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**This Book is Complements of
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Household Organization – Getting Started

Do you shudder when you think of people coming over to visit unannounced? Do you panic when you get a message on your answering machine that family is coming—and they left 4 hours ago (and it's a 5 hour trip)? Do you try to "clean" before your cleaning lady comes? Can you not afford a cleaning lady and try to do it yourself, ending up discouraged, frustrated, and thinking it's just impossible?

The real key here is to take it a step at a time. Take it at your own pace. This IS a fight that you CAN and WILL win! You will have to commit to having less "stuff" in your home and letting go of the sacred-cows you've hung on to for all these years (but please note that these cows haven't lifted a finger to help you get organized or clean—they only collect dust and take up space!). This isn't having "Clean Sweep" come to your home and do the work for you—it's all **your** work.

Don't worry. It can all be done in a few minutes each day. Yes, you too can occupy a relatively clean environment as long as you relax and let go of "it's-got-to-be-perfect-itis".

Ready for step one? Good. We're going to de-clutter first - set a timer and put on some energizing music to get you going. Decide that you're only going to de-clutter for 15 minutes in one certain room. Then if you want to work longer, say, another round of 15 minutes, you can. But you don't have to. This helps you get motivated, even when you feel like cleaning is the last thing you'd want to tackle. Yep-psyche yourself out.

Go from room to room one day, just de-cluttering - 15 minutes in each room. Some rooms might take only five minutes - there's a good feeling! Others might take 30 minutes before you can walk through the room without tripping over something. It'll all average out.

Then on day two, go back to your first room and surface clean. Wipe off counters, sinks, flat surfaces. Then spot vacuum. If there's a stain on the kitchen floor, spot clean that baby. Day three, pick another

room. Day four, still another. If you're so motivated one day and get on a roll, surface clean two rooms.

After you've de-cluttered, we're going to take fifteen minutes a day and do some deeper cleaning in each room. You know, vacuuming thoroughly, dusting, swatting away cobwebs, etc.

Now, if you just repeat this simple schedule, you've got a house that would at least make the grade on a pass-fail system. That takes a load off your mind and alleviates stress in your family relationships.

Remember, it's better to do a little each day and get the job done, than to stress out in an embarrassingly cluttered environment because you're too overwhelmed to even start. Go ahead – set that timer!

Organizing Your Home: Let's Get Moving!

While some home-organization gurus will tell you to start in the kitchen, I'm going to advise beginning in another area. The kitchen will be the third place we attack and this doesn't make it less important, but I will explain why I'm starting elsewhere.

First, if you look around your home, you probably see lots of clothes. Am I right? You've got clothes in closets, you've got clothes in piles (meaning to put them away and not having time, eventually just pulling them out of the pile and wearing them), and you've got clothes in laundry baskets. You might even have rumpled clothes in the dryer or (heaven forbid!) the washer.

If it's the former, the clothes are only rumpled. If it's the latter, they're probably rumpled AND smelly and (potentially) mildew-y. Yuck! Somewhere in this Mt. Vesuvius of laundry, dirty, clean, or otherwise, is your home. And I'm guessing that if you have a laundry room, you keep the door closed, as there are multiple Mt. Vesuvii piling up in there.

If you don't have a laundry room but have a laundry closet (with room for the washer, dryer, and some shelves), I'm betting you haven't seen the top of your dryer for weeks or even months. It's covered in rumpled clothes and towels, right?

Have you guessed where we're starting? That's right! The laundry area of your home. And here's why: if you get your laundry room cleaned and organized, you'll be much more apt to actually DO the laundry that plagues you and helps your home to be disorganized.

And because you won't want to undo the work you've done in the laundry room, you're more likely to fold the laundry when it's done, and put it away. There's something that's a breath of fresh air about a straightened laundry room—sort of like when you walk in to a closet where everything is hanging neatly.

So start with small steps:

Can you see the floor? No? Then pick up what's on the floor and put it in laundry baskets. If you don't have enough laundry baskets to accomplish this, then just sort the things in to piles outside the laundry room. I make piles of light clothes, whites, darks, and towels/rags.

Can you see the top of the dryer? If not, put the excess clothes in the aforementioned piles. Grab one rag to dust and have two plastic grocery bags—one to collect junk, and the other for later. Dust the dryer from the lint-leftovers and use a little window-cleaner if it doesn't come off readily. Don't neglect the area where the "start" button is—that can be grimy, too!

Can you see the top of the washer? If not, repeat the steps in #2, using the window cleaner if necessary.

Okay - now you've got your washer & dryer cleaned off. Congratulations! Let's continue to take small steps in the laundry room....

Now take a critical look at your supply-shelf. Do you have empty bottles or boxes lying around from spent detergent and/or fabric softener? Clean those out. Use that grocery bag that you've put excess dryer lint in and pitch those empties. Then organize what's left.

If you need to add things to your shopping list, now is the time—now you know what you've got and what you need to buy. When you

organize your supplies, I recommend putting the detergent and any liquid softener above the (gasp!) washer. Make it easy to reach. Put the dryer sheets over the dryer—why reach more than you have to? If your shelves are higher than you'd like, use the top ledge of your washer & dryer to hold supplies!

I've never seen a washer and dryer that doesn't butt up to a wall for the electrical plugs they need. So use that space to your advantage. Put the detergent box or bottle on the top of the washer, along with whatever other washing supplementals you have. Put the dryer sheets on the top of the dryer so you don't forget and end up with a load of static cling!

