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**Declutter Your Life — Now!**

**Where on Earth to begin? Professional organizer Barbara Reich knows the answer**

by Jancee Dunn, [AARP The Magazine](http://www.aarp.org/magazine/), August/September 2014|Comments: 17



"Clutter is stress: It nags at you, drags you down psychologically, slows you down physically" — Chris Crisman

Barbara Reich's [decluttering](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/your-home/info-2014/declutter-organize-your-home.html?intcmp=AE-HF-IL) sessions typically follow a certain trajectory. First, the New York–based professional organizer peppers her client with questions. How do you use this room? Which area makes you craziest? Then, she takes a deep breath and tunnels into the decades' worth of clutter, whisking ancient phone bills and mystery kitchen gadgets into trash bag after trash bag. Her clients, who range from harried mothers to CEOs, may grumble at first. As the clutter recedes, though, they usually give in.

But not always. When clients keep on grumbling, she asks about their lives — work, illnesses, significant events — until she hits on a convincing reason for them to toss the clutter. "In each case," says Reich, whose services are sometimes given as a gift from adult children to [pack rat](https://community.aarp.org/t5/Singles-Perspective-Revisited/Are-You-a-quot-Pack-Rat-quot/m-p/1396212/?intcmp=AE-HF-IL-COMM" \t "_blank) parents, "my job is to find a motivator."

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**Guide to Organizing Your Home**

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* [5 steps to getting rid of everything](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/your-home/info-2014/declutter-sell-items-online.html?intcmp=AE-HF-RELBOX)
* [How to know if you have a hoarding problem](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/your-home/info-2014/compulsive-hoarding-pack-rat.html?intcmp=AE-HF-RELBOX)
* [Photos: 9 nasty things to throw away today](http://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-04-2013/9-nasty-things-to-throw-away-photos.html?intcmp=AE-HF-RELBOX)

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Her nuclear option? "Imagine the future," she tells the client. "You are gone, and your children are dealing with the enormous mess you left behind. How does that make you feel?"

That usually does the trick.

Reich has just used this tactic on her latest client, a genial widower in his 70s named Fred. "You're right," he concedes, as they survey the chaotic home office of his apartment. "My kids are the ones who are going to have to throw everything out. My son-in-law, everyone, is after me to clean up. It's overwhelming."

That's where Reich comes in. A trim brunette in jeans, boots and a black sweater, she plants her hands on her hips and looks around with narrowed eyes. Piles of paper teeter on a desk. Old magazines spill from bookshelves. A dozen boxes claim most of the floor space. "OK," she announces. "We've got work to do."

Reich, 46, a self-described type A personality powered by six to eight daily cups of green tea, has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania and an MBA in management from NYU. A lifelong neatnik, she had already launched a consulting firm when, in 2004, she found herself rearranging the toys on her children's playdates. It occurred to her: Why not transform her neurosis into a business? (It's a growing one, too: The National Association of Professional Organizers now has 4,000 members.)

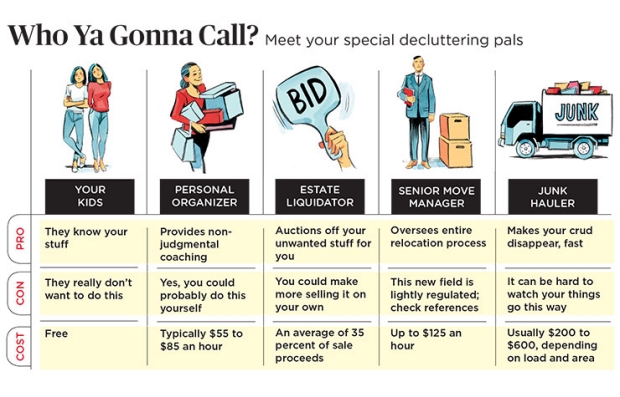
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Reich has since served about 300 clients through her firm, Resourceful Consultants; she's booked for appointments a month in advance. For most clutterers, 10 two- to three-hour sessions do the trick; some clients ask for occasional tune-ups. (A few have a standing weekly date.)

She doesn't work with [compulsive hoarders](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/your-home/info-2014/compulsive-hoarding-pack-rat.html?intcmp=AE-HF-IL), whose homes can fill from floor to ceiling with trash. Such people have a complex disorder best treated with cognitive behavioral therapy, medication or a combination of both. "True hoarding is more about anxiety," she says. "Just thinking about throwing something out creates so much anxiety that the person keeps it to avoid that feeling." Some specialists say there is a biological basis to hoarding disorder, and Reich believes it: "If you think of the animal kingdom, many species need to hoard to survive the winter."



— Kagan McLeod

The organizer, who rattles off rapid-fire tips as she works, is blunt but also a born nurturer; she softens her advice with kindness and humor. When Fred tells her that the hardest part is getting started, she nods sympathetically. "Oh, I hear that from everybody," she says, patting his arm.

Fred, a retired menswear executive, is still doubtful. "And do I want to spend my remaining golden years going through old papers?" he laments. "I'd rather go to a movie!"

