

## DISORGANIZED COUPLE SEEKS PROFESSIONAL HELP

Could working with a home organizer actually be better for a marriage than therapy? Marjorie Ingall sorts it out.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN REA

**M**Y HUSBAND, Jonathan, and I are in couples therapy, because we are New Yorkers, and that is what we do. One thing the two of us discuss a lot in therapy is that we both feel overworked and unappreciated—because we are human, and that is how humans often feel.

Recently we had a breakthrough. After we put the kids to bed one night, Jonathan started doing his expense reports with the ritual sighing and muttering. I said, “What can I do to help?” We soon discovered that if I scanned receipts and put them into online folders, Jonathan could print and file them in no time. I didn’t mind the task. (I talked on the phone to our mothers as I worked, killing several we’re-in-this-marriage-together birds with one stone.) And Jonathan felt enormously relieved. But it had never occurred to him before to ask for help, and it had never occurred to me to offer. Suddenly it dawned on me: If this wee moment of organizational unity made us feel connected as a couple, grateful, and happy, what might professional organizing do for our marriage? Imagine—problem-solving without all the thorny detours into childhood resentments, previous messed-up relationships, and deep-seated neuroses!

I call Lisa Zaslow, the founder of a company called Gotham Organizers. My friends had raved about her. She has a master’s degree in organizational psychology, and she seems to understand how tied up mess is with feelings of insecurity, confusion, nostalgia. That, for example, a pile of newspapers isn’t just a pile of newspapers; it’s a stack of potentially life-changing information, and it taunts us with its presence. One of us won’t throw it away because it’s the other person’s, and the other person won’t throw it away because there could be a treasure in its newsprint depths. And we both resent the other for the pile’s very existence.

As I discuss this with Lisa on the phone, she laughs, then tells me about her favorite episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, called “Baggage.” It revolves around a fight between Debra and Ray

about who will put away the suitcase after a trip. They both pretend not to see the suitcase as it sits on the stair landing for three weeks. Eventually Ray passive-aggressively sticks a smelly wedge of cheese inside the luggage to punish Debra when she finally opens it. Ultimately they decide not to let the suitcase come between them. Ray says with hard-won self-knowledge: “Cheese. I love it, and yet I used it as a weapon.” My husband is from Wisconsin, and his nickname is actually Dr. Cheeze, which made this anecdote particularly resonant. We do not want the metaphorical cheese-filled suitcase to destroy our marriage.

Lisa sends over worksheets for us to fill out in advance of her visit, asking what upsets us most about our clutter and what kind of environment we’d find more soothing. I love these questions! And I feel great after writing in my answers, which emphasize my sense of disempowerment about the number of books in our apartment. They don’t fit on the shelves and are stacked in piles like paginated termite hills. But then I read Jonathan’s. His list of grievances is twice as long as mine. And just like that, my great mood crashes. I feel guilty, responsible for his unhappiness. Just like in real therapy!

Lisa shows up at our place on a Friday morning and is immediately funny and warm, putting us at ease. At the kitchen table, she talks us through our worksheets—Jonathan and I both want to see less STUFF—then jumps up to lead us on a tour of our own space. Jonathan and I trot behind her like puppies.

Let’s pause for a quick visual of our apartment. It’s a duplex. The bottom floor is an open living-and-kitchen area. Behind a door is a bathroom and a laundry room. A narrow wrought-iron spiral staircase smack in the middle of the space leads up to two small bedrooms and a second bathroom. I was told a few years ago that our home is a feng shui disaster. The main door is directly aligned with the patio door (there goes the chi), the open staircase sends all the positive energy falling through the risers, and the ancient cemetery we live behind wreaks havoc on our harmony. So we need all the help we can get.



### IN SEARCH OF LOW-HANGING FRUIT

On our walk-through, Lisa looks around for quick changes that we can make for little effort and big payoffs. Simultaneously she takes notes about longer-term projects so we can set timelines as time and money permit.

First Lisa homes in on the overflowing bookshelves, which occupy a whole wall starting near the kitchen. Do we really use all those books? No. Many are cookbooks, and I cook almost exclusively from online recipes nowadays. I save a couple—the first *Silver Palate* and my synagogue cookbook from growing up—but otherwise these are easy to donate. Immediately we've

cleared two shelves. She eyeballs our big fish tank, crammed into the same wall, with its two lonely inhabitants. Those fish cost \$1.50, total. The kids have zero interest in them. So Jonathan agrees that he'll give the tank to our neighbors as soon as its current residents shuffle off this mortal coil. Boom, more space. Lisa notes that our daughters' ratty suitcases take up an entire shelf in the hall. (Raymond! Debra!) Their grandma has given them new suitcases. We throw out the old ones. Bam, another whole shelf. She has us get rid of a giant wastebasket in the laundry room, pointing out that there's a small wastebasket in the bathroom less than three feet away.

