

Chapter 1

Dealing with Clutter

In This Chapter

- ▶ Why anyone can get organized and why you should now
- ▶ Calculating the cost of disorganization in dollars and cents
- ▶ How organizing increases time, productivity, and good health
- ▶ Stopping clutter-causers in their tracks

I know you think clutter-busting is going to hurt. For many people, getting organized sounds less appealing than a trip to the dentist and more complicated. You may have put off cleaning up your life by figuring that if you're not organized yet, you must have the wrong personality type. Getting organized goes against the grain and only causes pain.

Then there are the more specific antiorganization arguments. "I don't have time," say many, mixing up the excuse with the exact reason to do it. Others worry that organization will limit their creativity or rob them of their spark. Some people steer clear because they fear that organizing systems might turn them into uptight rule-makers or rigid control freaks.

If a broad range of people didn't share these concerns, I wouldn't have a booming business as a professional organizer. My job, in my business and in this book, is to prove the power of putting everything in its place and how that improves all aspects of your life, from work to home, play, personal relationships, and professional reputation. Why get organized? How about recovering the 15 minutes a day you spend looking for your car keys, or the hour lost last week searching for a critical computer file saved in a dark corner of your directory? Getting dinner on the table with ease and cleaning up like a breeze? Inviting guests into your home without shame? What about finally winning the promotion you may have been passed up for because your desktop piles or late arrival at meetings have undermined your credibility? Wouldn't you like to leave the office earlier so you can get to know your friends and family again and earn more per hour than you did when you were 16?

The techniques in this book provide simple and proven ways to organize your life *the way you like to live it*. Get organized to achieve peak potential and enjoy lifelong peace.

Organizing myths and truths

Myth:

I wasn't born with an organized personality.

Getting organized will make me less creative.

I don't have time to get organized.

Getting organized will turn me into a control freak.

Truth:

Organization is learned, not inherited.

Organization frees the mind to think outside the box, and leaves you more time to do it in.

Organization saves time, yielding huge payoffs for the small amount of time invested in setting up systems that will last for life.

Organization reduces your need to exert control. Everything is already in its place — so you can relax instead.

Living in an Overstuffed World

Imagine that a tornado hit your house and whisked it away. What would you really need to start over again? What would you truly miss?

Say that an earthquake levels your office to rubble. How many missing items would you have to reassemble to get back to work? An accident lands you in the hospital. How much would the world really suffer because you didn't attend to all the obligations on your calendar? How much of the confusion could you have prevented with good systems that someone else could manage while you recovered?

It often takes dramatic thinking to help people sort out the productive elements from the clutter in their lives. Why? Because the world is overstuffed. Houses and offices are filled to the brim, and yet advertisers still beg consumers to buy more. Sandwiches get bigger all the time, and people do too. Cities are bursting at the seams, schools are overcrowded, and they've jammed so many seats onto airplanes that passengers are practically sitting on each other's laps. Society has adopted an overstuffed mentality, and then you wonder why you can't think clearly or feel peaceful and calm.

Getting organized is about *unstuffing* your life, clearing out the deadweight in places from your closet to your calendar to your computer, and then installing systems that keep the good stuff in its place. Organizing is a liberating and enlightening experience that can enhance your effectiveness and lessen your stress every day, and it's all yours simply for saying "No" to clutter.

Clutter happens when you don't put things in place, whether on your desk-top, inside the filing cabinet, in your calendar, or atop the kitchen counter. Bringing things into a room and not putting them back where they belong creates clutter. Leaving toys in the hallway, newspapers in the living room, or e-mail in your incoming queue clutters up your space. Unimportant obligations are clutter in the day. Jamming too many things in your home, office, or schedule — filling every space, littering your life — doesn't give you more power or pleasure. Random articles and activities give you clutter. By getting organized with the techniques in this book, you can leave space free to work, play, and be.

Piled-up clutter

Then there's that special form of clutter you may recognize with a guilty smile: the pile. While making a pile could seem like putting things away, nothing could be farther from the truth. Think about what happens when you make a pile: Now you have to dig through everything on top to find what you need, instead of simply going to the file or drawer or shelf where the item should be. Whether it's papers, toys, clothes, or computer disks, making piles makes work and wastes time.

