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CLUTTER busting MADE EASY

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Nothing beats getting home after a long day at work. Your home, after all, brings comfort, relaxation and a sense of belonging. But when it also brings a closet that's bursting at the seams, overstuffed kitchen cupboards and a paper-infested home office, then it's time to put on your best clutter-busting face.

Take it from an expert — in this case, Janet Barclay, a professional organizer and owner of Organized Assistant — running out to buy those stylish storage bins before you toss the excess is not a good idea. “You need to know what and how much you'll be storing before you can make a decision about what you need,” advises Janet. While dashing to your favourite department store may be your preferred first step, Janet cautions that you should first set a goal, know how you're going to tackle the task at hand and then put systems in place so that you stick with your new routine.

“Before you start any organizing, you need to figure out what you want to achieve and why you want to achieve it,” says Janet. “The why could be as simple as making things easier to find or to keep your co-worker or mate from complaining. You also need to determine what the outcome will look like. Only then will the steps to getting there start to make sense for your personal situation.”

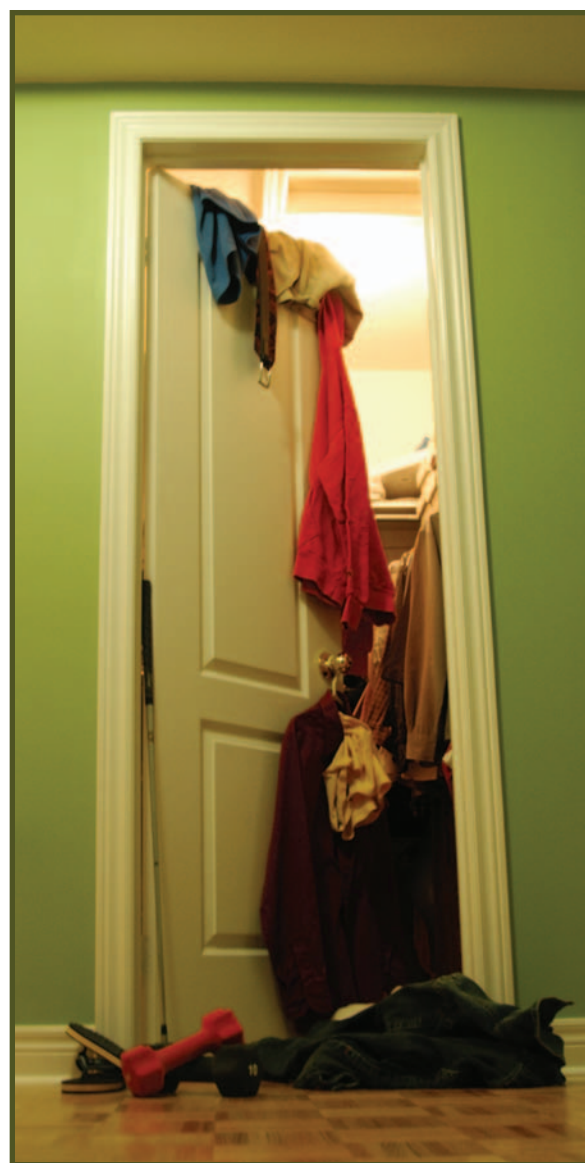
If you fall into the tons-of-clothes-with-nothing-to-wear category, then you may want to make that closet or armoire a priority. “Some things are pretty obvious when cleaning out a closet,” says Janet. “If you can't remember the last time you wore something or even know when you'll wear it again, it should be thrown out. The next step is looking at fit and if the garment is in good repair.”

You'll need to take a hard look at what you plan on keeping. “Be realistic,” she continues, “and don't kid yourself about how a garment fits now or if it will fit in the future. The same goes with getting things repaired.” While we may have sentimental attachments to some pieces or suffer from the I-spent-my-entire-pay-check-on-this syndrome, Janet says to bite the bullet. “Whether you keep it or not, the money has been spent,” she says. “If you can't use it, it's not really worth anything anymore.”

The kitchen is another area that tends to get cluttered with endless gadgets and that seemingly self-reproducing supply of plastic food savers. “With kitchen items,” advises Janet, “ask yourself if

they're worthy of your limited kitchen space.” That unused hand mixer, old and flavourless spices, and table linen you never use really do add clutter even when tucked away in a junk drawer. (Any feng shui rookie will tell you that out-of-sight clutter doesn't make for positive energy flow.)

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CLUTTER BUSTING

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"Giving things away to someone who needs it is always a good idea," she says. "Kitchen items from small appliances to tea towels are all appreciated at places like women's shelters or residences for those in need."

Organizing your home office will not only give you a more productive work environment but will keep Revenue Canada and your accountant happy. "The rule is to keep tax, accounting and financial items for seven years. Anything older than that can be discarded," explains Janet. "Of course, this rule can change at any time, so take a minute to check Revenue Canada guidelines before shredding."

As with the rest of your home, both paper and electronic files should have their designated places. "Label your paper and electronic files in the same way so that you know where to look for something and get into a consistent way of thinking about your files," she says. "You also want to avoid duplication and delete an electronic document if you're keeping the paper version. Since identity theft is so prevalent these days, make sure you're shredding paper with sensitive information."

If you haven't been diligent about backing up your files on a regular basis, now is a good time to do just that. Once your data is safe on CDs or other storage media, clean up your hard drive by removing files you won't need in 2006.

Once everything is in its place, Janet insists that the "one in, one out" rule is your best bet for maintaining your new clutter-free

life. "Resolve that if you're buying something new, then you'll toss out or give away something old," she says. "Buying a new sweater, for example, means out with an old one."

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Tackling organizing projects can be daunting. Follow these tips to cut through the clutter:

Be in the mood. Make sure you have the time and are in the right frame of mind to get the job the done.

Pile it up. Sort the clutter into four piles: Keep, Repair, Give Away and Throw Out. Be realistic about what you put into the Keep and Repair piles.

Put away. Now that you've weeded your clutter down to the essentials, invest in new hangers or storage boxes as a reward. You'll be more likely to stay organized if everything has its place.

Prioritize your keeps. Things that you use often should be clearly visible at eye level and within easy reach. Items that are seasonal or not used very often can take up that hard-to-reach cupboard or storage shelf.

One in one out. Whenever you're purchasing a new item, remember that you'll need to discard or give away an older item.

Get help. If you've decided that the best solution for you is to hire a professional, visit the Professional Organizers in Canada at organizersincanada.com for a professional in your area.