

20 Tips to Help You Get Rid of Stuff

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Downsizing for a move can be complicated. Where you see a houseful of stuff to sort and toss, your spouse is apt to see treasures, essentials, and a lifetime of memories.

To let go of what we have around us is to confront a very different living situation. People tend to cling to their possessions to avoid dealing with other issues, like stress or fear.”

For adults over 60, only a spouse’s death, losing a job and divorce rank as more stressful than moving, according to the Social Readjustment Rating Scale.

Here, 20 expert-tested ideas to avoid the “junk wars” and make downsizing less stressful -- for all of you.

Downsizing tips: How to sort

1. Avoid tackling the whole house in one go.

Though it’s more efficient for you to plow full steam ahead, you’re apt to be stressed emotionally, if not also physically. When organizing a move, it’s better to think in terms of months, not days.

Tackle one room or area at a time. About two hours at a stretch is ideal for many older adults, says Margit Novack, president of Moving Solutions in Philadelphia and founding president of the National Association of Senior Move Managers.

2. Frame decisions as yes-no questions.

Open-ended choices put a reluctant mover on the spot, raising stress. Avoid asking, “Which pots and pans do you want to keep?” Dwindle them down yourself first, then present a more manageable yes-no option: “Here’s your best frying pan, a large pot, and a small sauce pot. Does that sound good?”

Couching questions for yes-no answers provides the opportunity for you to feel successful so you can move on to the next thing.

Items that exist in abundance work especially well to presort: clothing, kitchenware, tools, and anything else you know the person has way more of than he or she will have space for.

3. Use the new space as a guide.

Measure exactly how much closet or cabinet space the new place has (retirement communities will provide this information if you ask), and fill an equivalent amount of space as you sort. Mark off the comparable space so you have a visual guide.

Beware of excessive multiples. In retirement living, you may only need one frying pan, one or two sets of sheets, one coffeemaker, one or two coats or sweaters, and so on.

4. Banish the “maybe” pile.

Relocation experts call it the **OHIO** rule: **O**nly **H**andle **I**t **O**nce. The less decisive you are about what to do with an item, the more attached you become to the item. Moving things in and out of “maybe” piles it also takes time.

Tempting as it is to set aside tough sorts for later, unless there’s room to “hold” them at a relative’s house, it’s not generally worth paying storage-rental fees (unless it’s a very large estate and time is tight). That’s because once they’re boxed, you aren’t likely to look at the items ever again. (Out of sight, out of mind.)

Exception: Save time by boxing piles of paperwork, which doesn’t take much room. Papers are time-consuming to go through and present an unpleasant task for many disorganized people, casting a pall on your packing.

5. Focus on most-used items (and let the rest go).

Be patient and follow your spouse’s lead -- what seems old and useless to you may be a source of great comfort and joy and therefore worth moving. Don’t go by the newest and best; go by what you use. You may think you should pack your pretty cut-glass tumblers for retirement living, but the reality is that those ugly stained plastic ones are what we use every day.

When facing especially hard choices, ask for the story behind a dubious object -- where it came from, when it was last used, or whether a young family might put it to good use. This takes time, but the payoff is that once you start talking, you may have a clearer perspective and feel more able to let go.

Downsizing tips: How to cope with treasures

6. Pack representative bits of favored items (not the whole kit and caboodle).

Photos, memorabilia, and collections typically take up far more space than the average retirement community quarters can accommodate. Many services digitize images and papers for you for reasonable prices – this way every family member will get a copy, too. (Pick key prints to display on the walls; large tabletop displays take up too much precious space.)

7. Cull a collection by asking, “Which is your favorite piece?”

Assure that one or two “best” items can have a highlighted location in the new home. “People sometimes feel OK about giving up the rest if they have a sense of control over the process.

8. Take photos of the rest of a collection and present them in a special book.

No, it’s not exactly the same as owning, but it’s a space-saving way for a collector to continue enjoying.

9. If it’s meant to be a gift or legacy, encourage giving it now.

Don’t wait for the next holiday, birthday, or other milestone to bestow; remind him that there’s no space for storage. Ask, “Why not enjoy the feeling of giving right now?” (And if you’re the recipient -- just take it, and encourage your relatives to do the same. You can lose it later, if you don’t want it, but the immediate need is to empty the house.)