Organization turns pilers into filers and helps you to put things away naturally and easily, because everything has a place.

Mental clutter

The most disorienting form of clutter is mental. Mixing up your mind with commitments you can't keep track of, things you can't find or don't know how to do, or chaotic surroundings can cause stress and block basic cognitive processes. If you find it hard to make a decision; if you frequently have to go back to the office, the store, or home to pick up something you left behind; if you're worried that you can't accomplish what's expected or needed, from cooking dinner to finalizing a deal, then you're probably suffering from the confusion caused by mental clutter. When you get organized, you'll gain planning, time-management, and placement techniques to clear your mind and de-stress your life. Getting organized is like growing new brain cells — an all-natural upgrade to your gray matter.

The Cost of Clutter

The reason for reading and using this book to organize your life is simple: Clutter of all kinds costs you dearly.

The costs of clutter range from hard cash to time, space, health, and your relationships with people. You may be unaware of the price you pay for overstuffing your life, but when you analyze the cost of clutter, the rewards of getting organized become clear.

Time

What's the one commodity we can never replace in this life? Time. Once it's gone, it's *gone*. Not a moment can be retrieved, relived, or replayed. Time is the most precious gift, yet we casually throw it away every day. Did you spend time looking for something this morning? Miss an appointment, train, or plane? Drag your way through a report after wasting your peak work time on opening the mail? Maybe you waited in rush hour traffic because you left too late. Perhaps you lost an hour of relaxation time because it takes too long to get dinner on and off the table, your laundry room is set up wrong, or you went to the grocery or office supply store without a list.

Every second counts. Getting organized helps you get things done fast so you can spend the extra time enjoying life.

Money

Hello, bottom line! The wallet is often where people feel things first, and disorganization could be draining yours. Consider your own situation, and take a minute to calculate the dollar cost of the clutter in your life based on the following:

- ✓ **Rent or mortgage:** All the square feet filled with junk in your home, office, or storage locker
- ✓ **Wage or salary:** The time you waste doing things inefficiently, twice, or without a plan *plus* the raises you haven't received because you're not working at peak potential
- ✓ **Overpaid for purchases:** Excess costs from buying at the last minute, from the wrong source, or in the wrong quantity

- ✓ **Duplicate purchases:** Cost of things you've bought duplicates of because you couldn't find yours, forgot you had one, or lost the instruction book or warranty to use it or get it fixed
- ✓ **Penalties:** Fees, interest, and penalties for late payments and bounced checks
- ✓ **Depreciation:** Loss of resale value of cars and other equipment you're not maintaining properly
- ✓ **Medical bills:** From doctor's visits to aspirin and stomach medications, all the money you spend because stress is sabotaging your health

Now imagine: What can you do with all that money when you get it back by getting organized?



Don't waste your money renting storage lockers or warehouse space. If you're using something so rarely that it's in offsite storage, you don't need it, so throw it away, sell it, or give it to charity. One of my clients paid to have the contents of two storage lockers moved to his new house in a faraway state, only to realize when the stored contents arrived that he didn't want most of the items anymore. Poor Robert; he could have used that money for fixing up his house instead.

Health

Getting things done when you're disorganized is hard enough, but how about when you're sick too? Over time, disorganization can actually contribute to disease. Stress can cause disorders from headache and fatigue to ulcers, high blood pressure, even heart disease. Missing checkups or neglecting treatments can allow conditions to get worse. Simply can't make the time to exercise? You could be shaving years off your life.

Just as being disorganized can make you sick, getting organized is a sound investment in your well-being. Reducing physical and mental clutter and creating easy self-care systems can give you the gift of health, now and far into the future.

Space

Close your eyes and imagine you're in a park, on a mountain, at the beach. What makes you feel so great to be there? It's that rarity of modern life — wide open space.

