



Outta Here!

Professional purgers' tips on getting rid of all that *stuff*. BY ARIANNE COHEN

YOU KNOW THOSE closets and drawers and cupboards that are so full, they won't quite close? It turns out they could be bad for your health: Every time you look around and feel anxious that the mess is getting out of hand, your body releases cortisol, one of the classic stress hormones, says Steven Maier, PhD, a neuroscience professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. We asked top

organizing experts to help us get a grip.

The Kitchen

PURGING Even Emeril doesn't need six spatulas and four whisks; two of each will do, so start by tossing extras. While you're at it, check expiration dates on foodstuffs and pitch anything that's past its prime. Next, tackle seldom-used appliances like cappuccino and bread makers. "Those things

don't need to live in the kitchen," says Ellen Kosloff, senior professional organizer at TaskMasters New York. "Put up a rack in the garage, or store them on a hallway closet shelf."

PREVENTION The number one rule: *Keep the counters clear.* "Counter space is only for items you use daily," says Barry Izsak, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers. "Everything

else can be stored in a cabinet or pantry."

The Household Desk

PURGING Begin by throwing away the no-brainers, including junk mail, expired coupons, brochures, and catalogs. Next, create desk zones. "Have a bill-paying zone, a stationery zone, a mail zone, and a reading zone," says Kosloff. "Keep everything you need

for each activity in neat containers."

PREVENTION Tackle your zones weekly, particularly bills and mail. For incoming papers such as children's art or tax information, keep one folder or container for each category, and at the end of the year (or month, if things really pile up fast), choose the keepers and purge the rest.

The Bookcase

PURGING Some people would consider it a sacrilege to ever get rid of a book, but if you've decided it's time to winnow, donate all books that don't meet any of these three criteria: books you love, books you read regularly, books whose content can't be found on the Internet.

PREVENTION Librarian's rules: No stacking or double shelving allowed. "Group your books into categories like fiction, nonfiction, and travel, so you can see what you have," says Chris McKenry of Get It Together LA. And good news: "Regifting is perfectly acceptable with books."

Tchotchkes

PURGING "You should own nothing that is not useful, beautiful, or loved," says Izsak. If a tchotchke can't pass this test, out it goes. **PREVENTION** When a new tchotchke comes in, Kosloff suggests immediately rejecting it if you already own something similar. Keep only the little *objets* you'll use (a vase, a pretty bowl) or that are uniquely meaningful (a handmade gift or travel memento).

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Photos

PURGING Keep the gems, toss the rest. "Throw away or delete all the blurry, unflattering, redundant, or bad shots," says Julie Morgenstern, author of *Never Check E-mail in the Morning*. This strategy is especially effective if you or your partner is a lousy photographer.

PREVENTION Don't feel compelled to label every photo. Instead, organize them into broad categories such as "Venice vacation" or "work events," and store them in a labeled photo box or digital folder. Weed out new shots as you take them or as soon as you receive prints.

The Garage

PURGING The garage is not a warehouse! Begin by attacking one shelf or corner at a time, and tossing or donating all items you no longer use. Sports equipment your kids have outgrown, the gardening tools for the yard you no longer own—out! Then arrange items by category. "Your garage should be zoned," says McKenry. "You might have a zone for car equipment and a sports zone."

PREVENTION Never pile items on the floor; buy new shelves or wall hooks as needed. Kosloff suggests keeping a large donation bin so that family members always have a place to put unused belongings.

Toiletries and Makeup

PURGING "Sort through all your half-empty bottles of shampoo, lotion, and

makeup, and toss anything you haven't used in six months," Morgenstern says. Group what's left in containers of like products (i.e., rather than having 18 kinds of makeup sitting out on the counter, put it all in one easily accessible container). Morgenstern also uses extra toiletries (unopened, of course) to make hostess baskets for overnight guests.

PREVENTION Avoid impulse purchases by buying products only to replace those you're done with.

The Clothes Closet

PURGING "Remember that 80 percent of the time, we wear only 20 percent of our clothes," says McKenry. So go through your wardrobe and jettison anything that's one of the four S's: stretched, small, smelly (ew!), or stained (sure, you could clean the stained and smelly pieces, but the idea is to let things go). Another great tip: Turn all your hangers in one direction, and for the next six months, flip the hanger (and leave it flipped) when you wear something. Donate the untouched clothes.

PREVENTION "The rule of thumb," says Izsak, "is that when something new comes in, at least one thing—preferably two—must go. And be realistic. If you're a size 10, hold on to the 8s but not the 6s." ●

Arienne Cohen is the author of Help, It's Broken! A Fix-It Bible for the Repair-Impaired (Three Rivers).