

10 STEPS TO ORGANIZE YOUR LIFE—Kathy Helou

Psychological studies show that people are more productive when working in an organized environment. That's great news for the neat freaks, but what about organizationally deficient folks? Are they destined to wallow in their debilitating clutter for eternity? Of course not! With a little effort, anyone can learn organizational skills and reap the benefits of an orderly life. If your mess has bested you, give this 10-step program a shot.

1. **Fix the leak.** It doesn't do any good to repair a water-damaged ceiling until after the leak in the roof is fixed. Likewise, you will make no progress in organizing your life if you continue to practice disorderly habits. Examine your lifestyle and determine where the bulk of the mess is coming from, then make a conscious effort to break those habits. Set some guidelines for yourself and your family. "No new messes!" Being the primary rule. The first step in changing messy ways is to stop contributing to the problem.
2. **Assess the mess.** Take a look around and decide what areas of your home or office need your attention. Maybe just one or two rooms have started to clutter, or maybe every square inch of your property is packed and piled with possessions. Whatever the case, begin with a good look-see.
3. **Do the daily dozen.** I know the thought of sorting through those closets and corners makes you shudder, so don't overwhelm yourself by trying to tackle the job all at once. The hit-and-run approach works much better. Set aside twelve minutes a day to do something simple like cleaning up your medicine cabinet or organizing your lawn and gardening tools in the garage. When your daily dozen is up, walk away. It may not seem like you are accomplishing much, but like running water wears away at a rock, after a few weeks, you will begin to see the effects of your efforts.
4. **Localize.** If you are disorganized, chances are your mess has crept through your entire house, with pieces and projects all mixed together in a jumble. Don't despair! It's fixable. Start by localizing your messes. Choose a place for each "category" of mess. Paperwork should go by the filing cabinet, tools in the garage, music and videos with the entertainment center. Don't worry about organizing them yet; just stash them in a box, basket, or plastic tub in the general vicinity of their final destination. Think of it as a giant puzzle. If you put all the pieces of one section in the same place, the final assembly is faster and easier.
5. **Reduce, recycle, resale.** Admit it! You don't even use the stuff you're hoarding in that basement storage room, and half the clothes in your closet don't fit you anymore. And when was the last time you listened to the music cassettes you purchased in 1983? As you begin to sort and localize your mess, find a giant box and write "garage sale" on the side. As you uncover something you can live without, stash it in the box. Recycle old papers, magazines and plastics, and make weekly donations to a charitable resale shop.
6. **Choose a corner.** Pick one area or room and concentrate your twelve-minute organizational spurts on that place until it is finished. Those jam-packed dresser drawers might be your first focus. Or maybe the cupboard below the bathroom sink demands top priority. If your whole house is in chaos, make a project list, placing high-priority jobs at the top. As you clean and organize each area, cross a line off the list and pat yourself on the back for a job well done. Seeing the list dwindle will keep you motivated!
7. **Categorize.** When organizing, it's often easiest to remove everything from its container or cupboard and sift through all the pieces that need to fit into the space. Sort through and separate your stuff into categories. If you're tackling the bedroom closet, maybe you want work clothes in one section, formal outfits clustered together and casual digs in a separate cubby. Once your clothes are categorized, you can see how much space you will need for each grouping.
8. **Case the space.** Take a look at your closet and determine the most efficient way to store your possessions. Which items do you use the most? You'll want those in an easy-to-reach location. How much space will the items in each category take up? You'll want to choose a shelf or drawer that will accommodate them. If needed, add shelves, hooks, closet rods and other gadgets that will improve the organization of a space.
9. **Clean and replace.** Since an empty space is easy to clean, this is a good time to pull out a sponge and a vacuum. Once you've vanquished the dirt, start replacing the items on category at a time. Work at it until you've found the right mix of organization and convenience. When one area is finished, move on to the next until the work is done.
10. **Maintain.** Your house or office is organized, but it won't stay that way unless you do the upkeep. Now that you're in the habit of spending a dozen minutes a day organizing, spend that time eliminating little areas of mess or disorganization that appear. While putting bath towels in the linen closet, take an extra 30 seconds to straighten the other shelves. Is that Tupperware cupboard starting to overflow? It only takes two minutes to restack the containers in a neat and orderly fashion. Spending a few minutes each day to stay on top of the mess is much easier than reorganizing the whole house each year.