Right about now, I see Lisa's eyes flash and she begins counting quietly to herself like a crazy person. Finally she bursts out, "You have 23 chairs in this apartment! Why do you have 23 chairs in this apartment?!" We immediately get rid of three peeling wooden dining chairs. I put them on the street. And since this is New York, they're gone in an hour. Lisa gently encourages me to dispense with my grandma's jolie laide white vinyl 1960s armchairs. I flutter uncertainly. On the one hand, they do add clutter. On the other, they were my grandma's! On the other other, I have another armchair of my grandmother's, a much snazzier, *Mad Men*-ish Danish modern one, in the kids' bedroom, so do I need all three? Jonathan is patient while I dither, which makes me love him more. Therapy! Unity!

None of this purging would be happening without Lisa—certainly not so fast and not so thoroughly. There would be emotion, equivocating, negotiation. (And that's just with myself!) This productivity is a function of the triad: Lisa, Jonathan, me.

### **(MARITAL) HAPPINESS IS A CLEAR, FLAT SURFACE**

Lisa points out that when things have a proper home, they're less likely to take up residence on every available surface. We resolve to take a few hours the next day to divest ourselves of old newspapers and magazines and to scan things that we want to save. We do a big purge of children's books so that the kids will have more room on their shelves for relevant items. Once we've cleared off the Ikea rolling storage bench, the entire apartment looks cleaner and more peaceful. We realize that maintaining this kind of discipline is difficult. But we're high on organization and determined to make it stick. Lisa understands that we are by no means minimalists, and she meets us where we are. That helps us see ourselves—and each other—generously.

### **STRAIGHTENING OUT OUR EDGES**

This is revelatory: Lisa suggests that we rearrange and prune so that objects do not stick out past the lips of shelves, which looks and feels cluttered. She rotates the board games and turns the wicker storage bins. Suddenly they become invisible. Our hard liquor is on a deep shelf next to the fish tank, but some of the bottles protrude farther than the tank. We decide to have a party that weekend to get rid of some alcohol. Even if you're a charmingly pretentious person who loves artisanal tequila, do you really need seven different artisanal tequilas at one time?

### **SHARED FANTASIES (OF PRICEY SOLUTIONS)**

Both Jonathan and I would love to have library shelving with a cool sliding ladder. This would solve much of our book and tchotchke distress, but we've been quite sure that it's out of our range. Lisa suggests pricing what we'd like anyway. Thinking about the future will give us something to work toward together and help us feel as though we're a team. We look online and learn that we need a custom job. (Despite Lisa's advice, we don't call for an estimate, since we have a Bat Mitzvah to pay for this year.) On the upside, Jonathan tells Lisa that I've always been good about pruning books and using the library instead of

buying, which makes me feel good. And he promises to work harder to get rid of more of his old books from college and grad school. (I'm the writer. I get to have more books.)

### **HOW TO TALK SO SPOUSES WILL LISTEN AND LISTEN SO SPOUSES WILL TALK**

The source of a lot of home-organizing conflict is poor communication, just as in every other area of marital life. Example: We've been talking about buying curtains to hide the book-toy-and-game-filled living-room shelves for, oh, a decade. But we can never agree on a fabric. Periodically Jonathan will bark at me about the fact that this is still unresolved. Lisa has us discuss this long-standing issue calmly. We establish that Jonathan secretly wants moving panels, not curtains, but hasn't communicated this to me. When I say that I hate panels, Jonathan agrees that curtains will be OK. The reason he hated all the fabrics I showed him in the past was that they were too busy. So Lisa gives us instructions. I will show Jonathan 20 samples of fabric, in solid colors or subtle small prints, and he will have to choose one right away. Then I will buy the curtains and help him hang the tracks. She writes this down, and I see she's composing an Action Plan. I've made to-do lists before, of course, but I like this one because it is being crafted by a professional-expert human being. And I'm obedient enough that if someone has marked with an asterisk things that need to get done immediately, I do them immediately, dammit!