"Here's the thing," Reich says. "It takes 20 to 30 hours to organize a house. If you think you're going to spend five minutes here and there, it will be undone in a minute." Instead, put a few hours on your calendar, she says, and honor the commitment the way you would a doctor's appointment. Then, play some music, enlist a friend to help, pour some wine — whatever works so you get cracking. Sort things into three piles — keep, toss and donate — and tackle what makes you most bonkers first. "After that," Reich says, "your anxiety level will drop exponentially and it's amazing [how motivated you are](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/info-2014/caregiving-exercise-fitness-health.html?intcmp=AE-HF-IL) to keep going."

**Organizing Tools**

**1. Label Maker:**  
When you label a drawer, you're not only telling yourself what goes in there. You're telling your entire family.

**2. Trash Bags**  
Use these to collect items you'll donate or discard. Then, make sure all the bags leave your house.

**3. Nice Boxes**  
Store items you use often or want to keep in attractive boxes that can be stacked, labeled and displayed.

**4. File Folders**  
Keep your file categories broad. If you have too many narrow categories, filing becomes burdensome.

She turns to Fred. "Once you've done the purge and get the infrastructure like file folders in place, it literally takes three minutes a day to keep it up. And then you can go to the movies." She picks up a box and starts digging through it. "I'm guessing that 80 percent of this is garbage," she says.

Fred nods. "Ninety," he says. "I hate to tell you, but I've had a storage unit for 10 years, and it's cost me thousands of dollars! I don't even know what's in there."

Reich feigns horror. "Look, no one ever wants what's in their storage unit. And if you get rid of it, think of the [money you'll save](http://www.aarp.org/money/investing/?intcmp=AE-HF-IL)." She starts tossing out old bank statements ("Get them online") and catalogs. "If you have time, unsubscribe from these," she says. "Catalogs are lose-lose. They're bad for the environment, take up space and encourage you to buy things you don't need."

To Reich, clutter is not merely piles of junk. [Clutter is stress](http://www.aarp.org/health/brain-health/info-2006/manage_stress.html?intcmp=AE-HF-IL): It nags at you, drags you down psychologically, slows you down physically. People tend to hang on to their stuff for a few different reasons, she says. Some clutterers suffered a major loss early in life. For them, accumulating stuff that no one can take away can be a source of comfort. Other clutterers grew up with a parent who didn't save anything (so the person overcompensates) or a parent who saved everything (so there was no model for purging). Still others hold on to things as a way of preserving memories they fear they'll lose otherwise.

Reich understands the comfort and security that stuff can provide, but when it piles up, that feeling of safety quickly turns into oppression. She maintains that the things you own should be beautiful, useful or well loved. Reich has clients ask themselves these questions: Have I used or worn it in the past year? If the answer is no, out it goes. Is it justifying the space it's taking up in my house? No? Goodbye.

Sometimes clients tell her she is wasteful when she advises them to toss still-usable things. Au contraire, says Reich. After the 20- to 30-hour megapurge, she urges people to live much more simply and stop being haunted by what-ifs. ("What if my two blenders break and I need this third one?") "Our closets are overflowing because we have this lurking fear that we're going to run out of toilet paper," she says. "You do not live in Antarctica. You can always replenish when supplies run low." Her credo: Own fewer possessions, and use them until they wear out. "You need only two sets of sheets per bed," she says, "one to use and one to wash."

She picks up a cracked box that once held a computer. "Many men, including my husband, like to save boxes, saying, 'What if we need to send it back?' "

"But I might have to send it back!" Fred interjects.

She chucks the box in the trash. "If something breaks, get a box and put some Styrofoam in it. One box!" Fred shrugs his shoulders and laughs. She moves on to a container stuffed with ancient manuals. "You almost never refer to a manual," she says, midtoss, "and there's almost nothing you can't get online."

As Fred steps gingerly out of the way, Reich grabs a stack of files and scribbles categories on the labels: medical, insurance, tax receipts. People like to make a separate file for every single thing, she says, but documents are more likely to get filed if you're not hunting for micro-categories, so the "car" file can include insurance, maintenance and expense records.

Next, Reich zeroes in on a horror she finds in almost every home: a plastic bin crammed with wires. No one ever knows what the electric cords and chargers in this box are for, she says, "but everybody is very afraid to throw it away." Get over that fear, Reich advises: "If you really need to buy another cord, you can go to Radio Shack. Cords are replaceable, but not your grandmother's vintage beaded purse."

And about that purse: Reich says that of all the items we hoard, sentimental ones are the most difficult to pitch, because along with all that sentiment comes a large dollop of guilt. But if you don't truly love the silver service your great-aunt gave you, you should donate it, or sell it on eBay. You're not living her life, and she would be unhappy that the tea set has become an albatross. "It doesn't mean you love your great-aunt any less," Reich points out. Nor do you love your [grown kids](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-04-2013/parenting-adult-children-family-relationships.html?intcmp=AE-HF-IL) less if you decline to keep storing their childhood artifacts. "It's their stuff, their responsibility," she declares. "You should not have other people's memorabilia."

Fred lugs over a box of photos. "What about pictures?" he says with a sigh. "I've got so many."