If you have wire-shelves above your washer & dryer, you've got a built-in place to hang a trash bag. Use that extra grocery-sack and cut one of the handles in half. Then tie those two ends around some of the wire-shelf and use the bag to collect dryer lint and empty containers from your emptied laundry supplies. When it's full, cut it down and put it in the trash and put up a new one.

Now look at your floor. Does it need sweeping? If so, grab a broom and sweep. It won't take you more than 5 minutes and you'll feel much better about your room and your work—especially if something you've just washed falls on the floor as you're transferring stuff to the dryer.

Congratulations! You've done the preliminary work of organizing your home—you won the battle in your laundry room! Take a 15 minute break and enjoy this victory. Then start the task of doing the excess laundry that you've been collecting—one pile at a time. When the first is done, swap it out immediately to your dryer or to hangers, if that's more appropriate.

Take it one pile at a time—in other words, small steps! Soon, you'll find that it really only takes 5-10 minutes to fold warm clothes from the dryer and put them in laundry baskets, ready to transfer to the appropriate rooms, closets, and drawers. The rewards are huge here—keep up on it (one load every day) and you'll win the war against the Mt. Vesuvius of clothes in your home.

Organizing Your Home: The Family Room/Living Room

Some homes have a “great room” and no living room, others have a “family room” and a living room. No matter what you call it or how many of these rooms you have, organization is necessary to make it a welcoming haven for your family.

Walk in to this room as a visitor would. Notice the small details that you’ve overlooked in daily living. Do you see clutter? Your guests do, too. To make this room inviting, we’re going to reduce the number of *things* in this room and make it more homey.

What did you see in terms of clutter? Magazines and newspapers all over? Toys? Shoes lying around? Start with several laundry baskets (empty, please!) and put things that don’t belong in this room in the baskets. The idea is to send things to different areas of the house in these baskets and make your de-cluttering that much easier.

Throw away the newspapers and old magazines. If you’re just not going to have time to read them, get rid of them. Why have them hanging around making you feel guilty? Put toys in the basket that will get them to their owners’ rooms. Shoes should be kept in the room where their wearer lives. Now that you’ve done that (and delivered the baskets to the appropriate locations), go back and look at this room as a visitor sees it. Better? If not, keep going in small stages and steps.

If you look at your furniture, do you see fingerprints and dust deep enough to write a ransom note in? Do you even see the top of your furniture? If you can’t answer the latter question, don’t worry about the former one. Take care of the flat surfaces first—we call this The Law of Flat Surfaces. This Law is defined by the idea that flat surfaces collect papers, no matter what the surface is: tabletops, armoires, desks, or floors.

If you start with clean flat surfaces, you’ll be more likely to keep them clear—a little every day. Once your flat surfaces are clear, give them a once-over with a furniture polish (if appropriate) or glass cleaner (if appropriate). Run the vacuum — don’t worry about getting the edges and moving furniture — just vacuum the places you can get easily.

Chances are if you can't reach the areas easily, no one has been able to deposit large amounts of dirt or tracks back there, either.

Can you see your TV through the dust and fingerprints? If not, give it a once-over with the rag and some glass cleaner. Same with your stereo cabinet.

Now look up. Do you see cobwebs in the corners? Not a huge deal—grab a feather duster and knock 'em down. That's that!

You've tackled your family room and/or living room—congratulations! Keep moving along, taking baby steps every day. Soon, your home will exude the warmth and hospitality you want.

Organizing Your Home: the Master Bedroom

As we move through the house, we're going to hit the master bedroom next. I want this room to be a haven and an escape for you. You won't see your room as that if you don't like it and the decorations you have in it. Remember: small steps!

Walk in to your bedroom as you walked in to the family room and look at it critically. Is it cluttered? What's the first thing that you notice? Do whatever that is first. If it's making the bed, do it. If it's putting dirty clothes in a basket, do that. Whatever it is, get it done.

Does your bedroom fall under the Law of Flat Surfaces? If not, start by clearing off the dresser(s) and headboard. If you have papers there, look through them, pitch what needs to be pitched, and file away (as you did in the study) what needs to be filed. Once you can see the tops of the dressers and headboard, run over them quickly with your duster.

If you have lots of things on your dresser tops and top of the headboard, the next challenge is to de-clutter. You've already done the paper-aspect of this — now look critically at the other things you have. Do you have too many jewelry boxes? What about baskets that are supposed to organize things? Now is the time to determine what you absolutely love and wear all the time and what you hardly look at and almost never wear.

Pull out the things you're not crazy about and get rid of them. Give them away, throw them away, or sell them online. It doesn't matter — as long as what's left is what you truly love. If you have too many "organizing baskets," now is the time to realize that more things to hold your clutter isn't "organizing" - organizing is paring down what you have and then keeping it orderly.

Go through your baskets and determine which perfume bottles are your favorites and which ones you just don't use anymore. There's no glory in keeping 35 scents on your dresser if all they do is collect dust and make things look messy.

Let's move on to the floor. Can you walk freely in your room? If not, use the laundry-basket method and pick up the things on your floor. Deposit the items in their correct location and run the vacuum. No moving the bed or dressers—just sweep where you can easily walk.

Look at your windows—are they grimy? What about the window ledges? Grab your rag and window cleaner and give them a quick once-over. You'll be amazed at how much dust you pick up and how clean your ledges will look after that!

Keep going in the master bedroom—we're going to go inside closets and dressers next!

Walk to your closet. Whether it's a walk-in that you could camp-out in or a smaller closet that has bi-fold doors, it is supposed to organize your clothing. Do you have Fibber Magee's closet in there? If so, open it, grit your teeth, and then proceed to step over whatever just jumped out and tried to kill you.

