



## Organizational Expert: Lower Your Stress By Decreasing The Mess

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DURHAM, N.H. -- For many, a new year ushers in opportunities for fresh starts. For those hampered by last year's (or the last decade's) household clutter, decreasing the mess also can reduce stress, according to organizational expert Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, a health psychologist at the University of New Hampshire.

"There is a connection between mess and stress. Life is substantially more stressful when chaos reigns. You end up taking longer to do the same amount of work," Kendall-Tackett says. "When your home is well ordered, people and things get to where they need to be, tasks get done, and family life is cherished. Organization allows you to have a life."

While in school, Kendall-Tackett cleaned houses, sold kitchen supplies and worked as a home health aide -- jobs that gave her license to open drawers, root around in cupboards and look under sinks. "The suggestions I offer come from the real world and my own attempts to streamline my work at home," she says. She is the author or editor of 15 books including "The Well-Ordered Home," and "The Well-Ordered Office."

Why is it so difficult to be organized? According to Kendall-Tackett, our lives are quite different than they were a generation ago. People simply have more to deal with.

"The amount of paper that comes into our lives every day is staggering: families now handle six times more than families in the 1950s. On an average day, a person handles about 300 sheets of paper. That's 660 pounds of paper a year," Kendall-Tackett says.

"In addition, Americans have the longest workweek of any industrialized nation. With limited time at home, we are often forced to choose between time taking care of families and sorting household debris. Household debris usually loses," she says.

Finally, the size of American houses has increased. In the 1950s, the average home was 900 square feet. In contrast, the average new home is more than twice that size; some are even larger. "While more space can be a plus, it's also tempting to fill all that lovely space with more stuff," she says.

Kendall-Tackett offers the following tips for getting organized.

### **Step 1: Have What You Need**

Not having what you need will slow you down and waste your time.

- **General Household Cleaning Supplies:** Each room should have a trashcan, and each floor should have a duster and spray cleaner. Keep vacuums near where you need them. For rooms with specialized light fixtures (e.g., bathroom, dining area), keep a light bulb supply nearby so they can be replaced immediately
- **Bathroom Supplies:** Keep a caddy of cleaning supplies in each bathroom -- paper towels and rags; cleanser for the toilet, sink and shower; glass cleaner and squeegees; a toilet brush and plunger. Keep extra toilet paper handy.
- **Office Supplies:** Keep a small stash of office supplies (stamps, return-address labels, envelopes) where mail is sorted so mail responses can be sent immediately.

## **Step 2: Use Active Storage**

Keep things that you use most often in the most accessible places. Infrequently used items go in the front, on low shelves, and in the middle. Items used less often go toward the back, up high, and even in a different area of your home.

- **Kitchen:** Keep cutting boards, knives and colanders near the prep area. Keep your soap, dishrags, and drying rack near the sink. Keep your pots and pans, potholders, and stirring spoons near the stove. Store infrequently used items elsewhere.
- **Closet:** Clothing that currently fits and is appropriate for the season goes in the middle of the closet and in drawers. Everything else goes to the sides or back. If closet space is tight, move seasonal clothing, outfits for special occasions and clothing that doesn't fit out of this space.

## **Step 3: Get Rid of Clutter**

"Clutter is perhaps the single largest impediment to becoming more organized. Unfortunately, clutter dramatically increases the time you spend in any task," she says.

But what should you get rid of? Before chucking items, consider the following:

- If you put it in a handier place, would you use it?
- Are you missing something you need in order to use it? Can you get what you need?
- Is it obsolete for you? If so, could someone else use it?

"Going through what you own can be wonderfully freeing. If you notice that you have made some unwise purchases (and we all have), become aware of that, resolve to do better next time, and then *let it go*. You'll save time and be able to share some of your abundance with others," Kendall-Tackett says.

When just beginning to organize, Kendall-Tackett suggests selecting an area of the house that is used every day. "If you organize your kitchen or bedroom instead of the attic or garage, the impact will be immediate and you will know right away that you are making progress," she says.

She also said novice organizers should give themselves a break. "We often believe that we 'should know' how to do things the first time we attempt them. Rubbish! Make mistakes and learn from them. Give yourself room to experiment. Be flexible and adapt as you go," she says.