one! — that they would love to fit back into and wear again," Arnold said. "That can be a motivator. But it's demotivating — almost depressing — to have a closet full of clothes and nothing to wear."

#### THERE IS NO END

Clearing clutter "is a process, not an event," Hall said. "You get to the point you're organized because you're staying on top of things. It's called maintenance." Or, in the acronym mentioned above, Equalization. McIntosh prefers the term "Establishing a system."

"You say, OK, my room's organized, everything's in a place, this is what I'm going to do now to maintain it," she said.

That means not opening your mail while you walk from the mailbox, but sitting in one designated spot with a garbage can by your side to discard inserts, flyers and the original envelopes right away

. It means explaining the goals to other people in the house, so kids just don't think mom's just being naggy.

It is, in essence, editing your life — discarding what you don't want so you can put together what's left.

"It is an ongoing process," McIntosh said. "We're always getting stuff in. If you want to keep the balance, you have to let go of things as you go."

It is learning to hold on as you let go. Hold on. Let go. Hold on. Let go.

#### NO SHORTCUTS

The first step to decluttering, whether working alone or with a professional, is a game plan.

"People need to be realistic," McIntosh said. You will not clear a garage of all extraneous matter in one day. You might not even be able to clear a closet.