



# September 2018 Newsletter

## Helping Seniors Stay in Their Own Homes

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### *Decluttering Your Senior's Past From Their Home for The Future*

#### **Is it time to declutter?**

Is the stuff that has been stored over the years in the way? Has a move to a more manageable location or just a need to ease the future finally mean something that must be done? Older adults used to pare down their belongings when they did the spring cleaning each year, but many have stopped the practice of cleaning out and removing excess possessions. Of course those of all ages are holding onto belongings longer, which is a big driver of the boom in storage facilities. Does your senior loved one's house have many years of stuff stored in the closet, basement, and any other spaces — what might be called clutter?

#### **What is Clutter?**

Clutter is defined as an accumulation of items that interfere with your daily life and usually have no inherent value, at least not now. Would you want to be put in the position of being the one that decides what to do with the accumulation — what will go, get donated, or save for someone in the family? Having clutter can be emotionally stressful for both older adults and their family caregivers. The stress can result in physical and emotional impacts for all involved. Reducing the stuff can give you all a feeling of accomplishment, clear some pathways to make the home safer, and may even earn some money.

#### **Relieving a Family Burden**

Have you heard of 'Death Cleaning'? It originated in Scandinavia and is the practice of decluttering, the goal of which is to relieve the pressure on the family in the future. It is a culture that shifts the burden from children to the person who owns the stuff. Would your senior loved one want you to spend hours sorting through their things instead of spending time with your own family or away from your job? Expert Margareta Magnusson, who wrote *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*, says we should begin by talking about all the belongings with the immediate family. Who in the family is interested in certain items, what memories do family caregivers have about the items, or what might items be worth if sold? Talking about their possessions may help make it easier to downsize. Realizing that their memories are not contained in their belongings but are in their heart and soul may give seniors the push they need to clear out the clutter.

*Continued on Page 2*

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*Continued from Page 1*

### Advice from Professional Organizers

Your older adult has decided to do start downsizing, now what? Where do you begin? Here are some steps that experts advise to get you going:

1. Don't try to do the entire home at one time. Attack each room separately. Don't move on until that room is completed.
2. Take baby steps. Begin with the easy stuff like tossing old mail, warranties on products you no longer own or old magazines you never got around to reading. Then move on to things you haven't used in the past year. Eventually you will decide on things that you have forgotten you still owned.
3. Motivate you and your senior by setting achievable goals such as removing a garbage bag a week or filling a donation box each week. That will help you both focus on moving forward.
4. Gather the tools that will make the job easier. Get some clean boxes, heavy duty garbage bags, permanent markers and labels, file folders and organizer bins to put things that you will keep neatly in their place. Important things you both decide to keep should be easy to access in the future when they may be needed.
5. Devote time to the task. The entire house won't be decluttered in a few minutes here and there because it is too easy to undo the progress. It will take hours of work (not all at one time) to declutter many years of collected treasures. Schedule the time to do it together if need be so that real progress can be achieved.
6. Don't overlook the bathroom where old lotions, shampoos, cosmetics, ointments, first aid supplies and expired medications are lurking. It isn't safe to keep these things on the shelf and in the closet so it is best to dispose of them now.

### Electronic Footprint

The same techniques can be used for their electronic life in the desktop computer, tablet or smartphone. Are they holding on to emails for years? Is your senior's inbox filled with junk mail or old jokes mixed with important things like family photos? This is also a good time to be sure all the passwords are up to date and discoverable by the people who need them such as executors or power of attorney designee. This can also help you determine if the proper security measures are in place so that no one can access important personal information when it may be too late to recover it.

The hardest part of decluttering is getting started. Once you get into it and begin to lessen the load, you and your senior will be invigorated to complete the task. You might be surprised at what you will uncover!

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