

Reprinted from September 2006 *Natural Awakenings* Ann Arbor edition

## **A Way to Organize One's Journey through Life**

By Carolyn Anderson-Fermann

Who among us hasn't felt overwhelmed, stressed or just out of balance from time to time? Such feelings can arise from a cluttered life, manifested in numerous physical, electronic and mental forms.

Physical untidiness is what most of us think of when we hear the word "clutter." It may include paper piling up in our homes and offices, excess belongings in our living spaces and those "mystery boxes" hiding out in storage areas.

Electronic clutter beleaguers our modern age of computers, email and digital media. While it's not always visible, it can be equally detrimental to our well-being.

Mental clutter is more difficult to put a finger on, and might include an internal nagging voice, unwritten to-do lists and scattered thoughts. Often individuals who struggle with mental clutter also struggle with time management and have a hard time prioritizing projects.

As a professional organizer with a master in business administration, I've found that taking control of the clutter in our lives inevitably saves us time and money. Who doesn't want more of that? Plus we realize better peace of mind and reduce waste burdening the environment.

### **How to Begin**

The process of organizing our physical space, electronic media and internal dialogue can be an immensely rewarding journey. Contrary to popular quick-fix television shows, magazine stories and ads, getting organized is a process *not* an event. So often we are sold the impression that by purchasing the right products, our lives will suddenly be better. But consumption of more stuff is rarely the answer. My work with clients has shown me that with the right attitude and a little time every day, virtually anyone can be on their way to a simpler, more organized life starting today.

One of the first steps in successful organization is limiting consumption to only that which is useful, necessary and loved. Before bringing something new into our life, we need to ask how often we'll use it. Will we continue loving it five years from now?

Also consider what impact a thing will have on the environment when we're finished with it. A key lies in immediately stopping the unnecessary inflow of additional items, information or time commitments into our space. This helps us stay focused and organized in the long run, allowing us to make progress winnowing out existing clutter without creating more.

## Next Steps

The next step in the organizing journey is to determine what clutter is the most bothersome to daily life and peace of mind. Slow and steady change wins the race for long term orderliness for all categories of clutter. It's really more about changing our behavior than putting pretty labels on fancy boxes, although that can be fun too.

Once we know which areas are likely to create the most trouble, it's time to remove items that are no longer useful, things we do not love and do not make us feel good. If we believe a physical item may prove useful "someday," it's better to think of a person or charity that could use it now.

The same is true with electronic clutter. I advise clients to focus on what information is useful now, not what might be useful at some vague point in the future. With mental clutter, putting thoughts on paper, thereby allowing us to purge them from our mind, is a quick way to free up mental space. Lists can help us prioritize time.

## Rewarding Results

The structure of an organizing journey may be thought of as an onion with many layers. First we remove the unsightly outside layers most troubling us. Over time we become ready to remove successive layers, little by little.

The metaphorical onion can be layers of a space, for example, we can start with flat surfaces, then clear closets, drawers and so forth. Layers may be files we have stored inside our computers. Layers even can represent our personal journey in letting go of clutter in order that we can spend more time on activities in synch with our deepest values.

No matter where we are in our organizing journey, the most important point is to start small. With time we can find our spaces and time freed up and feel good about making room for the things that matter most to us.

*Carolyn Anderson-Fermann, founder of Simply Organized Life, offers seminars as well as individual client consultation. She is a member of the National Association of Professional Organizers and director of professional development for its Southeast Michigan chapter. Carolyn holds an MBA from Michigan State University and brings her clients 10 years of experience in the corporate world. For more information see: [www.SimplyOrganizedLife.com](http://www.SimplyOrganizedLife.com).*