

Let it go, let it go, let it go

Add storage space by clearing clutter Pro's tips for tackling your junk

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BY DEE GIBNEY

Ask Tina and Paul Oliveira what their biggest clutter predicament is and you get furrowed brows and a long pause.

"That's the problem," says Tina, a program consultant with the federal government. "We don't know where to start."

There's the golf equipment, sleeping bags, tents, camping gear, suitcases, Paul's notebooks from grade school, his binders from an industry he left years ago, empty appliance boxes, bikes, photo gear and thousands of photos, car parts, bits of lumber and DIY supplies. And then there's Tina's three garbage bags of shoes, Paul adds.

All in a 900-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of an Annex triplex.

Jena Argiropoulos is overwhelmed by the mountain of paperwork from the courses she takes.

Jenny Hong has clothes in a range of sizes, now in plastic bags, after she lost 40 pounds.

Sylvie Desroches moved from a house to a 750-square-foot condo on the Esplanade three years ago and no longer has the storage space she once took for granted. She's still unsure of how to organize her belongings. And her old furniture now seems too large in the small space.

They've come to the Learning Annex on a soggy evening recently to hear professional organizer Brenda Borenstein tell them the how to increase their living space by 20 per cent.

You have to be ready to let go, says Borenstein, who along with her trusty crew, can transform chaos into calm in a matter of hours. She recently successfully tackled the basement, studio and office at Toronto designer Jane Hall's furniture and accessory store on Pape Ave.

Thirty years of accumulated fabric samples, correspondence, drawings and design boards were squeezing Hall out of her space.

"There were no work surfaces left," says Hall, whose business grew faster than her ability to organize it. The clutter soon overwhelmed her and she spent more time looking for items than getting things done.

"The basement was a solid wall of boxes," says Borenstein. She and a team of five people spent two days at Hall's. When they were done, 60 boxes and garbage bags filled Hall's parking space behind

the store. "You have to make up your mind that you want to take the steps it takes," Borenstein says. "If someone is motivated and focused the work gets done."

Borenstein advises getting rid of all the chipped and broken stuff, the collection of Petro-Canada glasses, old lipsticks – things you don't like or use.

"Don't keep anything you don't need. Take it to Goodwill. You'll feel like Santa Claus," says Borenstein. "If your space was a room pictured in a magazine, think of what it would have in it. Then take the stuff that doesn't belong out."

What if you just don't have the space for the stuff you do use, like the camping and sporting gear that is overrunning the Oliveiras' apartment?

Rent storage for things that aren't in season, Borenstein advises. And consider turning a second bedroom into a custom closet, using the available wall space for cabinets.

For those with a paper pileup like the one that's plaguing Argiropoulos, Borenstein suggests getting a set of banker's boxes and files and starting to organize things in loose categories: course notes, bills, personal, research.

Establish a filing system and buy a filing cabinet if you have room. Or Argiropoulos could keep the organized files in the boxes, as long as she can access them as needed.

Get things off the floor, Borenstein suggests. Open mail over the recycling bin so you keep only what is essential. Then file it.

Once you've let things accumulate, you're faced with a huge job and it's easy to get discouraged, Borenstein says, so don't try to take it on all at once.

Break it down into manageable chunks. Start with three easy things you can accomplish – maybe it's clearing the kitchen and bathroom counters and your dresser. Start with one hour a week if you must, but don't let it paralyze you.

"You need uninterrupted time so nothing else distracts you. So schedule time. Treat it like a doctor's appointment."

Borenstein says people have to be hard on themselves, "but then you'll feel like a million bucks. The goal is to have a highly functional space."

Get rid of the fat pants, the skinny pants, the clothes your sister gave you that she outgrew and the stuff you got on sale but never wore, Borenstein adds. Then you're down to the items that look good on you and that you wear – and you now have space to grow.

"Now you don't have to keep buying new pants on sale because you have nothing to wear because you can't find the 10 pair that you already have," Borenstein says.

She recommends sorting and organizing (things to keep, things to give away or sell, things to throw out) before you clear a space; otherwise you'll just be moving stuff around.

"Find a home for your stuff – side tables with drawers for the TV remote and for pens and notepaper.

"Use baskets to store magazines and odds and ends. Keep a basket near the front door for mail so it's not strewn all over the house.

"Make sure each member of the family has his or her own basket for laundry so it doesn't end up on the floor."

If you have too much furniture, or pieces that no longer work in your home, let an auction house or consignment store take it. Use the money to buy something new that is more suitable.

Once a small space is uncluttered and organized, it becomes much more functional. A cleared desk can double as a table.

Lay out a beautiful cloth and you can throw a dinner party.

You now not only have more space, but more time as well because you know where everything is and you aren't wasting hours hunting for things.

It's a money-saver, too, because you're not buying things you don't need to replace things you can't find, Borenstein says.