

# Declutter Your Life—Now!

**AARP** The Magazine  
Real Possibilities



## Meet the Queen of Clean



When your house needs a purge, professional organizer **Barbara Reich** knows the answer to that most crushing question: *Where on earth to begin?* *By Jancee Dunn*

**Barbara Reich's** decluttering 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 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 parents, "my job is to find a motivator."

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.)

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 →

## HOW TO GET RID OF ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING

### GIFT IT

#### Got family heirlooms?

Consider passing them to your kids as holiday or birthday gifts, says Kelly Gill, an estate lawyer at Belcher Fitzgerald in Boston. The exception? Anything that has appreciated greatly in value while you've owned it, such as an artwork or a vintage sports car. If you give away such a treasure while you're living, the recipient will owe capital gains tax if he or she later sells it. But the capital gains clock starts over at zero when it's inherited after you're gone.

### SELL IT

**Beyond garage sales** and brick-and-mortar consignment shops lies the bustling bazaar of the Internet. But what should you sell where?

- **Electronics** Reasonably new cellphones and other electronics can bring money on sites like uSell and Gazelle. Older vintage audio equipment and retro electronics might find buyers on eBay.
- **Books** List recent hardback best-sellers at Amazon, Alibris or AbeBooks. (Old textbooks and most paperbacks, however, are probably best donated.) A store that specializes in used books can help determine the value if you have a large collection of rare volumes. "We've seen stuff that

clients ask for occasional tune-ups. (A few have a standing weekly date.)

She doesn't work with compulsive hoarders, whose homes can fill from floor to ceiling with trash. (See "Beyond Clutter," page 47.) 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."

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 to keep going."

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." 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: 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."

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is not worth anything at all, and we've seen stuff that's worth more than we can pay," says Corby Gillmore, manager of the Dawn Treader Book Shop in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

- **Clothes** Selling vintage clothing in good condition is a snap on eBay, Etsy or any of a host of online vendors such as Wiseling and Poshmark (for women) or Grailed (for men). The women's clothing consignment site Threadflip will send you prepaid shipping bags for your clothes and manage your sale; you keep 60 percent of the cash. Twice and thredUP offer free cleanout bags and pay directly for women's clothes; thredUP also accepts children's clothes.

- **Furniture** Because of the shipping expense, think local: consignment shops or antiques stores for high-value pieces, Craigslist or eBay Classifieds for the rest.



**DONATE IT**

**You know you** can donate clothes, toys and housewares to thrift stores operated by nonprofits such as Goodwill Industries and the Salvation Army. Many of these stores won't accept major appliances, mattresses or automobile parts, though, so call ahead. Better World Books has drop boxes and will provide free shipping for your donated tomes — or just donate to your local library. Old hearing aids can find new owners through recycling programs like the Starkey Hearing Foundation and Lions Clubs International. Don't forget to get an IRS tax receipt if you plan to write off charitable contributions when you file your income taxes.

**LIQUIDATE IT**

**To empty your** house of every stick of furniture, consider a liquidator. These are the pros who run estate sales. But beware: The industry is unregulated, and there is plenty of potential to be ripped off, says Julie Hall, director of the American Society of Estate Liquidators and author of *The Boomer Burden: Dealing With Your Parents' Lifetime Accumulation of Stuff*. Hall suggests inter-

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 : 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 expenses 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 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. 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, spacehogging specialty gadgets either. She recently →

**Two hours and one full trash bag later, the client grins like a kid. "I feel lighter already," he says.**



viewing several liquidators before choosing one. Ask for references, an explanation of fees (which average 35 percent) and a copy of the contract. Make sure your liquidator is insured and bonded, and check online reviews and the Better Business Bureau before you sign. And trust your gut, says Hall: "If something feels wrong, find someone else."

#### TRASH IT

**Last stop:** your local landfill. But before you rent a Dumpster, summon a junk hauler, or call for local bulk-trash pickup and drag your crud to the curb, think green, and set aside recyclables. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, about 70 percent of heavy metals in municipal landfills are from discarded electronics. Many states and cities offer free electronics recycling; Staples and Best Buy stores recycle computers, cellphones and some office equipment without charge. Best Buy will also haul away televisions and appliances when a new one is delivered. — JOE EATON



**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.

**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.

**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!

**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.

# Reich's Tools



## LABEL MAKER

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

## TRASH BAGS

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

## FILE FOLDERS

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

## NICE BOXES

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

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 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, 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. →

## Who Ya Gonna Call? Meet your special decluttering pals



	YOUR KIDS	PERSONAL ORGANIZER	ESTATE LIQUIDATOR	SENIOR MOVE MANAGER	JUNK HAULER
PRO	They know your stuff	Provides nonjudgmental coaching	Auctions off your unwanted stuff for you	Oversees entire relocation process	Makes your crud disappear, fast
CON	They really don't want to do this	Yes, you could probably do this yourself	You could make more selling it on your own	This new field is lightly regulated; check references	It can be hard to watch your things go this way
COST	Free	Typically \$55 to \$85 an hour	An average of 35 percent of sale proceeds	Up to \$125 an hour	Usually \$200 to \$600, depending on load and area

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, 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." ■

*Jancee Dunn is a Brooklyn writer.*

## Beyond Clutter

How to tell if you've got a real hoarding problem

- For many of us, decluttering can be dirty, difficult, even demoralizing. But for those who have a compulsive tendency to hoard, it is downright impossible.

Hoarding is a mental disorder marked by a psychological drive to acquire and save objects. What's the difference between a clinical case and an unreconstructed pack rat? When possessions interfere with normal daily activities, says Randy Frost, a professor of psychology at Smith College in Massachusetts and coauthor of *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. "If you can't cook on your stove, if you can't use your bathtub because it's full of stuff, then you have tipped over into a clinical hoarding pattern," he says. Other clues include money problems and family friction sparked by out-of-control clutter.

Is this your house? You might have an issue.



Hoarders also tend to overreact when asked to declutter or when others throw away their possessions.

Up to 5 percent of Americans exhibit hoarding behavior. Sufferers come from all economic classes, though there is a slight correlation with poverty. Hoarding is often accompanied by obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The average age of people who hoard is 50, says Frost, and symptoms often get more severe over time. Older people also run a higher risk of clutter-related problems

such as respiratory illness and falling.

The good news for hoarders and their family members: Treatment options exist. Cognitive behavioral therapy can be effective, and some subjects respond to medication. It can be hard to talk a hoarder into pursuing treatment, but it's important to maintain connection. "Just visiting [them at home] will have some impact," Frost explains. "It may be uncomfortable, but they will do things to try to manage their space if you visit."

— Joe Eaton

See Reich's before-and-after photograph album at [aarp.org/magazine](http://aarp.org/magazine).

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