Downsizing tips: How to sell

10. Think twice before selling items on your own.

Craigslist, eBay, and other self-selling options are time-consuming when you're trying to process a houseful of goods. Be realistic: **"The value of an item isn't what you paid for it or how well made or special it is -- it's what someone is willing to pay for it."**

11. If there are several items of high value, consider an appraisal.

Go through the entire house; the appraiser will only come out once and is more interested in relatively large lots. Auction houses, whose goal is to sell items at the best price, are better options than antique dealers, whose goal is to get items for the lowest price. Consignment shops will also sell items, but they tend to cherry-pick (they take fewer items) and often charge to pick items up.

Downsizing tips: How to Donate

12. Understand how charities work.

The main donation outlets include, Goodwill, the Salvation Army, AMVETS, and Purple Heart. Depending on your area, popular alternatives may include other charities or a local hospitals, PTA thrift shops or church thrift shops. Senior living communities and moving companies often furnish lists of area charities that accept donations.

These charities work by selling castoffs; they don't want (and often won't take) dregs that are better left to the trash. Some take only furniture; some won't take clothing. Larger charities tend to accept a wider variety of items. Get a receipt for a tax deduction.

Clarify whether they offer free pickup (a huge time-saver). Some charities will remove items from the ground floor only.

13. Target recipients for specialty items.

It's time-consuming to find willing recipients for everything, but it may be worth the effort for items to be donated and used in another home. Examples: Schools may welcome musical instruments, old costumes, or tools. Auto repair shops and community maintenance departments may take tools and yard tools.

14. Try the "free books" tactic.

In some communities, setting items on the curb with a sign that says "Free! Help yourself!" will make items miraculously disappear. This works great for books and sometimes other items. (Libraries don't normally take books; some charities or schools may, but finding a willing recipient and transporting the books -- or any other items donated piecemeal takes time.)

In some areas, "free-cycling" is an option. You post an item available for pickup to a membership list, and anyone who wants it can come pick it up from you (or from your curb). More than 5,000 groups make up the Freecycle Network. Like selling items on Craigslist, however, the communications involved can be time-consuming and tedious if your goal is fast disposal of a large number of objects.

Downsizing tips: What to discard

15. If it's chipped, broken, or stained, toss it.

Charities don't want nonworking Christmas lights, snagged clothes, lidless plastic Tupperware, or any items that they can't sell. Period.

16. Weigh your loyalty to recycling against your available time.

Avoiding waste is noble, but finding a home for every object can be incredibly time-consuming. "If you recycle the other 364 days of the year, tossing a few things in the interests of time is fine. You have to be pragmatic.

17. Don't be shy about tossing replaceable items without consultation.

Not worth moving, donating, or even conferring about: old spices, junk mail, old magazines (yes, even all those yellow-spine National Geographic issues), outdated medications, unused toiletries, plastic food containers, candles, stuffed toys (most charities won't accept them), and the contents of the junk drawer (just hang onto change and spare keys).

18. For a price, you don't have to haul it away yourself.

The local garbage company may have limits on how many large black trash bags it will take, and not all local dumps take unsorted trash, either.

Waste Management's Bagster is a smaller-scale alternative to a Dumpster, and it doesn't harm your driveway. Buy one of its large bags at a home-improvement retailer (about \$30, depending on pickup location), fill up to 3,300 pounds of trash, and call to schedule a pickup.

Services like 1-800-Got-Junk and 1-800-Junk-USA (which recently merged with the industry's other biggie, College Hunks Hauling Junk) remove appliances and furniture as well as smaller items.

Smaller local junk dealers may haul things away for free if they see, on appraisal, items that they'll be able to sell.

Downsizing tips: Get help

19. Consider bringing in the pros.

A fast-growing specialty, senior move managers specialize in helping older adults and are skilled at both the emotional and practical dimensions of late-life transitions. (The ten-year-old National Association of Professional Move Managers has more than 600 move-management company members.) These experts can defuse a parent-child emotional clash while handling everything from sorting and packing through hiring movers and unpacking in the new place. They usually charge an hourly fee that varies by locale.

20. Investigate one-stop solutions if time is tight.

Deciding whether to sell, donate, give away, or throw away is stressful and takes a lot of time. Another way to outsource the tasks is to hold an estate sale. Caring Transitions is a chain of senior-relocation franchises that handle estate sales.