Next we discuss Jonathan's dismay about clutter in the bedroom, which is also where I write articles like this one. And I have an epiphany: Jonathan doesn't like to see reminders of work in the bedroom because he feels guilty that the bedroom is my workspace. He worries that he is a crappy provider, since I don't have an office. I don't mind at all; I like writing in the bedroom. The kitties curl up next to my desk. But he needs reassurance. I promise to get rid of the tons of papers that induce stress for him. Cleaning out shelves upstairs allows me to move these stacks from the bedroom. Lisa continues poking around. "Why are you storing nine Ikea picture frames in your bedroom bookcase?" she asks me. I cannot answer this. Sometimes you do not see the loony-pants things you do until someone points them out.

### **TRUTH IN PARENTING**

All this talking is beginning to feel like real therapy. It gets even realer when Lisa mentions that it's important to communicate about clutter with kids, too. Uh-oh. I was of the "smuggle toys out of the house in the dead of night" school of divestiture. Lisa says that I have to respect the kids' preferences—they're 9 and 12, old enough to have input—and encourage them to work with me to get rid of toys and books that they've outgrown. I need to let them feel good about donating things themselves. (Lisa supplies us with a list of local charities that will pick up.) Regarding the many

small dishes around the house in which the girls and Jonathan amass coins, Lisa suggests an occasional family outing to a bank with a coin-sorting machine, which is fun to watch in action. We can donate the cash to a charity we pick together.

### LOVE IS IN THE AIR

Still in the bedroom, Lisa lasers in on a Balinese shadow puppet from our honeymoon that's currently propped in a Mason jar of pens. "Hang that," she orders. Again, her reasoning feels very couples-therapy-ish. Displaying a reminder of our honeymoon, in a prominent place, will help us think about our shared past and the kind of peaceful, joyful vacation that we will one day, God willing, have again after these infernal children are out of our house.

Another source of tension—a classic—is our one and only bedroom closet. Jonathan is being driven insane by my mess on the floor, and he's cranky that I have more space on the shoe rack. I agree to clear off the floor and store more shoes under the bed or in a basket downstairs, giving him half the rack. (Yes, I believe that as the female, I deserve more shoe space. But look how evolved I'm being.) Lisa also suggests hanging hooks above the shoe rack on the closet wall for even more storage. It's a great spot for belts and giant chunky necklaces that don't fit in my cute jewelry box. Jonathan looks thrilled and astounded by this notion. (Lisa is a fan of 3M Command Hooks, which attach with removable adhesive.)

Another easy fix in the bedroom: Move my giant, old scanner-printer-fax (still in the working bedroom from the days before wireless printing) to a hallway nook, where sits an ancient computer used for homework. I don't need a printer in the bedroom, and I almost never fax, because I live in the 21st century. The minute the printer is gone, Jonathan seems to breathe more easily.

### LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT

In the bathroom, we have two unusable hooks. (They've been there since we moved in, 14 years ago, and now a storage cabinet below renders them useless.) Lisa points out that they're at the ideal level for a print or a painting. Lo and behold, we have some art leaning against a living-room wall that's just right. A wee source of pleasure. She also tells us to hang additional towel hooks inside the tub, where they will be less noticeable and more useful—and to treat ourselves to some new towels. Ours are a bit threadbare. To make counter clutter less oppressive, she suggests buying an open-topped storage container for the kids' asthma medicine, which will keep it from migrating all over the room. Contained is tidier. And, realistically, kids aren't going to put things they use twice a day into a closed cabinet.



The week after Lisa's visit, I donate five boxes of books to charity and mail two giant boxes of toys to my nephew in California. Jonathan and the girls sort Lego and Playmobil into storage bins. We have a party to get rid of alcohol. (We do pretty well.)

### MILES TO GO BEFORE WE SLEEP

Yesterday I went through clothes that I finally acknowledged I will never fit into again. I brought two bags to the homeless shelter and filled a box with vintage treasures to give to my kids when they're older. (The Sally Draper-esque color-block knit miniskirt! The pieced-and-stitched rust suede A-line! The 1950s dirndl depicting a scary clown made of vegetables! Wait, why are you cringing?)

I've had friends who have only sort of joked that hiring a housecleaner has saved their marriages. I totally get that now. A single visit from a home organizer got us jazzed to work together to make productive changes in our lives. We still have a long way to go. We haven't chosen the curtain fabric yet, for instance. And by the time we get around to finding a carpenter to tell us about the library shelving that we can't afford, we'll probably be looking at the next Bat Mitzvah. But that's OK. Like marriage, organization is a journey, not a destination. ■