

ASK THE ORGANIZING EXPERT

Question: What are your top three organizing tips?

That's a great question, and the New Year offered organizing tips aplenty. January headlines screamed: "Pretty Boxes and Funky Files Solve Organizing Dilemma!" or "Mudroom Makeover Guarantees Organized Life!" I dole out plenty of tips myself, but I can think of three that are absolutely essential to success; and indeed, establishing or maintaining order is nearly impossible without them. I call them my "Organizing Absolutes."

Tip 1: Choose Homes: Do you know where your keys are? The glue gun? Your ski socks? Each item in your house should have a home – a place to live. That includes every shirt, sheet of paper, thumbtack and small appliance. When things don't have homes, they become piles. Piles grow into clutter and before long - you're disorganized. Choose a home for each item based on logic, convenience, and where and how often you use it. If you're not sure where something should reside, take a moment and ask: "Where would I look for this?" Put it there. Do this in every room of the house. Labels are great for reminding the rest of the household where things live. Once you've identified homes for all your possessions, clean up will be a snap. Choosing homes is Organizing Absolute # 1.

Tip 2: Weed Constantly: Let's face it: we have too much stuff. Our closets, cupboards, attics and garages are crammed to capacity. Weeding out the excess is an essential organizing skill. And it should be done on a continual basis, ideally every time something new enters your home. (Yes – *every* time!) We have lots of excuses for holding on to our things (I might need it some day...It still works...It was a gift...), but having more stuff than space will always lead to clutter. Keep a donation box in the back of your car and toss things in it year round. Drop them off while you're running errands. Stay on top of your recycling by processing paper and packaging on a daily basis. Keep in mind that every thing that enters your house takes up space and requires care – if it's not worthy, don't let it in! Constantly weeding the unwanted, unused, and unnecessary is Organizing Absolute # 2.

Tip 3: Maintain Daily: Organizing your space is one challenge, keeping it that way is another. Knowing where things belong and purging the excess will put you ahead of the game, but daily maintenance routines are the only way to prevent a full blown clutter fest. Washing dishes, laundering clothes, emptying the car, tidying up, removing trash, processing paper and putting things away are the everyday tasks that keep your house ship shape. Get behind on these basics, and it's difficult to catch up, let alone find time for a big project like hosting a party or overhauling the garage. Squeeze these tasks in whenever you have a free moment and they'll hardly seem like chores. A daily "to do" list posted in the kitchen can keep the whole family involved. Daily maintenance is Organizing Absolute # 3.

I'm always reading organizing books and articles about the latest techniques and trendiest products. But my experience tells me there is no substitute for the Organizing Absolutes. They're not very sexy, and in fact, they're pretty boring, but they are the lifestyle habits that result in a general state of order. Your house will have messy days, and even messy, *messy* days, but with the Organizing Absolutes, you'll be able to restore it to order in no time. So, next time you find yourself with ten minutes of time, put a pile of random things away, fill a donation bag with outgrown clothes, or simply tidy up a room – you'll be on your way to an organized life!

Danielle Liu, MPA, CPO® is a board certified professional organizer. She is the owner of Totally Orderly, a professional organizing company based in West Linn. She is the President of the National Association of Professional Organizers, Oregon Chapter. She can be reached at 503.750.7111 or Danielle@totallyorderly.com. For more organizing tips, see her website at www.totallyorderly.com.