

LivingWell

CHOOSE THE RIGHT EXERCISE FOR YOUR LONGEVITY PAGE 3C



Professional organizer Marla Ottenstein stands in her closet at her home in North Naples. NICOLE RAUCHEISEN/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

GET ORGANIZED

Southwest Florida's professional organizers are here to help you

Ashley Collins | Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

You may have three small children who leave a trail of toys in their wake. Or maybe a two-car garage that serves merely as storage space for long-forgotten items. The mess is manageable until it's not. When it becomes too overwhelming to tackle, who are you going to call? Maybe try a professional organizer.

By now, you've probably heard of Marie Kondo, the Japanese organizational maven whose hit Netflix series "Tidying Up" has sparked a donate-or-toss movement across U.S. households. But Kondo is far from the only expert at her craft.

In Southwest Florida, there are a handful of professional organizers who use their tried-and-true methods to help families take control of their mess and live in harmony.

But what is a professional organizer and when do you need one? And if you don't have money to spend, what are some helpful tips to tackle the mess on your own?

Three local organizers answer your burning questions.

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Organize

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What does a professional organizer do?

Marla Ottenstein calls herself a “problem solver.” She drops into someone’s home Mary Poppins-style and helps them declutter and organize, everything from the kitchen pantry to the garage. The North Naples resident shares much of her knowledge in her Get Organized columns.

“I come into someone’s home and work with a client to teach them how to become and stay organized,” Ottenstein said. She also offers moving and staging services.

The Naples-based organizer is one of six in Southwest Florida certified by the National Association of Productivity and Organizing Professionals (NAPO).

NAPO defines a professional organizer as someone who “supports evaluation, decision-making, and action around objects, space and data; helping clients achieve desired outcomes regarding function, order and clarity.”

Ottenstein wants to be clear she isn’t a maid, although she does help clients clean their houses throughout the organizational process. Her ultimate goal is to transfer her organizing skills to her client.

“There’s nothing better than someone saying I don’t need your services anymore.”

When do I need one?

Roxy Hambleton says she usually gets the call when someone is facing a major life change like a divorce, death, moving or retirement.

“At that point in their lives, they may stop to look around their house and say to themselves, ‘How did it get like this?’” said Hambleton, a certified professional organizer who owns and operates Positively Organized serving clients in Naples, Bonita Springs and Fort Myers.

Like Ottenstein, Hambleton is a general professional organizer who offers corporate and residential services but also specializes in hoarding cases.

Learning how to properly declutter and organize isn’t just beneficial for keeping up with appearances, Hambleton said. These skills can leave a lasting psychological impact.

A clean space helps raise a person’s self-esteem and shifts their energy and focus. Although we live in a consumer-driven society, where more is seen as best, some people crave the peace that may come with less stuff, she said.

The approach works for her clients with hoarding tendencies and those who are slightly unorganized.

“Both groups are all so filled with shame because of the mess and often succumb to negative self-talk.”

Hambleton transfers her skills to her clients to help turn their negative mindset into a positive one.

When working with hoarders, she uses a slightly different approach. Hoarding is a disorder diagnosed as a mental illness.

The American Psychiatric Association defines a person suffering from a hoarding disorder as someone who excessively saves items that others may view as worthless. They have difficulty getting rid of or parting with possessions, leading to endless clutter. People with a hoarding disorder often save random items and store them haphazardly.

“They give items a lot of meaning, and it’s literally painful for them to let them go, so they end up keeping everything,” said Hambleton, also a member of the Lee County Task Force on Hoarding.

She helps these clients by teaching them how to let go, developing a plan to prevent future clutter and connecting them to a support group or coach.

What to expect when you’re expecting an organizer

Typically a consultation takes place before an organizer gets to work. That’s when a client and the organizer form a plan of action and see if their visions align.



Shoes are neatly organized in Marla Ottenstein’s master bedroom closet at her home in North Naples. NICOLE RAUCHEISEN/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

If everything goes well, then the work begins. When Ottenstein walks into a home or office, she’s not coming in with the intent of throwing everything away.

“We don’t make someone get rid of stuff. I suggest they may get rid of an item if they don’t need it anymore. It’s a gentler process, especially if they have trouble giving sentimental items away,” she said.

Let’s say someone wants to hold on to their mother’s fur coat for sentimental reasons. Instead of letting it gather dust in a closet or giving it away completely, Ottenstein suggests they repurpose it.

“I’d say something like, ‘let’s make a pillow cover or a throw blanket out of it,’” she said.

If boxes and boxes of old photos are taking up most of her client’s closet space, rather than throwing away most of the photos, Ottenstein would suggest saving many of them on a flash drive while still keeping some stored in a box or two.

Every client is different, she said. Sometimes all they need is a few hours of her time, while others need her for several months.

And the way Ottenstein approaches the organizational process depends on her client as well.

She likes using the room-by-room approach where you organize one room at a time. She tailors it to her client’s needs and wants.

“There is no cookie-cutter method when it comes to organizing,” Ottenstein said. “There are no rules. ... The goal is to help people so they can enjoy their lives.”

Then there’s Marie Kondo’s KonMari method that encourages tidying by category — not by location — like clothes, books, papers, miscellaneous items and sentimental items. She’s often heard telling clients on her Netflix series to keep only those items that “spark joy.”

When Hambleton works with clients, she likes taking away any and all distractions.

“The TV shouldn’t be on and they should avoid taking a call unless it’s an emergency. Once we get going, it’s best not to slow the momentum,” she said.

What to do with old paperwork

If you have mountains and mountains of paperwork, Tracy Colleran can help with that. This certified professional organizer specializes in bookkeeping. She owns and operates Straighten Up Inc. based in Southwest Florida.

Colleran started her professional organizing company in 2007 to help disorganized individuals feel more in control of their surroundings.

Paperwork may not be as sentimental as household items, but she said many of her clients end up accumulating so much paper they don’t know what’s trash and what’s worth keeping. Often important documents get lost in the shuffle.

“A lot of residents living here rely on physical copies of documents, but they don’t know when it’s OK to let it go or keep,” Colleran said.

Depending on her client, she may use a digital or traditional approach like file cabinets to get their life in order.

Tips for organizing on your own

Start small, says Hambleton. If you’re thinking of tackling mess on your own because you don’t have money or time to invest in a professional organizer, Hambleton recommends starting with small spaces like junk drawers before moving on to a large space like a garage.

For her own clients, Hambleton often follows a specific guideline which she said can be helpful for do-it-yourself organizers. It’s called SPACE, an acronym that stands for sort, purge, assign a home, containerize and equalize. It was created by New York Times best-selling author and organizer Julie Morgenstern.

How does it work?

Let’s say you plan on organizing your bedroom closet first. Start by removing everything and grouping similar categories together like purses and pants. Then decide what you want to donate, toss or keep. That’s the purging process. The next step is to assign a home in your closet for all the items you want to keep. You can categorize your clothes and accessories based on color or type. For smaller accessories like shoes and handbags, use bins or containers to keep the items organized. That’s the containerize step. Equalize is the last thing on your list. That’s when you create a maintenance program by incorporating daily cleanups for starters.

Here’s how to find a certified professional organizer

Visit NAPO’s website and enter your ZIP code in the search directory to find the nearest certified professional organizer and see what services they offer and at what rates.