People today are so accustomed to being crowded that forgetting the value of physical space and letting yours get overstuffed with things you don't want or need is easy to do. Yet space creates appreciation for everything it contains. As they tell you in music class, without the rests, the notes lose all their interest. When you get organized, you can find out how to stop filling up space and let it stay empty, so you have room to breathe, dance, and dream.

Reputation and relationships

Missing birthdays. Blowing deadlines. Greeting guests with a harried face and house. Letting clients, colleagues, and your boss see you surrounded by piles of papers and supplies. What do you think clutter does to your reputation and relationships?

Clutter comes between people. At work, looking or acting disorganized presents a picture of incompetence that may make your boss hesitant to assign you projects or put you up for promotion. Teammates might be reluctant to work with you if they doubt your act is together. A messy desk, missed meetings, or misfiled memos can all inhibit your potential for money and growth.

In your personal life, the toll is just as high. A cluttered home puts your family on edge and discourages guests from having fun or even coming by. High-stress holidays and parties, late or poorly chosen gifts, leaving the kids waiting at soccer practice, forgetting to follow up on a sick relative or pick up your partner's dry cleaning when you promised can all lessen the love and laughter in your life. Is that a price you're willing to pay?

Getting organized can enhance all your interpersonal relationships by letting your talents shine. Order and clear expectations create a comfortable environment, freeing everyone up to enjoy and express themselves. Organization can boost self-esteem and the regard in which others hold you. This confidence will reflect in everything you do.

The Causes of Clutter

Clutter is costly but not inevitable — clutter is caused by patterns and practices that can be changed. If you have clutter-causing habits, I'm here to tell you that you are not alone. The age of abundance has affected everyone, and I have clients of all ages, backgrounds, and occupations who are equally unequipped to process all the information, products, and activities being pushed upon us today. You are living in a unique historical period in which people generally have more things and thoughts than ever before but are

finally facing the limits to growth. You may want to simplify, streamline, get to the essence of what's important, and at the end of the day have more time and money and less stress and stuff. But how?

Let's tackle the problem at the root, by looking at the causes of clutter.

You've got mail and other forms of information overload

Whether you're hooked up to the Internet, surfing a few hundred satellite TV channels, or simply trying to get through your mail and the daily paper, you're probably faced with all the facts you can handle and more, 24 hours a day. Just a short century ago, books, newspapers, and mail were about it in terms of information arriving at your door. Today the telephone has become a fifth limb that travels everywhere you go. Radio and television bombard the population with messages around the clock. E-mail, faxes, and the Internet broadcast information instantaneously, keeping millions up-to-the-minute on a world's worth of minutiae.

Knowledge is power, but information you don't need is clutter. Whether data is printed on paper, electronically encoded, or just bouncing around in your mind, information without a proper place is a waste of time and space. Getting organized will help you filter information flow and turn the tide of this new age to your advantage at work and play.

The drive to buy

Though the information age is still a little new, the consumer age is so well entrenched that buying has become second nature — whether you need it or not. The Sunday paper beckons you out to stores. The exciting ads in the evening entertainment can leave you dissatisfied with your lifestyle and eager to make up the difference for a few (or many) dollars. A culture built on free enterprise encourages people to compare themselves to their neighbors, not on the basis of inner riches or personal fulfillment but by the number of things in their houses and yards.

My main message when it comes to managing the drive to buy is: Be very afraid. Salespeople are pros. Advertisers go to school, attend training sessions, and earn advanced degrees finding ways to sell you things without regard for your needs. Their sole purpose is to sap your bank account and fill your available space. Then, surprise! You don't end up with the more fulfilling lifestyle they promised. Your big reward is an empty savings account and an overstuffed house. Driving the drive to buy are the standard, full-price temptations. And then there are the sneaky ones.

Sale: Your favorite four-letter word

You walk into any store and what's the first sign you see? SALE!

So you make a beeline to the display behind the sign to see all the ways you can save money by buying more today. Suddenly, shopping is not a matter of looking for what you came for but of choosing from what the store has put on sale. You're no longer matching a solution to a need. The seller takes over, telling you what to buy — even if you already have a sweater in that color, or own nothing to match, so now you need to buy a pair of pants — at full price — too. As you organize yourself and your home, you'll find it easier to put up a stop sign between you and the sale sign. You'll think of your nice neat closet . . . your nice full wallet . . . and you'll just say no.

