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Get Organized: 'Right-sizing' can help simplify and declutter your life

By LAURA LEIST

Downsizing is no longer relegated to the later years. People are beginning to realize the benefits of downsizing earlier on in life. Two trends that are spurring an increased interest in downsizing are:

- The need to declutter and simplify an existing home environment.
- The move to an urban condo environment, where one may be trading space and stuff for a different lifestyle experience.

I like to refer to these trends as "right-sizing."

Your approach to downsizing will depend on your stage in life and your time frame. The following lists will help. You may find that some will cross over.

Decluttering and simplifying an existing home and lifestyle

- Identify your vision or goals for the way you want to live in your home. Your goal might be to live in a house, rather than what has become essentially a storage warehouse. Or, your vision might be that you want to downsize some of your collections.
- Communicate your plan to family members and ask for their buy-in, and participation. Otherwise, you may be the only one doing the work.
- Set a realistic time frame to accomplish your project. The decision-making process always takes longer than you think.
- Ensure that the items you donate are in good, usable condition. If you wouldn't give them to a friend, think twice before donating.
- You will feel better parting with your stuff if you know it will help another family in need. Look for organizations that need your type of donation. Here are a few to help you get started, but there are many, many more:

Assistance League of Seattle -- 206-547-4680; seattle.assistanceleague.org

Domestic Abuse Women's Network (DAWN) -- 877-4657234, 425-656-4305;
www.dawnonline.org

Exodus Housing -- 253862-6808; exodushousing.org

Hopelink -- 425-869-6000; hope-link.org

Overlake Service League -- 425-451-1175; overlakeserviceleague.com

New Beginnings -- 206-522-1201, 206-783-4520; newbegin.org

The Ruby Room -- 206-439-7575; rubyroomseattle.org

The Hope Chest -- 425-204-8885; thehopechest.org

The Share House -- 206-767-5280; thesharehouse.org

- The lack of a decision leads to clutter.
- Shift your thinking from "Do I need this item?" to "Does this item need me?"
- Establish a policy: For new stuff you bring into your home, the same amount or more must leave.
- If your home contains several rooms to be downsized, concentrate on one room at a time or you run the risk of losing focus by running from one room to the next.

Moving to smaller-space urban living or an adult community

- Don't forget that you can't fit 3,500 square feet of stuff into 1,500 square feet. No matter how organized you are, it doesn't work.
- Instead of pulling your hair out after you move in because there isn't enough closet or storage space, first think about how much storage space you require. If you can't live without certain things, you will need to determine how you can modify the existing spaces to accommodate them. Or you may want to reconsider how much stuff to bring.
- Most likely the oversize couch and loveseat will need to be downsized to furniture that serves dual purposes. For example, an ottoman that doubles as a filing cabinet or coffee table or both.
- Measure the open spaces, such as the living and dining areas, and create a space plan using your existing furniture in the new location. Doesn't fit? Then don't move it. Instead, sell it in advance and use the money to purchase something that *will* fit.
- There are many free space-planning tools on the Internet; such as:

Floor Planner -- myfloorplanner.com (click on the British flag to get English)

SmartDraw -- smartdraw.com

Better Homes and Gardens -- goto.seattlepi.com/r1215

When packing for your upcoming move, pack your boxes by what will live in each new room -- rather than just boxing up existing spaces in the house you live in. This will take longer on the front end, but it will help you estimate what will fit into the new areas.

And I guarantee it will take less time when unpacking and figuring out how you want to organize your new home.

Preparing for an assisted living space or nursing home

- Recognize that this is a difficult and stressful time for the person who is downsizing, as well as the adult children. Get help if necessary to put less strain on relationships during these times. Adult children tend to pressure parents to downsize, but then they don't plan enough time for the process and how long it takes.

A professional organizer, senior move manager or family mediator can help ease the transition:

National Association of Professional Organizers -- 847375-4746; napo.net

National Association of Senior Move Managers -- nasmm.com

National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization -- 314416-2236; nsgcd.org

- Introduce this idea over time. Some people need longer to get used to the idea and mentally prepare.
- Make the decision in a time without stress or time pressure, rather than having an injury or illness force an immediate decision.
- Check into the services provided at the new home, which will help you make decisions about items to bring.
- If items in the home are being given to family members or friends, they should not be urged to take what they know they won't use or treasure. Make sure items taken will be appreciated.
- Give each family member colored stickers -- one color for each member -- and have them walk through the house and mark what they'd like to take.
- Choose an auction or estate sale over a garage sale -- you will have much more success in parting with the majority of the items if time is of the essence.
- Remember: The important thing is the memory, not the memorabilia.

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