If you have too many clothes in your closet, it's not doing you any good. If you have "fat clothes" and "skinny clothes," now is the time to be realistic and get rid of anything that you cannot wear RIGHT NOW. Don't hope for a different size in 2 months—pick out the best of what you have right now and will wear right now and keep only that.

If you're staying at home and not in the working world, get rid of your work clothes. Donate them to a women's shelter or sell them online. Do whatever you have to do to pare down the number of outfits in

your closet. When you have only what you love, you'll take better care of it.

Once you've purged your closet of things unworn and out of style, take a look at what's left. Organize that by style of clothes. In other words, put blouses with blouses, skirts with skirts, and pants with pants. Make it easy on yourself to find clothes in the morning!

Now look at your dressers. Same procedure as your closet—go through and get rid of that which you don't wear often and don't love. You'll be better able to close your drawers and keep what you have from looking rumpled! Pitch, donate, or sell—it's your choice.

Now there's just one spot left — your bedding and window treatments. Do you love how you've decorated, or does your room still sport the big orange flowers of the 1970s? When is the last time you washed your bedding and curtains?

You might find that a quick trip through the washer and dryer brings back even the dingiest of bedding. Strip everything off and cart it to the washer — hot water and bleach — all bedding is made to withstand the normal amount of bleach and not lose its coloration. Take it from the washer to the dryer and once it's dry, schlep everything back to your room.

As you make the bed and re-hang the curtains, look around. If you still don't love it, make plans to replace it. Remember — your room is to be a haven for you and a place you love to unwind and spend time.

Although all of the steps for the Master Bedroom are here, all are easily done in other bedrooms, too — don't neglect those!

Congratulations—your bedroom is done! You have a special, organized sanctuary from the stresses of life.

Organizing Your Home: The Kitchen

Arguably, the kitchen is the heart of the home. We cook there, eat there (hopefully as a family), entertain there, chat at the table, do homework, and any number of other family-related things. A

disorganized kitchen discourages us from doing the above; we don't want to cook and eating will likely then take place in front of the TV.

We don't want to entertain others or sit and chat because the clutter distracts us and makes us feel ashamed of not keeping things in better order. So let's get to it!

Please understand that this room CANNOT be done in one day or in one chunk of time. I'm willing to bet it took more than one day for your kitchen to look the way it does—so it will take more than one day to un-do it. Be patient and attack these different tasks in small chunks of time—small steps!

You'll find that as each one is done that you'll be motivated to do another and another. And then when it's all done, you'll not want to mess it up, and so be motivated to keep it organized! Oh happy day!

Unload your dishwasher. If your dishwasher is full of clean dishes and not put away, you won't have a place to put your dirty dishes as you clean up. If you don't have a dishwasher, take a look at your sink. If you've got clean dishes in your dish rack, put them away now. Then move your dish rack to the counter and put an empty dishpan under the sink. You'll see why as we keep going.

Take a look at your counter-tops. Are they piled high with papers, dishes (dirty), and appliances (some you haven't used in weeks or months)? Are they stained (underneath the stuff on them)? Let's clear off one counter-top at a time.

Pick your smallest one and clear everything off. Put it on a table or other surface where you can go through the things. Put the dirty dishes in the dishwasher (or dishpan under your sink), go through the papers (junk mail = trash can, bills go to the study, etc.).

Put the other miscellaneous things you've found in separate piles to be schlepped to the appropriate rooms where they belong. Then look at the naked counter-top. Take a cleaner of your choice (I love the Lysol disinfecting wipes, but you could use a spray cleaner, a bleach cleaner, or simple window cleaner) and a rag and start wiping from back to front.

Sweep the crumbs in to the garbage can. Now put only the things which are **necessary** back on the counter. That means no excess paperwork, no hair-bows, etc. If you need space for a coffee maker or other small appliance, you now have it!

Move to the next counter and repeat the same steps as above.

So you've survived the cleaning of your counters. Great! These next few steps will require an honest look about your kitchen and an honest appraisal of your culinary skills and commitment to cooking. Not *if* you will cook, but *how* you will (or do) cook. Remember to use small steps!

If you have a dishwasher (or dishpan under your sink) and it's now filled with dirty dishes, now is the time to get it running. Put the detergent in and set that baby to "pots & pans." It uses more water, but if your dishes have been sitting for a while, they'll need the extra strength of that cycle to get sparkling clean.

You don't have to use the dry-cycle—it eats up energy and makes your dishes too hot to handle. When the dishwasher is done, open the door and let the dishes cool **briefly** before putting them away. Do the last step quickly — if you keep the dishwasher empty when the dishes are clean, you've won a large portion of the battle to keep your kitchen organized.

If you have a dishpan that's full of dishes, move the pan up to the sink and start washing. Dry them quickly and put the dishes away—then move your dishpan to its spot under the sink for collection of future dishes.

Take a look at your kitchen appliances on the counter (or up above the cabinets). Do you have too many things that you hardly ever use, but collect dust and kitchen grease? Take an honest assessment of what you have and when you last used the item(s). If you haven't used it in a while or don't plan to use it in the near future, donate, sell, give it away, or pitch it. Take a look at the cast-iron skillet you have but haven't used in God-knows-how-long. Useful, yes. In your life? Maybe not. Be honest and be brutal. You'll end up with kitchen appliances that you love and that are useful, not clutter.

Now look at your sink. How grimy is it? Take a good steel wool soap pad and scrub that bad boy out! If you've got a porcelain sink, don't use a steel wool pad, but do use a gentle abrasive.

