

## HOME IMPROVEMENT

# How to Declutter Your Home If You're Moving or Downsizing — 8 Tips to Avoid Overwhelm

Planning to declutter your home — whether you're moving or downsizing — can be overwhelming. Here's how to do it.



(Image credit: Getty)

Once he retired, Jakob Miller finally had the time and energy to organize his three-bedroom home.

“As I entered my golden years, I realized that I needed to streamline my life and get rid of all the unnecessary clutter that had accumulated over the years,” says Miller, 54, a retired laboratory scientist from Staten Island, N.Y.

He headed to the basement, where he emptied boxes and bins of old clothes, toys and knick-knacks. But as he looked around the mountain of clutter, he quickly discovered that thinking he could do everything at once was a mistake. “I was so excited to get started that I didn't realize how overwhelming the task would be,” he recalls. “I was overwhelmed and exhausted, and I barely made a dent in the clutter.”

Experts have made downsizing and decluttering seem simple: Keep, trash or donate. If only it were that easy.

“Decluttering can seem daunting, especially for retirees and those nearing retirement who may have accumulated decades' worth of clutter,” says Aaron Traub, owner of My Professional Organizer in Dallas.

For anyone who's planning a move or just downsizing to a smaller place, the process often requires sifting through a literal lifetime of memories and mementos — children's art doodles, yellowed newspaper clippings, a grandmother's shawl — making the process far more complex and emotionally draining.

But it doesn't have to be that way, especially if you consider the opportunity to offload a lot of your stuff a fresh start.

"I always recommend that my clients focus on the idea of what they want to keep—what will support their lifestyle today, and their hopes and dreams for tomorrow, rather than the more traditional idea that we have to declutter to get rid of stuff," says Danie Smallwood, a self-described decluttering mindset coach based in Bethesda, Md. "One is about the present and the future, the other is based in fear of letting go of the past, whether past memories or dreams or hobbies that just didn't work out or that we've outgrown."

The goal is to "pare down the contents of your home to the things you honestly use and love," says Diane Quintana, an organizer with Release Repurpose Reorganize in Atlanta. "If you don't love or use the other things, then they are just clutter taking up valuable space in your home."

Retirement, or planning for it, is the perfect time to invoke your inner Marie Kondo — the popular Japanese organization expert — who, famously, emphasizes keeping only those items that "spark joy" in you.

Although older people can get wrapped up in their memories and the trinkets of their past, Kondo counsels: "Truly precious memories will never vanish even if you discard the objects associated with them. No matter how wonderful things used to be, we cannot live in the past. The joy and excitement we feel here and now are more important."

Whether you're preparing for a big move or just starting your spring cleaning, here are some tips on how to start effective downsizing and decluttering:

### **1. Don't try to do it all in one day**

Downsizing and decluttering need to be done consistently. "Even if all you can manage is dealing with one paper from the mountain that has built up on your desk, commit to doing that one tiny thing every single day," Smallwood says. "Will you unclutter your whole desk that way? No. But you will create the confidence in yourself that you are someone who declutters, who sticks with it, who can keep it up — and that's the most important step you can possibly take in the beginning."

### **2. Make a schedule and stick to it**

Whether it's 10 minutes, 30 minutes a day, or a full day on the weekend, setting aside dedicated time to declutter will help ensure you progress," says Traub.

### **3. Start with easy wins**

Gather all trash, clean the fridge and pantry and then collect and organize receipts and paperwork, which likely have minimal sentimental value. Next, "look for things that are out of place, like piles of books, clothes, shoes, small appliances," says Diane Quintana. "Can you put these things away? If you can't put them away, can you make room for them by decluttering where they would go?"

Then move on to other smaller areas. Consider tackling individual drawers before moving up to something slightly larger, such as a closet or a spare room, suggests Darcy Speed, who trains other organizers and home stagers at Ultimate Academy. “There are usually fewer decisions to be made regarding what to keep and what to donate,” she says.

### **3. Stop collecting more stuff**

Even if it means telling friends and family members to skip this year’s birthday present. “If you continue to accumulate things through the decluttering process, you’re just rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, and you’ll be a lot slower in reaching your goals,” says Lisa Dooley, author of *More Space. More Time. More Joy!: Organizing Your Best Life*.

### **4. Consider getting outside help**

Professional organizers can map out a process and timeline while keeping things moving. “It can be helpful to have an objective outsider around when things start to get stuck,” says Melissa Gungi, a San Francisco-based professional organizer who works with retirees and seniors. “I also encourage getting help for the smaller bumps, like hiring haulers for a couple of hours to move heavy things around or trash out, or finding resources for where to donate and recycle things.”

### **5. Give yourself grace with a 'maybe' box**

If you’re on the fence about a particular item, set it aside, suggests Danie Smallwood, the Maryland decluttering coach. The hardest decisions will involve holiday ornaments, scrapbooks, pictures and other items that tear at your heart. “Sentimental items will slow you down, and the goal is to get through as much as you can, as quickly as you can,” she says.

When the box is full, “put a note on it and a date when you will revisit those contents,” she says. “By then, your decluttering muscles will be stronger” and you’ll be able to make a decision.

### **6. Ask yourself the last time you used something**

If you haven’t used it in the past year or so and don’t expect you’ll need it in the near future, it’s probably safe to get rid of it, says Aaron Traub, the Dallas organizer.

### **7. Involve your family**

Reach out to your family and ask them to go through any possessions they may have left behind. Then invite family members over for a “give and take” visit, suggests Darcy Speed. “Explain that you are looking to declutter and encourage them to choose their favorite items. The “giver” can share the story behind the keepsake, making it even more meaningful, and then it can be taken out of the home.”

You may think about keeping this stuff for your heirs, but keep in mind that “very rarely do your children have the same attachments to items that you have,” says Jil McDonald, an interior designer with Jil Sonia Interior Designs in Vancouver, Canada, who recently downsized significantly. “They want to create their own new memories.” Instead, discard the items, but “take pictures and videos to keep the memories alive,” suggests John Linden, a Los Angeles-based interior designer.

### **8. Declutter on a regular basis**

Finally, be sure that your old habits don't return "Keep up with the organization," says Linden. "Make sure to declutter on a regular basis, and be conscious of what new items you are bringing into your home."

For Jakob Miller, in New York, "Decluttering was a challenging but rewarding task. Not only did it make my home more organized and functional, but it also gave me a sense of peace and clarity," he says. "Just start small, take it one step at a time. And you'll be amazed at the results."

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