THE 12 MOST COMMON ORGANIZING MISTAKES

If you struggle to get organized, you may be making some very common mistakes. As a professional organizer, I see these dozen mistakes over and over from my clients who’ve tried hard to get organized on their own. You can be a step ahead of the game by learning about them and avoiding them!

1. Buying products before you sort and weed

For many people, the fun part of a decluttering or organizing project is buying the bins and containers! But you might be throwing your money away if you shop before you sort and weed and know what you need to buy. I recommend using containers you already own or using temporary containers (like shoeboxes or other appropriately sized boxes) for the sorting process, then making a shopping list so you’re buying only what you need. If you shop first, you risk trying to create an organizing system to suit your products, not the other way around.

2. Storing things far from where you use them

The key to an orderly space is having a designated place for everything and then putting things away. Make it easy on yourself by storing things near where you use them. The more steps it takes to put things away, the more likely it will be to stay out.

You probably already store your toothbrush near the sink and your clothes near the area where you dress and undress. Take this principle and apply it to other areas of your life: Store your dog leashes near the door, your craft supplies near the space where you craft.
3 Making systems too complicated

We already talked about minimizing the number of steps you have to take to put stuff away. It’s also a good idea to create processes that have as few steps as possible. For example, it’s much easier to put something in an open bin or box at the front of a shelf than it is to have to move something out of the way that’s in front of the storage box you want to access, pull that box forward, lift the lid, put the item in, replace the lid, push the box back and put the first item back in front of it.

My favorite example of an organizing system that requires more steps than many people want to make is using binders as filing systems. In order to store papers in a binder, you have to pull the binder off the shelf, open it, find the section you need, open the rings, punch the paper to be filed (or slip it into a sheet protector), put the paper in, close the rings, put the papers back on the right side of the binder, close the cover, put the binder back on the shelf. The result is that many people let paper pile up, rather than going through that multi-step process.

By contrast, to file into a filing cabinet, you simply have to open the file drawer, find the file and drop the piece of paper in (assuming you’re using hanging file folders without interior folders). Much easier.

4 Not paying attention to your piles

We tend to think of piles as bad things that need to be cleared. But persistent piles offer valuable clues that can help you set yourself up for success. If you habitually put certain items in certain places, rather than where they belong, you can work with that tendency and make that your storage area.

Always leaving your keys on the counter? Put a pretty glass bowl on the counter and make it your key bowl. Does your mail always end up on the table by the front door rather than the upstairs desk where you think it belongs? Make that table by the front door your mail-processing area. Work with your natural tendencies, not against them. (See mistake #7.)
5 Having too few (or too small) wastebaskets

If messy spaces plague you, take a look around. Do you have a wastebasket in every room? If you do, you’re much more likely to throw trash away and not let it clutter up your room.

An overflowing wastebasket is almost as bad as none at all. If you find your wastebasket fills too fast, there’s a simple solution: get a larger one, particularly in the bathroom or the kitchen. You’ll be amazed at how much better it will make you feel.

6 Not having a system to handle the mail

If you don’t have a designated spot for the mail, you probably have stress-inducing piles of mail scattered all over your house. Have a place where you handle the mail, so you know where you can find it. Better yet, don’t let the mail pile up! At the very least, go through it daily and get rid of junk mail and catalogs or magazines you don’t read. (If those are coming to your house, consider unsubscribing from the magazines and using a service like Catalog Choice to stop the unwanted catalogs from being sent in the first place.) Open your mail daily so you don’t have any unhappy surprises lurking in the pile. You can control your mail, rather than letting it control you.

7 Trying to change yourself instead of the system

Not everyone thinks alike. Some people are just not wired to organize things in traditional ways. If you’ve tried without success to get organized, you may need to be a little more innovative in setting up your organizing systems. For example, label file folders with labels that reflect how you think of the contents. Or abandon files completely and just have a few boxes with very broad categories that you store your papers in. A great resource for chronically disorganized people is Conquering Chronic Disorganization, by Judith Kolberg. Her book, ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life, co-written with ADD expert Kathleen Nadeau, has great organizing ideas for folks with Attention Deficit Disorder.
8 Thinking you’re a failure if you backslide

Backsliding is very common. In fact it’s natural. Almost everybody does it (including me!). If you find yourself descending to disorder because you got so busy you couldn’t keep up your system, don’t despair. Just start using it again. I promise it will be easier than starting from scratch. As you use the system again, think about ways you might be able to tweak it to help prevent backsliding in the future.

9 Thinking you need a huge block of time before you can start getting organized

Many people thing they need a whole day, or a whole weekend, or a week’s vacation so they can “get organized.” Unfortunately, it’s really hard to put aside a whole day (let alone a week or a weekend) to focus solely on decluttering or setting up systems.

I encourage you to set aside small pockets of time to work on small projects. You’d be amazed at how much you can get done in a half hour, for instance. Even if your decluttering project feels monumental, 30 minutes per day will eventually get you there.

Don’t wait for a huge block of time to materialize. Start now by setting your timer for a half hour and getting to work. (You can learn more about this approach, and get help and support in doing it, with Declutter Happy Hour, the four-week e-course I offer with life coach Shannon Wilkinson.)

10 Relying on your memory

The busier you get, the harder it is to remember everything you have to do. That makes you feel out of control and disorganized. Do yourself a favor and write down your tasks in a central place. (I recommend using a planner or having a spiral notebook where everything goes -- avoid using Post-It® notes or scratch paper that can easily scatter.)

Write all your appointments in your calendar and consult it religiously. Create a routine of looking at your calendar at the beginning and end of
each day. By writing everything down, you free your mind up to work on other things!

11 Striving for perfection

Many chronically disorganized people are perfectionists. Many perfectionists don’t want to start a project until they know exactly how they’re going to complete it. Or they don’t want to start for fear of doing it wrong. There’s no such thing as being perfectly organized. Organizing systems are fluid things. They should change with you as your life changes.

I encourage my clients to be “organized enough,” rather than perfectly organized. That means that they can find what they need, when they need it, with a minimal amount of effort. That means there are assigned places for their belongings and they can put things away easily. It doesn’t mean that everything’s perfectly labeled or orderly at all times. Life is messy and your space can get messy. Just be organized enough that you can whip it back into shape when you need to.

12 Trying to do it alone

Organizing and decluttering can be difficult for many people to do on their own. Hiring a professional organizer or getting a trusted friend to help you can make the task so much more efficient and enjoyable. Enlisting the help of someone else forces you to set aside the time to do the job, rather than putting it off forever, and it keeps you focused on the task at hand during the process. When selecting someone to help you, find someone who is non-judgmental and will allow you to make all the decisions.

I hope that by learning about some of the most common organizing mistakes people make, you’ll be able to avoid them. If you find yourself in need or organizing help, please don’t hesitate to visit my website to learn about the services I offer.