If you don't have a cleaner on hand to do it, sprinkle a good portion of baking soda on your sink and use a wet rag. Rub the baking soda paste (created with the water from the rag) in circles and when you've completed the whole sink, rinse the remainder down the drain.

Regardless of what type of sink you have, once you've given it a good scrub, pull out the window cleaner and a dry rag. Shine up the faucet and inside of the sink (if it's chrome). Dry it all out and your sink will shine! I dare you to put a bunch of dirty dishes in it after that! So now you have cleaned off counters, only the appliances you need and love, and a shiny sink. You are on your way! Remember — small steps get the jobs done!

Take a look at your cabinets. Are they clean? I'm not talking about the insides (yet!), but the outsides. If they have built-up grime on them, take a cleaner and rag and wipe them down. You'll be amazed at how different they look and how dirty that rag will be!

Now let's talk about the front of your large appliances. Fingerprints are fingerprints — it doesn't matter if it's on an avocado-colored refrigerator or a chrome-colored one. Take some window-cleaner and 5 minutes on each appliance and spray 'em down. Wipe them clean, and don't forget the small crevices where crumbs hide. Remember—you're not doing the insides, just the outsides! Hit the refrigerator, the stove, the dishwasher, and anything else that "fronts" in the kitchen that I might not have mentioned.

Now take a look at your kitchen table & chairs. When was the last time you washed them down? Is there food stuck to them that is of questionable origins or dates? This will probably take more than 15 minutes, but take a rag and a bottle of cleaner. Spray the chair from the bottom rungs to the seat and up to the top. Let it stand for 2 or 3 minutes and spray down the next chair. Go back to the first one and start rubbing with the rag. You'll be amazed at what comes off and how clean the chair becomes! Repeat each step until all the chairs are done. Then spray down the table legs. Same procedure—spray, let it

sit, rub and wipe. Now your chairs and table are clean enough to eat off of!

Take a gander at your floor. Dismal, huh? Start small—sweep it with a broom and dustpan. Move the things that are up against the wall, but don't feel obligated to sweep with your toothbrush. In other words, don't obsess about the crevices—do the best you can with a regular broom.

Sweep in to small piles to make pick-up easier and transport the dirt & crumbs to the trash can. Now take out a mop. I don't care if it's a rag mop, a sponge mop, or a Swiffer® mop. You don't have to mop like your mother did—just wet the floor with a cleaner and wipe up the dirt. Remember—even chores that aren't done "right" (according to how you were taught) but are *done* still bless your home and your family! Let your floor dry and take a break.

By now, the surface areas of your kitchen are clean. Just a few more steps and you're done in this room!

We're gonna get down and dirty here: under your sink! Most people keep cleaning supplies under there; some keep garbage cans, and still others, appliances. No matter what's under your sink, tackle it! If it's cleaning supplies, look and see what you've used and never used and what's just dried out and old.

Pitch what you don't use, won't use, or is old. Organize your cabinet in the way that's best suited to you—what you use the most up front, what's less-frequently used in back. If you don't have a dishwasher, remember to leave room for your empty dishpan to collect dirty dishes.

Next is your dish cabinet(s). However many of them you have, you probably don't use everything in them. Be brutally honest here: if you haven't used it recently, you probably don't need it. And I'm certain that if you offered it to someone else who was just starting out, they *could* use it. Consider looking up a Freecycle group in your area (www.freecycle.org) and joining. It's free and keeps things that still have life in them (but no use in your home) going around.

Pare down to 8-12 place settings with your dishes; serving dishes are necessary, but no one needs 7 serving dishes that are the same size. If you're cramped for space, consider how much more relaxed you'll be when you open your cabinets and can actually FIND what you're looking for! Organize your shelves in the way that best suits your family needs—it doesn't have to be perfect, just useful.

Hit your spice cabinet next. I recently went through my spice cabinet and was shocked at how much I had (duplicates!) and didn't use—and I'm a born-organized person! Pitch what you don't use or is out of date. Consolidate in to smaller bottles, if possible. Use lazy-susans if applicable to your cabinet space.

Finally, go through your appliance/baking cabinet. If you don't bake cheesecakes, why keep the springform pan? Do you have 12 cookie sheets? Three or four is as many as one family needs—even if you have two ovens, each only has 2 shelves. One sheet is on one oven shelf, so 4 would max out your ovens. Do you have broken appliances? Pitch 'em! Put what you use in front, and things used less-often towards the back, but still in reach.

Whoa hoo! Now your cabinets are organized! And by now, your entire kitchen should look as if it's had a mini-makeover! Congratulations!

Organizing Your Home: The Dining Room

An organized dining room adds extra comfort to a home. If you're like me, sometimes it's the only organized room in the house! Let's take a quick look around. Do you eat in here often or is it only for guests? If you don't use it often, you may just have some simple organizing and dusting to do.

Are there papers on your table? Is this table a collection spot for things you want out of your way and then forget about? If so, take the bite out of the Law of Flat Surfaces! Use the "laundry basket" method we talked about in the family room here: if there are things that don't belong in this room, put them in baskets and take those baskets to the appropriate rooms.

Do you have a china cabinet or other means of storing fine dishes? If so, how does the cabinet look? If it's stuffed to the gills, start by taking a hard look at what you have, how many place settings you have, and how many you need. If you want a guideline, take one from the line in "Sleepless in Seattle": "12 is too many, 8 is too few. 10 is just right." How many creamers, sugar bowls, and teacups do you have? Are they collecting dust and never getting used?

