



it's not that
i'm more organized

adventures in organizing

She thought she
had her closets under
control—until a
professional showed her
how it's *really* done.

by Anne T. Donahue

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it's not that i'm more organized

than everybody I know. It's that I like to *think* of myself as the most organized person on the planet. I like arranging, rearranging, and getting rid of anything I'm not completely obsessed with. And if we're close enough, I'll come over to your place to do the same. Tidying is my love language: If I care about you, I'll show you the best way to fold a sweater.

But given the way my closets look, I might care about myself a little too much. I display my sweaters as though I still worked in retail, my dresses are hung according to color, and my shoes live in their original boxes—arranged by season, shade, and frequency of wear. Organizing has become my express route to feeling productive and in control.

So when *Real Simple* asked if professional organizer Lisa Zaslow could lend her expertise to my already organized apartment, I said yes—mainly because I was convinced that Lisa would end up learning from *me*, and that this would somehow turn into a piece about how perfect I was and how, while hugging and crying, Lisa and I decided to start our own business.

Alas, here's how it actually went down.

NAME YOUR GOALS

Lisa and I don't live in the same city (she's in New York; I'm outside Toronto), but that didn't hinder us. I shared photos of my apartment, we exchanged emails, and we had a number of phone calls that eventually forced me to answer the question "Anne, why is there a pile of folded sweatshirts on the closet floor?" (Because...I don't know?!)

But before we even got started, I had to fill out three worksheets for her. All were simple and straightforward. Lisa asks questions to help you pinpoint the challenges of your space (what is disorganization

costing you in time or money?) and articulate your more emotional goals (what mood do you want to create?). Upon such introspection, even I had to acknowledge the drawbacks of my closet organization system. It wasted space, stripped away personality, and made me feel stuck.

BE REALISTIC ABOUT THE APPROACH

Storage space is limited in my apartment, so I'd been keeping my miniature Christmas tree on the floor of my bedroom closet. Boxes of ornaments, two snow globes, and a light-up ceramic figurine were on the shelf above my clothes. Ideal? Absolutely not. But storing these things anywhere else felt like a hassle. If I put them in the hall closet, I'd have to transfer my purses, hats, gloves, and lint roller to my bedroom. And what if I didn't like them there? (Moving items onto a shelf seemed oddly permanent—don't ask me why.) Feeling overwhelmed is evidently normal when you reorganize: Your belongings trigger an avalanche of emotions, Lisa told me. Fortunately, professional organizers like her don't have that connection to other people's stuff. For them, it's all logic. So I took Lisa's suggestion to swap Christmas with purses and found more space in the process.

HATCH AN ACTION PLAN

That swap was only one of Lisa's many suggestions for making my space more functional. She asked if I'd be willing to take the robe I regularly slung over a mirror and relocate it to my closet door. (I was!) She recommended I purge my perfumes and keep my folded sweatshirts on that shelf instead. (Admittedly, it didn't make sense to have perfumes sitting so high up that I regularly forgot to use them.)

Generally, Lisa suggests nurturing positive vibes in your space. When she spotted the Nobody Cares sign hanging in my bedroom, she said, "It can't be good to

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see that every day.” But then I sprang to its defense—a friend made it for me because it’s the title of my memoir. Lisa and I both started laughing, and then we agreed: It absolutely must stay. Despite the words, the item held positive associations. (Plus, I argued, couldn’t it be seen as a *liberating* message?)

Lisa emailed me a detailed action plan, noting I should reach out if I started to worry about shaking up my routine. “I don’t want to say it’s a marathon, because that sounds daunting, but it’s not a sprint,” she warned. The trick is breaking the process down into steps: Identify your concerns, then find the tools that make sense for you. Shoe racks; clear, drop-front shoe boxes; and shelf dividers can clean up a front closet. Lidded boxes keep dust out of seasonal gear. Swing-arm pant hangers are perfect for scarves. Closet rod dividers can separate your outerwear (or any-wear) by style and season.

I plucked the floral robe off the standing mirror and placed it on the hook on my closet door, certain I wouldn’t notice a difference. But I did! Suddenly my room felt brighter and more aesthetically intentional. I liked being in it. Quietly accepting that I didn’t have it all figured out, I wanted to see what effect her other suggestions would have.

All of which was part of Lisa’s plan. Start small, with an area you see daily, so you earn a quick win and feel motivated to keep going. Embrace that feeling and come up with a few positive mantras: “I can do this,” “A little bit at a time,” “Fifteen minutes a day.”

CATEGORIZE YOUR CLUTTER

Anyone who’s seen TV shows about organizing knows that most people complain about visual clutter. “It could be papers, it could be a crammed closet,” Lisa says. That’s the stuff her clients confront first. Then it’s time to face the other type—the emotional clutter—which may have led to the problem in the first place.

Working with Lisa made me realize I’d been a hyperorganizer since I was little. I grew up in a tiny bungalow with my parents. Almost monthly, my mom and I would go through my toys and decide what to keep and what to donate. Whenever I won back enough shelf space to display a favorite Troll or Barbie, I felt like I’d achieved something—and I’d also

earn a little extra allowance money for my efforts. Organization was ultimately my shortcut to freedom: I’d be rewarded for parting with things I didn’t use, and I’d be in charge of my little world as I did so. Everything in my room had a purpose, and I could donate the stuff that reminded me of anything I’d outgrown. My emotional clutter was the belief that the joy I got from purging my room as a kid could be replicated as an adult.

My parents never insisted I get rid of things I really liked or wanted to keep. But the older I got, the more I began using organizing to wield power over the parts of my life that made me feel powerless. And in my (admittedly warped) way of thinking, I believed banishing something meant I’d “won” my imaginary battle with it. I micromanaged my living space affectionately, but it made me less likely to ask for help.

COMMIT TO THE SYSTEM

Living in an entirely new arrangement hasn’t been too difficult—thanks to my previous obsessive organizing behavior. But that doesn’t mean I won’t backslide. This week, pressed for time and stressed about work, I want desperately to sort through my belongings and send anything I possibly can to the thrift store. That routine is comforting and familiar. Then I remember what Lisa told me: This is a process, and setbacks will happen. But I now have the tools, ability, and information to get myself back on track.

I still like to organize, but maybe I don’t always have to be so ruthless. Because—contrary to what I initially thought—I don’t know everything. (And no, Lisa hasn’t reached out about starting a new business.) It turns out that letting somebody into your space every once in a while means you’ll learn something about who you are and why that is. Also, everybody needs help sometimes. Even one of the most organized people on the planet.