She rifles through them. "I really encourage people to sort them, and then arrange them in a meaningful way. Put them together with a narrative in a nice album, or burn them onto a DVD. To make sure a memory is preserved, treat it as preservable."

Two hours later, Fred's desk is half cleared, four boxes are bound for the closet, and a trash bag is stuffed. He is grinning like a kid. "I feel lighter already," he says.

The following week, Reich meets me at the apartment she shares with husband Jeffrey, a real estate lawyer, and their 14-year-old twins, Rebecca and Matthew, to show me her rules in action. Her homey abode, done in soothing shades of cream and sand, is — no surprise here — immaculate. ("In her desk drawer," says Reich's close friend Karen Goodman, "I once moved some of the pens into the pencil section just to mess with her.")

There are acres of space on her granite kitchen counters. "I'm amazed at the amount of duplication in kitchens, like four spatulas and 12 wooden spoons," says Reich with a laugh. "I tell clients, 'Pick two. You don't need 12.' "

She's not a fan of little-used, space-hogging specialty gadgets either. She recently urged her mother to toss a fondue maker that hadn't been used in years. When her mother argued that it was expensive, Reich invoked the rule of sunk cost, the first thing she learned in business school. "What you paid for an item has absolutely no bearing on whether it has a place in your life," she says. "Think only about whether you like having it around."

Trailed by her Havanese dog, Charly, Reich opens up her pantry, a wonderland of minimalism. "You don't live in a 12,000-foot big-box store, so you don't need to re-create its inventory on your shelves," she says. "Three boxes of cereal are fine, not a dozen." She purges her fridge weekly but recommends, for less exacting folk, monthly at least.

Reich heads downstairs to her bedroom and flings open the doors of her husband's closet. All is pristine, except a yellow promotional bag that she snatches ("What the hell is this?") and stuffs in the trash. "Jeffrey's very organized and has even learned to fold according to my specifications," she says, chuckling. "I could never have dated someone messy."

Jeffrey confirms that marriage to Barbara took his tidiness to the next level. "After hearing her mantra — 'Everything has a place and everything in its place' — a thousand times, I finally got with the program," he says.

**Reich's Rules of Organizing**

**Do the most distasteful task first.** Tackle your "hot spot," the place that drives you the most crazy, before you try to clear out anyplace else. Your angst will diminish, and you'll be much more motivated to continue.

**Stick to routines.** Do things the same way every time: Put your purse in one place, your keys in one place. When you need them, there they'll be.

**Store like with like.** Having multiple storage locations for supplies such as lightbulbs breeds a chaotic environment.

**Get it off the floor.** The floor is not a storage option. Boxes that reside there permanently create visual clutter. Stow belongings behind cabinet doors to make a room more serene.

**Make a decision and act on it.** When decluttering, don't look at something, ponder it and put it in a stack for later. If you hate that lamp, why would you put it in your closet? You hate it, so get rid of it!

Reich's closet is minimalist, housing just a core collection of garments. Many of her clients have clothes in multiple sizes, "just in case." "People will say, 'What if I lose 20 pounds?' " she says, exasperated. "If you [lose 20 pounds](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/your-home/info-2014/declutter-tips-for-home.html?intcmp=AE-HF-IL), you're entitled to some new clothes!" She recalls one client who kept a wardrobe from 30 years before, when she'd been three sizes smaller. "Your closet should reflect who you are now," she says firmly.

But she acknowledges that it was painful for the woman to face the fact that she would never wear her college clothes again. Some things that we hold on to are more than just objects. They represent possibility, and the promise of transformation. It can be tough to say goodbye to the person you thought you might become — a fitness enthusiast, an expert painter, a gourmet cook.

"If you were really passionate about it, you would have done it by now," Reich says with a shrug. "Think about the life you actually lead, not the imaginary life you'll live in the future. Would you like to bake a lot, or do you bake a lot?" If a decade has passed and that cake-decorating set sits reproachfully in the box unopened, give it to someone who will use it.

Reich has prized order since she was a child. At summer camp in Florida, she loved laundry day for two reasons: because she could help precision-fold, and because at the end of the day, all her clothes were gloriously clean at the same time. When she [gets rid of old junk](http://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-04-2013/9-nasty-things-to-throw-away-photos.html?intcmp=AE-HF-IL), be it hers or someone else's, she feels weightless and free. "It's remarkable how much our clutter holds us back," she says, "and amazing how much freedom and confidence we achieve when we confront and eliminate it."Reich ends her house tour at her teenage daughter's gleaming, orderly bathroom. There, she reveals a dark secret. "See, it looks nice, until you do this," she says, opening a drawer crammed to bursting with cosmetics. "Anything she touches is a mess! Makeup everywhere. Can't she keep the lip gloss separate?" She opens another drawer to an explosion of hair products, and then slams it shut. "I can't look," she mutters.

Somehow it's a comfort that even a professional organizer has a job she can't quite conquer. Reich says perfection is not the goal here, anyway. "Your home shouldn't turn into a catalog spread overnight," she says. But if it's well organized, you will be calmer, healthier, happier. "Life will throw you enough messes," Reich says, scooping up Charly. "You definitely don't need to come home to one."