Pare down and give them a quick dusting with your duster. When you open the doors to your cabinet, do you grit your teeth and wonder what's going to jump out and kill itself at your feet? Consider giving your surplus to a newly-married couple that can use it, or donate it to a women's shelter or other worthy charity. Dust down (or use furniture polish — whatever is applicable here) the front of your cabinet.

What about your lighting source? Dusty? Grab your duster—hit the table, the chairs (rungs and bottom of the table, too!), and the lighting source. You don't have to take it down and scrub it clean—just dust it, and if necessary, shake the dead bugs from it.

As the final step, run the vacuum in here—not the edges, just the "middles" where you walk. Move the chairs but not the table—don't even think about pulling out the china cabinet! If there are things behind there, they're small and no one else is going to see them. <wink>

Congratulations—your dining room is done! Happily, it's often one of the easiest rooms to keep looking nice and neat!

Organizing Your Home: Bathrooms

Organizing your entire house at once is a sure prescription for insanity. Instead, you want to move steadily through your home, organizing in small steps as you go. Let's talk bathrooms. If yours looks less than inviting, we can change that...follow me!

The first things to consider are the counter-tops. Are they dirty and disorganized? First, take everything off of one area of the counter and

place it on the floor. Spray that one area with whatever you use for bathroom cleaner and wipe it down.

Put the things you took off that area back and repeat the steps with the other areas of the counter-top. Put the things that belong in drawers away, and the things that should stay on top (soap dispenser, etc.) should be wiped down. Don't neglect the sink—use something that will break up toothpaste spit & soap scum and clean that baby out!

Move on to the toilet. If you have things on the back of the toilet, take them off, put them on the floor, and clean the back of the tank. Replace the items and hit the area where the seat lifts—it's a great collector of hair and dust. Lift the lid and wipe down the actual seat—you'll be amazed at the collection of dead skin cells on it. Then clean underneath the seat as well.

Next, scrub the inside of the bowl with whatever cleaner you choose and scrub it with a long-handled toilet brush. Flush and close the lid—this part is done! Finally, use your rag and cleaner to hit the bottom of the tank where it bolts to the floor. This is a prime spot for dust and hair and is often neglected.

Next is the shower or tub. Shampoo and body wash are great things—they remove grit and oil from our bodies well. Unfortunately, the bubbles they produce tend to collect on the sides and bottoms of the shower and when they dry, it's a tough grime to clean.

Grab a good soap-scum cleaner for this job and be prepared to use some elbow grease. Spray it down and let it sit for 5 minutes. Then use a non-abrasive (i.e., non-steel-wool) scrubbing pad and go to work. Keep scrubbing until you hit a smooth tub surface. Rinse when you're all done—use a large cup or bowl to splash clean water on the back of the tub and get all the grime down the drain.

Now look at the floor. Do you have weeks or months of dust and hair there? Use a broom or Swiffer ®-type sweeper to clean it up. Then go back with a damp mop and grab the dust that's stuck to the floor from humidity and water.

Finally, grab your window cleaner and spray the mirrors. Do small sections at a time or the cleaner will dry before you get to it. Wipe it down and smile—you're done in the bathroom!

Organizing Your Home: Your Linen Closet

I'm so proud of you—committing to organize your home is the first step in actually doing it! Let's hit the Linen Closet!

If you have excess laundry to deal with, you probably have a linen closet that is less than user-friendly. Once you have clean towels, rags, and other linens to put away, you won't do it if your destination is less-than-appealing.

So let's organize it! This is the first place where you'll have to be brutally honest with yourself about what you keep and what you get rid of. When I say, "get rid of," I don't necessarily mean it ends in the trash—if it's towels, bedding, etc., that are in bad condition, your local animal shelter would be grateful for your donation. They always need things for the dogs and cats to lay on in their runs and crates, and your cast-offs in this area will be eagerly accepted.

Take stock of what you have for shelves. Do you have wooden or wire shelves? Do you have problems with things "falling through" if you have wire shelves? If so, you don't have to worry and go buy scrap wood to line the shelves with—a simple piece of shelf-lining (you know, that bumpy green stuff that comes in rolls) will lay nicely and prevent small things from falling through. If necessary, put some of that down.

Now take a look and see what you've got in terms of extra bedding. How many beds in your home? You should have a minimum of 1 extra bedding-set for each bed, a maximum of 2. Think about it before you start to write me and tell me why you need 6 sets of bedding for each bed—if you have small children who have nighttime accidents (or get the stomach flu in the middle of the night), you might have to change sheets in the morning (or the middle of the night if it's barf!), and you'll have some clean ones to put on.

You'll put the dirty ones in the washer and get the machine started on that task. Then you'll swap things to the dryer. You'll still have clean sheets on the bed and if you've got 2 extra sets, another clean one in the linen closet. So now with that argument won, go through your bedding. Do you have mis-matched pieces? If so, put them in the donation pile. Do you have twin pieces mixed in with king pieces? If so, separate them in to piles.

Make sure everything is folded (I'll give you a pass on the fitted sheets — those are impossible to fold neatly!). Now set aside one or two shelves for your bedding. Make sure that the bedding for the queen bed is not piled up with the stuff for the crib or twin bed. You can fold the stuff in squares or fold it in to long rectangles and then roll it. Either way is acceptable—it just depends on how much space you've got.

Now we move on to towels and other things in your linen closet...

Take stock of your towels, washcloths, and other terrycloth things. Do you have towels that are holey or bleach-stained? Do you have towels that aren't very absorbent from using too much fabric softener? Do you have towels that don't match your current bathroom décor? Donate them. Keep only that which matches your décor (unless you turn it in to a rag), and only that which wouldn't embarrass you to put out for guests when they visit.