Freebies

Even more appealing than a sale to our bargain-hunting soul is that other four-letter word: free. Free lunch, free toothbrush, free trip for two to Bermuda — this single syllable is a siren call to all acquirers. But free offers usually have a price. Either the item comes attached to something else that you have to buy and might not want, or you have to buy more later, or you have to spend time filling out rebate forms and matching them to receipts and getting them in the mail.

Let's say a certain brand is giving away a free toothbrush when you buy a tube of toothpaste. Great, you think, I need a toothbrush, so you buy it. But you use a different brand of toothpaste specially formulated for sensitive teeth, and the new tube sits around forever. Was that toothbrush free? Nope. It cost the price of the toothpaste you didn't use and the space to store it.

Maybe you spend 15 minutes filling out a \$1 rebate. Isn't your time worth more than \$4 an hour? Add in the cost of the stamp and envelope, and you're really in the hole.

Then there are the notorious offers where you get a free book or CD if you agree to buy ten more during the year. Would you buy ten books otherwise? Do they have the books you want? At the end of the year, will you have read them all? Any? Do you have space on your shelf for ten more books?

Even true giveaways — pens, mugs, calendars, caps, knickknacks — that promote a company or product aren't free. You're advertising at the cost of the space in your life.

I've already talked about the costs of clutter. As you read this book and become more clutter-conscious, you'll free yourself from free things that come at a price.

Warning: This car stops at garage sales

Many cars have such a bumper sticker. The warning can at least help prevent accidents from the sudden stops, if not the clutter disaster that can result from garage-sale shopping.

I admit that I once had a garage sale problem myself. When my girls were young, they liked to take their little wallets full of pennies, nickels, and dimes and go trolling for clothes, costume jewelry to play dress-up, puzzles, games, books, toys; once we even landed a pair of roller skates. But as I started to see my house fill up, I realized what was happening: Everyone else was putting out their clutter, and I was taking it home and making it mine. How did I recover from this organizing error? I turned around and had my own garage sale. What came in the front door went out the garage door. (Now, of course, I don't let clutter in any door at all.) For ideas on having your own garage sale, see Chapter 24 in the Part of Tens.

Organizing principles show you that if you do buy something used, you should check to be sure you need it and that it works. Are all the parts there? Does it look nice? If it needs repair, can you take care of it easily, cheaply, within the next week?

Getting organized will also help you drive on by those garage sales and get on with your life.

The cute effect

One quick definition of the word *cute* is useless. Cute things are rarely high-value purchases, but they have a way of getting you to open your wallet. Probably the reason the thing is sending a smile across your face is because it's so silly — a wild and crazy dress you'd never wear outside the fitting room, a really dumb joke on a coffee mug, a talking tie. The problem is that cute (or stylish, or wild, or silly) wears off fast. Puppies are cute too, but you better not buy one unless you eventually want a grown-up dog.

As you discover how not to clutter up your life, you'll find yourself less attracted to things of only momentary meaning. You'll gravitate to acquiring items that will last and matter. You'll buy less "cute."

Gifts that keep on taking

A gift, almost by definition, is something you didn't choose — so you may or may not want it. But a gift is also a token of affection or esteem, so you have to keep it, right?

The important thing to remember about gifts is that they're meant to make you happy. Clutter doesn't do that. Clutter messes up your life. So observe the true spirit of giving by returning gifts you don't want to the store,

exchanging them for something you can use, or putting the refund money in the kids' college fund. Maybe you know someone who really wants or needs the item. Give it to them. (Don't just pass on clutter, though. That is *not* the spirit of giving.)

There are occasional cases, usually involving good friends or relatives, in which the giver expects to see the gift in use. Does that mean you have to display the ugly vase from Aunt Susie or wear the so-not-you sweater from a friend all the time? Of course not. The true clutter-busting solution is to tell Aunt Susie the vase broke and your friend that the cat clawed the sweater to shreds or you spilled coffee all over it and the ugly stain won't come out — then quietly return or donate the gifts. If you prefer not to fib, put the vase away in a remote cupboard and the sweater on a high closet shelf. Get the vase out when Aunt Susie comes to visit. Wear the sweater once in awhile when you see your friend. Don't let things you don't like take up prime space in your life.

