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When space allows, adding a chair or sitting area to your closet makes getting dressed easier. Photo courtesy ClosetMaid.

SMARTER STORAGE

Clear the clutter in closets and beyond with less-mess strategies and solutions

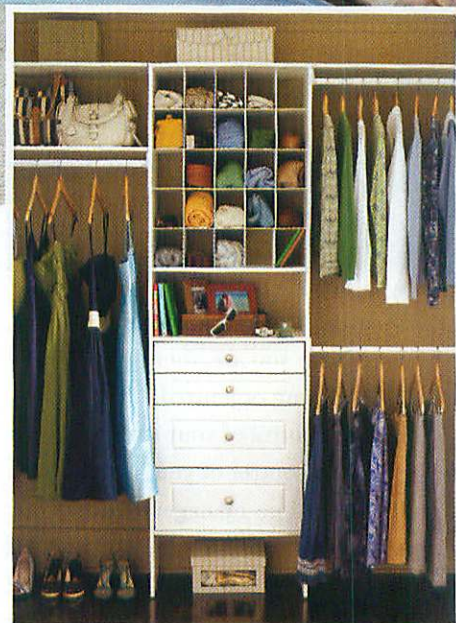
Written by TAMA SWAN

It's a common human experience, spanning time zones, class lines and cultures. It starts with the sound of a light switch and concludes with the sight of a cavernous, dark space instantaneously illuminated, revealing an amassment of stuff. Poly/cotton-blend sweaters, tennis rackets and other recreational miscellany, unpacked moving boxes, unworn clothing with price tags dangling from their sleeves — if it can fit through a standard 2-foot, 8-inch door frame, chances are you can find one stored in a closet somewhere.



Try keeping rarely used and out-of-season items in labeled storage boxes placed up high so they're out of the way. Matching containers keep it tidy and give it a streamlined look. *Photo courtesy Poliform USA.*

INSET Nestled between hanging clothes, drawers and shelving maximize space. *Photo courtesy ClosetMaid.*



The motives behind what we store in our closets are as varied as what collects within their confines. Maybe an item is kept at the ready for spontaneous use, or perhaps its usefulness is infrequent but imperative when the time comes — think folding tables and chairs for large-scale entertaining or clothing suitable for extreme temperatures. Sentimentalists store keepsakes from the past; chronic hoarders are less discriminating and may not know what's in their closets or why it's there.

In her book, "Let Go of Clutter" (McGraw-Hill), organizing expert Harriet Schechter hypothesizes that having a backlog of belongings around the house is intrinsically human and the underlying reason behind our accumulation of

possessions is genetic. "Throughout history and prehistory, humankind has been on a relentless quest to acquire more — more food, more territory, more people, more money, more information, more stuff," she says. "When feast or famine was a reality, as it was until relatively recently, stockpiling of food was a survival strategy."

Schechter goes on to point out that human biology hasn't caught up with reality. "It's as though the famine button is stuck in the 'on' position while we are in the perma-feast mode. So the hunter has become the hunted; we are possessed by our possessions."

Some homes are teeming with piles, collections and stacks of stuff, and the occupants are perfectly comfortable. But if you feel overburdened, overwhelmed or

unable to manage your clutter, it's time to do something about it.

GET TO THE BOTTOM OF IT

"Being organized is different than being neat and tidy," says certified professional organizer Scott Roewer, who owns Solutions by Scott, LLC, in Washington, D.C. "Clutter is anything that gets in the way, both physically and emotionally, in our daily lives." Roewer's clients vary from couples with kids and single city dwellers trying to maximize their space to people whose clutter build-up is suffocating them



EXPERT OPINION

With professional organizer Scott Roewer

To simplify the process of cutting through clutter, Roewer breaks it into five easy steps.

1. Empty the closet of everything and clean the interior.
2. Sort your clothing into categories: shirts, slacks, suits and sweaters. Don't forget to include a charity category as well.
3. One grouping at a time, add the categories back into the closet.
4. Turn the hangers backward as you return things to the closet. Once you wear an item, place the hanger forward like normal. At the end of the season, all the backward hangers are clothes you didn't wear.
5. Add organizing accessories to outfit your closet.

and they don't know how to contain it. No matter who you are, there is a lot to be gained by getting organized.

"Being in control of your stuff, not your stuff being in control of you, is important to happiness, time management and our overall daily functioning," Roewer says. "If you organize your physical space, you'll be on a direct path toward a clutter-free mind and feel less stress in your personal relationships."

The clutter continuum is vast, but the weak spot is usually the closet. "If you're at the point where your clothes don't fit in the closet, you haven't seen the floor in the last year or you've forgotten what's on the top shelf, it's time to regain control of your closet," Roewer says.

The first step toward closet nirvana is to consider how you want it to look, feel and function. If you work from home and wear jeans and t-shirts during the week, your closet needs plenty of shelving and drawers at the ready. If you work in

a high-rise and sport business attire most days, you'll need extra hanging rods for dress pants and skirts. Decide what applies and what doesn't in the existing space and envision how the new closet will look.

After this (hold on to your perfectly ripped-in-one-knee, college-aged Calvins), Roewer advises cutting through your collections and editing. A closet that is jam-packed will remain that way unless it's downsized. He asks his clients to routinely purge and empty closet contents, sorting the items into groups for keeping and for giving away.

Once you decide what will stay and what will go, outfit your storage areas with accessories that maximize space and encourage organization. "You can double the size of your closet by adding shelves and rods at varying heights," says Brian Liverman, president of Closets Your Way. Roewer recommends clothing rods that allow hangers to slide back and forth unimpeded by supports, drawers and cabinets that slide smoothly without getting off their tracks and plenty of shelving, either wire or melamine.

If your current closet already has these components and it's still unorganized, try streamlining things even further with drawer dividers, racks made for ties, belts and scarves, lidded boxes, shoe racks and jewelry organizers. For comfort and beauty as well as function, he also suggests adding storage cabinets with glass fronts, a place to sit while getting dressed and lights that turn on automatically when the door is opened.

KEEP IT CLEAN


When the task is done and everything in your closet has a place and a purpose, how do you keep it that way? Maintenance. "Take time in your closet as you get dressed," Roewer explains. "Just like a diet, if you begin your old habits, the weight will come right back."

Roewer says it's important to follow

some basic storage rules in the space you've created. This includes placing dirty clothes in the hamper, putting shoes back in their place and removing dry-cleaning bags.

Decisiveness counts in practical places, and professional organizers say a primary pitfall in an otherwise organized closet is chronic indecision. "If it's clean enough to wear again, then it's clean enough to hang up or fold and place back in the closet or drawer," Roewer notes.

He also promotes the "one in, one out" rule. Following this guideline means keeping a shopping bag in the closet and filling it with outmoded items when you bring home a replacement. "Buy new jeans, and the old pair goes out; find a new skirt, and replace an old one by dropping it in your sack. Once the sack is full, give it to your favorite charity," he says.

One final closet tip: buy less. Roewer says some people really do have too little closet space. For the most part, however, he says we just have too much stuff. The proof is in both the jeans we buy and the genes we're born with. 

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