That should pare down your towel collection to a more manageable number. I can't tell you an exact number that is appropriate here—that depends on how many members are in your family. What I can suggest is 2 towels per person—one that's currently hanging in the bathroom and one clean one that can be conscripted in to service when the current one is in the wash.

Do you have washcloths? One for every-other day of the week would be appropriate—many people don't use them anymore, in this age of scrubbies, poufs, and other facial cleansing methods.

Do you have a rag-pile (or kitchen-towel pile) in your linen closet? If so, fold those and put them on a shelf that's easy to access. You'll use those most frequently, so make them easy to reach and use. Again,

sort through and see what's in reasonable condition and put the rest in the pile for the animal shelter.

What other things are in your linen closet? Do you have table linens there? If so, do you know what's there? Are they neat enough that when you need them you don't have to go digging and put the iron on "fry it silly" to get the wrinkles out? If any of the above is true, pull them out, wash, sort, keep only the best, and fold (or press) them quickly and put them away.

Finally, if you have other miscellaneous things (doilies, candlesticks, etc.) in your linen closet, set a shelf aside for those things. If you don't have a full shelf to ascribe to them, use a shelf that's only half-full of other items. Again, sort through and keep only what you're in love with—anything else can be donated to a charity-resale shop, given to siblings, or sold on eBay.

Don't keep things "just in case" great-aunt Mildred comes by — she won't, and if she does, she probably won't remember what it was. Remember, you're organizing your home so that it's not just a house of stuff for your family. That's much more important than not offending a distant relative!

Congratulations—you've won the battle with your linen closet. Isn't it such a nice feeling to open up a closet and not be in danger of the falling towel zone?

Organizing Your Home: The Study/Computer Room

Where do you house your computer? Does it have a room of its own along with the books in your home? If you have a study, we're going to head there next. This is another reminder to take these tasks in small steps—you'll not accomplish this in one day, even if you're born-organized!

How does your desk look? Can you see the top? Are you convinced it even HAS a top? If not, let's start here. Take one small area of your desk — to the right of your monitor, for starters. Sort through the paperwork you have — determine what can be filed (in folders and

then a filing drawer), what can be thrown away, and what you need on your desk (bills that are due).

Don't whitewash yourself here—be honest and figure out what you can do without. The less you have on your desk distracting you, the better you're going to feel. Remember—small steps here! Now work on the area to the left of your monitor. Leave space to be able to adjust the volume on your speakers and get to your printer.

If you don't have a bulletin board, this might be the best opportunity to put one in to use. You don't have to have a fancy bulletin board with ribbons—a standard corkboard with pushpins will do nicely. If you have paperwork that you don't want to file away (yet) or things that you need to keep in front of you for memory-jogging purposes, a bulletin board is a great addition. On my bulletin board, I have things that I don't need cluttering up my desk, but I do want in easy reach when I need them.

Take a look at your bookshelves. Are they organized so you can find things? I'm not saying that it has to be by the Dewey Decimal system, but as long as you can easily find things, that's what counts. My shelves are alphabetical, but that's me. Are your shelves dusty? You don't have to take everything off of them to dust them—under the books is rarely dusty. Simply dust from the edges of the books to the edge of the shelf. Done!

How's the floor in this room? Can you walk and not kill yourself? If not, use the laundry-basket method we've already discussed and sort through what you've got, what you need, and what you don't need. Once you can see the floor, run the vacuum. Again, not the edges, just where you can walk and roll your desk chair.

Finally, dust the furniture in this room. Run your duster over quickly and pick up whatever particles spell out "help me" on flat surfaces. You'd be shocked how quickly dust builds up where your computer is involved and how effective the fans are in your CPU!

Here's one area completely organized! Keep in mind that many small steps make one great journey!

Organizing Your Home Office

When organizing your office, you've got a couple choices. Write a list of all the little things that need to be done and work on them a few minutes each day, or dive straight into the deep end and do it all in one fell swoop.

If you're sick of your entire office, box it all up like you're moving, and set the boxes in a different room. Then unpack one box at a time and organize from the bottom -up. Make sure to file papers as you go along.

I like the "little at a time" approach. My first step would be to take all the papers that are scattered about and put them into one box. You can file these now, or clean your desktop and surrounding area further. I like putting all the filing together, all the books together, and then working on one pile at a time.

If several folks in your home are receiving mail, you can use wall-mounted acrylic holders and just label them with each person's name. That takes care of the mail lying around.

A friend of mine keeps all her bills on her refrigerator with a magnet. As soon as they come in, they go straight on the fridge. That way, they can't get lost underneath piles of papers. I've adopted this idea and it's saved me a huge headache. Now I don't have a bunch of envelopes and bills lying around on my desktop, just waiting for payday.

Decide what your office needs and designate a spot for each item. If you make calls from this area, you'll need a phone, phone book, message pad and pens.

You'll need a place for the computer and accessories, plus a spot for copy paper.

Set up the basics first, and then decide item-by-item what else you want to place in your office. Do you have room for personal items? Pictures can be placed on a bulletin board or hung on the wall. You

ability to focus and accomplish is affected by a messy desktop, so make it a priority to keep it de-cluttered.

Once you've set up the office and filed your paperwork, you can buy some colored folders or stickers and color-code your files to make it easier to find what you're looking for.

If you take just 15 minutes every other day to clean off your desk and surrounding work area, you'll find your home office a much more pleasant place to work! And your personal efficiency will skyrocket as well!