Saving for later

Did your parents teach you to save for a rainy day? Great. Go have a garage sale, get rid of all the junk, and put the cash in the bank for the day you lose your job, leave your relationship, or make another major life change. Clothes you can't or don't wear anymore, old appliances and dinner plates, outdated files and papers, and extra boxes of staples simply aren't going to make the difference on that rainy day. Though *someday* may always seem just around the corner, the chapters that follow will help you make more of today by clearing away the clutter you're saving for later. Focusing on the present can yield many future benefits.

Souvenirs and mementos

Souvenirs are another form of saving for later, trying to capture a moment in a thing. When travel becomes a quest to acquire objects to remember you were there instead of devoting yourself to being there, you're cheating yourself now and cluttering up your later. Why not skip the souvenir shops and loll on the beach, lay back in a café, or take in a museum or show instead? The word *vacation* comes from *to vacate*, which is hardly what you're doing when you fill up your suitcase with *tchotchkes* to take back home.

You want to remember special moments. This book offers hints on how to snap photos and shoot videotapes packed with personal meaning; catalog your archives for easy, anytime enjoyment; select the special accents from your travels and adventures that spice up your life, and leave the junk behind.

Aunt Babe's gifts

I was the only relative living nearby when my Great-Aunt Babe decided she was getting old and wanted to start passing on some of her things, which she had plenty of. She and Uncle Abe had lived in their house since the 1930s or so, and though it was very neat; boy, was it packed full, so I greeted her announcement with some trepidation. Still, she was like a grandmother to my girls and very dear to me, so I dealt with her gifts and learned some good strategies in the process.

Gift #1: Don't want or need it. Aunt Babe's first gift was simple: some cloth doilies for the holidays. Though I didn't want them, it was easy to take them and pass on to my sister, who did.

Gift #2: Needs work but useful. The next visit to Aunt Babe's house was a little more nerve-racking. She had some chairs, she said. Oh no, I thought. I have zero appreciation for antiques (what can I say?), and it would be tough to get rid of an entire set of chairs, let alone explain their absence when Aunt Babe came over. But lo and behold, Babe pulled out these light wood chairs with gorgeously carved backs that I absolutely loved. The only problem was that they were upholstered in an awful shade of green. I took them directly to the furniture shop — and the key word here is *directly* — and

had them recovered in a shade I liked. Transformed by a simple fix from ugly to beautiful and very useful for parties and holidays, those chairs are still with me, though Aunt Babe's been gone for more than ten years.

Gift #3: I hate it, the kids love it. The next time, Aunt Babe pulled a grandmother's trick and applied her gift-giving wiles directly to my daughters. "Girls, would you like those shell collections on the wall?" she innocently asked. We're talking two truly bad-looking spray-painted shell collections that had me groaning and the girls, age 3 and 5 at the time, jumping up and down with glee. Nothing to be done here. To them, the shells were a piece of Aunt Babe. Those shell collections hung in my basement for 15 years until I moved. Some gifts you just can't fight.

Gift #4: I hate it, the kids hate it. The fourth time, Aunt Babe bypassed me again, offering the girls an old chenille bedspread. Chenille apparently has none of the appeal of shells to little girls, and it went over like a lead balloon with them. The spread looked old and decrepit to me too. I didn't want it, they didn't want it, but what were we going to do, hurt an old woman's feelings? We took the old spread and I donated it to charity.

Why get organized? To collect the payoff of putting everything in its place: More time and less stress. Cash in your pocket and peace of mind. Peak productivity, better health, and more rewarding relationships.

Flip through the pages of this book to see how you can put organization to work for *you*, from planning a meal to pulling off a strategic project; from beautifying your home to cleaning up your computer. Get organized so you can make more of your life while working less, and let these proven systems take care of the rest.