Organizing Your Home: The Basement

Organizing your basement doesn't have to be an overwhelming job. Just follow these few simple steps and you're on your way! If you don't have a basement, consider organizing your attic space so you can find what you need when you need it.

First, go through and find that which is obviously garbage and throw it away. Don't think twice about it—garbage is garbage, no matter how long you keep it.

Look around for a large space on the basement floor. Put down two large flat sheets and use one sheet for stuff that you love and need to keep (i.e., Christmas decorations are a great example), one sheet is for stuff you've kept and haven't used in who-knows-how-long. Once all of the things in your basement are on those two sheets, we'll move on.

Take all of the things on the "pitch sheet" and box them up. Either put them out for the garbage collection, have a yard sale, or donate them to a charity. Now go back and look at your "keep sheet."

Your "keep sheet" should have things that are used periodically, such as Christmas decorations, or things that are used frequently but only in the basement. For things that are used often, keep them handy (such as at a workbench) and make sure they are neatly hung up or put in drawers. For things that are used periodically, put them in re-

usable boxes or storage tubs. Then make sure the boxes or tubs are well-labeled so you can find the things when you need them.

Now with the things that you have in boxes or tubs, you should elevate them a few inches off the basement floor, just in case of flooding. No one ever plans for their basement to flood, but it DOES happen. I recommend getting old pallets from a shipping company or retail store — many will just let you take them if you ask politely—or use pieces of 2 x 4 lumber to elevate your stuff.

This will prevent a certain amount of water-damage, but also permit you to treat for vermin in your basement, if appropriate. Roaches and mice don't like open spaces such as this—they prefer it when things are tightly against floors and walls and it's dark.

Congratulations—your basement is now organized! Remember, you can use these same tips to organize your garage and attic, too!

Organizing Your Home: The Garage

If you don't have a garage, these tips still apply to you—just move the directions here to your basement, storage shed, or wherever else you stash bigger things. If your cars don't live in your garage, we're going to change that! Get ready to take small steps and make your parking area livable again!

Let's take stock of your garage. Are there things all over the floor? Do you have a path picked out to the house? Have your cars even lived inside your garage in recent memory? If not, get ready—we're going to wave the checkered flag on gettin' to work!

First, we need to clean up your floors. If they are particularly cluttered, we'll make a way, but it will take lots of small steps. Start by putting all garbage (trash) in a trash receptacle. I don't care if it doesn't have wheels or it doesn't have a bag— just do it! If you're not sure if it's trash and don't recognize it, put it aside and ask a member of your family. If they can't identify it, pitch it.

I know it sounds harsh, but you'll thank me later.

As you're sorting through things, you need to make a pile of "keep" and "sell." I recommend using old large flat sheets for this purpose—to keep things separated. Determine what you absolutely cannot do without (and why you love them!) and get rid of the rest. Chances are good that if the things are in your garage and you haven't been out digging through the boxes and piles, you won't miss what you get rid of at all.

Now that you've sorted, let's talk about shelving. If you don't have shelves in your garage, you're wasting valuable space. You will be amazed at what some plywood and brackets can do to get stuff up and off the floor! If you need to install shelving, now's the time to determine how many and how long they should be.

Then call your local lumber store and have some wood cut for this purpose. Plywood (at least ½" thick) will do the job. Put brackets at least every 2 linear feet. Then use a level and install the brackets. For added security, put a wood screw in at the edge of the bracket and wood—this will stabilize your shelf.

Hooray! Your shelves are up! Now start putting things that you've stored on the floor up on the shelves. I recommend an area for car-care things (oil, soap, antifreeze, etc.), one for gardening supplies, painting supplies, and another for general house-items that you use once or twice a year.

If your kids aren't riding their bikes in and out on a daily basis, consider hanging them upside down from the garage ceiling. Hardware stores sell large hooks that screw in to the wall or ceiling and are wonderful to hang bicycles by — simply use the hooks to catch the inside of the tire, one for the front wheel and one for the back wheel. This will maximize your floor space considerably.

These hooks also work well if you have a fertilizer-spreader sitting on the floor — put the hooks in the wall and hang the spreader up and out of the way, especially since it's only used a few times a year.

You can see your garage floor, good! But how bad is the dirt-level? Take a shop-vac (wet-dry vacuum) and empty out whatever is in the tub. Put some bug-killer in there, preferably the powered sort. I

recommend using a powered Sevin formula—it will kill whatever is live that you might suck up and is approved for gardens. Now that your vac is ready, section your garage in to quadrants.

Move everything away from the walls in one quadrant and start vacuuming. Hit the edges, the concrete blocks where the walls meet the floor, etc. Don't forget the crevices where the concrete quadrants come together. Once you've vacuumed it, spray whatever bug-killer (liquid form) you'd like at the perimeter of the quadrant. Put things back where you had them and take a break.

When you're ready for your next small step, attack another quadrant and repeat the steps until the whole garage has been vacuumed. This will prevent tires from being punctured by loose nails or screws, and keep you from tracking all of outside in your home!

Okay, your garage is organized, swept out, and ready to receive its inhabitants. Move your cars inside and enjoy the lack of frost, ice, & snow in the winter, and the lack of scalding hot steering wheel & seats in the summer!

There you go! Think of how delightful it'll be to have everything in your garage organized and at your fingertips!

Keeping Your Home Organized

Now...as much of a challenge as it was to do all of that pitching, organizing, and cleaning, how do you maintain it and not let your stuff overwhelm you again?

There are some easy steps to take—and they just take moments a day. Please don't email me and tell me you're too busy to do this because of your special situation—everyone can find the time to take 15 minutes a day and maintain their home in stages. If you can't, then I'm going to brashly suggest that you re-evaluate your schedule and determine what IS more important than maintaining your home for your family.

Maintaining the Kitchen

Daily, put dirty dishes in your dishwasher or dishpan under the sink. When either is full, do the dishes. If you run your dishwasher while you're asleep at night, you'll pay lower utility rates and the dishes will be cool and clean in the morning—ready to be put away.

Run a rag with the cleaner of your choice over the counter-tops and tabletop once a day. This will take you just moments, yet will help keep your kitchen organized and neat. You don't have to scrub or take everything off the counters, just wipe where you've cooked or eaten.

Clean your sink daily. Scrub it with a soap pad or use some window cleaner and a rag—if your sink is clean, you're less likely to let dirty dishes pile up in it.

Sweep your floors once a week. Just take a broom across it and get the big crumbs. Then run a damp mop over it to get the week's dirt washed off—you don't have to shine it, just a damp mop (the type is your choice).

Maintaining the Living Room Areas

Pick up the papers that land on your Flat Surfaces and either throw them away or file them appropriately in the study every evening. If you are diligent about keeping the papers picked up, your room will appear much more organized and clean, even if you haven't done any deep cleaning.

Dust once a week—run your duster over the flat surfaces. It's a 5 minute job that will make a large dent in your room(s).

Vacuum once a week. Don't move furniture or pull out the crevice tools, just do the middles where you walk. 15 minutes, max.

Take your glass cleaner and go over the TV screen and any other glass that collects fingerprints once a week. 3 minutes, tops.

Just doing quick and easy tasks gives you the push to get started. That's the key when it comes to staying organized. Once you get going, things get done!

Let's keep going....before you realize it, you'll be giving Martha Stewart a run for her money.

Maintaining the Bathrooms

Take some window cleaner and a rag and squirt the mirror just where it's gotten toothpaste spray. Don't do the whole thing—that's a waste of time and cleaner. Just hit where it's dirty.

Use a quick swipe of a rag with cleaner to wipe out your sink and faucet from the toothpaste and shaving cream residue. This gunks up a clean bathroom quicker than anything else. I use one-half of a disposable (flushable) bathroom wipe — one half is enough for the counter, sink, and one other area of my choice. I typically choose a part of the toilet, and that way the whole toilet is cleaned by the week's end.

Swish out the toilet bowl with a quick flick of the brush. No cleaner is necessary. We're just doing some easy maintenance here.

When you shower every day, take your pouf or wash cloth and use some of the leftover suds from your cleanser to wipe down the sides of the shower or tub. It takes a minute to do, but it will prevent having to bend over the tub and scrub it out periodically.

Once a week, sweep your bathroom floors and catch the hair that collects there.

That's easy enough, right?

Maintaining the Study

Don't put papers on your desktop to just collect. When a bill comes in, put it in the bill-organizer on your desktop or pay it immediately and put it in the mail. The same with other mail and paperwork. I open the mail right over the trash can — that way, whatever is garbage doesn't collect on my desk, but hits the circular file immediately and it's out of my hair.

Consider having a cross-cut shredder in your study for shredding pre-approved credit-card offers. Most identity theft takes place when information is gathered from credit card applications that were stolen from the trash. A shredder is a worthwhile investment.

Dust your bookshelves once a week. Run your duster over the area between the ends of the books and the edge of the shelf.

Wipe down your monitor weekly with window cleaner and a rag.

Finally, the last stages of maintaining your organization... and you thought this section would never come!

Maintaining the Laundry

I recommend doing laundry daily, depending on the size of your family. If you have at least 3 kids, do some every day. For example: baby laundry is handled differently than adult laundry. You shouldn't use fabric softener for baby laundry, but it's fine to use with adults' clothes.

So choose a day to do only baby laundry. Choose a different day to do adult laundry. Do your oldest child's laundry on a given day (maintain that day on a weekly basis), your next child's laundry the following day, etc. If you keep up on it, it won't become a Mt. Vesuvius and overwhelm your home again.

If you find laundry tedious, sort and pre-treat while you're watching TV, for example. It takes moment to pluck a piece of clothing out and check it for stains, squirt it with pre-treater, and then put it in the dirty basket, ready for the wash.

Folding can be done the same way. Once it's folded, I recommend putting it on the recipient's bed (not in the basket). This way, it must be put away before retiring for the night and you won't live from a laundry basket full of clean clothes.

If you have things that need ironing, do it when the laundry is clean and hang it up. Be done with the task and make sure that clean, ready-to-wear shirts or blouses are smiling at you when you walk in the closet in the morning.

Maintaining Your Sanity

This is easier said than done, I understand. But what I've discovered is that if you put your home on a schedule, things won't overwhelm you. You'll know that vacuuming will be done on one day and that laundry will be done on another.

You'll not resent walking in to the bathroom, because it will make you smile to see a shiny sink when you turn on the light. And you'll know that YOU are special enough to have a clean bathroom, not just the company that comes to visit.

You'll have peace of mind knowing that if a package comes to your door, you won't kill yourself getting to it and won't be ashamed to throw the door open for the UPS guy or mail carrier.

Most of all, you'll have the appreciation of your family, and you'll know that you're setting up good habits for your children to observe and repeat in their own homes. No matter what the Mastercard ads say, THAT is priceless.

That's it. Print this info out and hang it on your fridge if you like. You'll find it easier to remember the little tasks that need doing, and you'll be reminded that it's just going to take a few minutes each day to maintain your organized household!

The Essential Guide to Organizing Your Home
is brought to you by:

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