

Get Organized for the Planet

Eliminating Your Clutter in an Eco-Friendly Way

By Nancy Castelli

Getting organized is all about sustainability. Putting the “stuff” that doesn’t serve you back out into the planet to serve someone else is simply the right thing to do. “What does getting organized have to do with the planet,” you may ask? Great question. Let me explain. Everyone and everything on the planet is some form of matter and energy spinning together, evolving and all connected. Human beings are a lot of energy and a bit of matter. A tree, on the other hand, is more matter than energy. Let’s take it even smaller now—down to those shoes in your closet. They, too, are bits of matter and energy—the energy of a tree for its wood, perhaps a cow for its leather and of course the human hands from which they were formed. Parts of this spinning earth came together to create a pair of shoes whose purpose is to protect your feet, allowing you to walk comfortably. When they are on your feet, supporting you, you give purpose for all the matter and energy that went into that pair of shoes. On the other hand, when they sit at the bottom of your closet, simply gathering dust, the purpose of those shoes is lost.

With this premise, I hope you can see how getting organized is all about sustainability. It’s about making sure that the stuff that you have around you supports and serves you. If it doesn’t, consider that it is actually bad for you and for our planet to hold on to possessions that could be out there serving someone else. All of the co-authors

in this book can give you one reason or another to motivate you to get organized. Allow me to give you one more. Do it for the planet—to sustain this planet for all of our children and their children, and so on. I invite you to embrace this philosophy, make it your own and put some balance back into the planet. Turn matter into energy.

The Top 10 Best Ways to Eliminate your Clutter Sustainably

To get you started, here is a countdown of the top ten easiest, sustainable ways to eliminate the things you have that aren't serving you. In reviewing these top ten, you will find that there are a limited number of local resources cited. When possible, I will site national sources or web-based sources, but most of the places available to you for the green elimination of your clutter will be right around the corner from where you live or work. Your favorite web search engine makes it easy to find resources. Always look for options that are nearby, easy to get to or within route of your typical day. Discover the joy of giving back to your community by taking a little time to do some research for your best local options, with the guidance here to get you started.

10. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

Commonly known as the three Rs, the reduce, reuse and recycle principle—in that order—is simply a way to live by producing less waste. You can have a major impact on the amount of trash that ends up in the landfills simply by changing your habits about buying, using and discarding your stuff. Embrace a more planet-friendly attitude by producing less waste in the first place. Practice the three Rs by buying products that are less toxic or contain less packaging,

using reusable containers and other reusable items, maintaining and repairing products, participating in recycling programs and buying products made from recycled materials.

First, reduce what you use, which starts in the store by buying less stuff. So important is the idea of reduction of use for sustainability that you will learn much more about this a little later when we get to #1.

Second, reuse or repurpose your stuff to extend its life. For example, if a container or bin can be used elsewhere, repurpose it instead of buying something new. The planet already gave a piece of itself up for that garbage pail. If you don't like how it looks in the bedroom, use it as a bucket in the garage. If you organized your receipts and no longer need that shoebox, use it inside a drawer as a divider. Be creative.

There are many ways to reuse items that would otherwise go into the trash.

Finally, most of us understand that recycling means to process used items in order that the material can be used to make new products.

Many people rely on recycling entirely, giving no thought to the idea of reducing and reusing. Don't fall in that complacent place. Be aware that in many municipalities, it is still a challenge to recycle and much of what goes in to the recycling bins is still not effectively recycled.

While it is great to recycle as much as possible, don't forget the front end by reducing and reusing wherever you can.

For example, you can go out and buy a bottle of water and then recycle it. However, that is not as good as using a bottle or container you already have over and over again. You reduced by not buying something new, reused an existing container and eliminated the need to recycle. Most importantly you decreased the need for the water bottling company to produce a new bottle of water to replace the one you just bought.

9. Find a Donation Center You Love

Most of us are familiar with the concept of donating possessions to a donation center. However, I still see people with bags of clothing and such that end up sitting stagnant in a corner as clutter. Make it easy to get these items out of your space and into a new space by having options.

- Have a donation box in every bedroom of the house so adults and children in the household get into the habit of filling it up when clothing and other household items are ready for a new home. This is a great way to start good habits with your children.
- Choose a donation source whose mission you value. That will motivate you and your loved ones to donate often. If you are a pet lover, find a pet organization that takes donations.
- Make sure that the donation center maintains hours that work with your busy schedule and is in an easy-to-get-to location near you. Ideally a place somewhere on your normal work or errand route or near a place you go often. That way it's easy to get these items out of your space and into the hands of someone else who can appreciate them.

The Salvation Army (www.salvationarmyusa.org) and Goodwill (www.goodwill.org) are great national sources that may have a location in your local area. Still, remember to explore local organizations you wish to support. You may end up with two or four favorite places to take the variety of your stuff (more ideas to follow). As it becomes a part of your routine, soon you will see how easy it is to visit those centers and serve the planet!

8. Share Your Entertainment Collections

There are many sources that can use your books, CDs and other entertainment possessions. In fact, in some instances you can even make money by donating this type of clutter. Used book and music stores will often give you money back or store credit for second-hand books, CDs and DVDs.

For music and instruments, check around your city or neighborhood for a music or art school. The young students in most of these institutions would love to reuse the musical instruments that are gathering dust in your home. Unfinished projects are clutter too. If you haven't yet taken those music lessons or haven't played that guitar in years, perhaps it's time to let it go to a dedicated student.

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7. Unload Your Extra Office Supplies

In the homes and offices I have organized, there is almost always an overstock of some type of office and craft supplies. We keep binders, half used notebooks, pencils/pens/markers, colored paper and more, expecting that it might get used someday. Times have changed and it is very possible that you won't use all those overstock items. Schoolteachers, after-school programs or childcare centers, on the other hand, with their incredibly shrinking budgets could really use your office supplies and craft items today! Teachers have to fend for themselves to create that next art or craft activity for students and often have to use their own money to get the supplies. I have yet to

come across a school that refuses this type of donation item. Eliminate your office supply clutter and serve your community school or childcare center.

6. Get Rid of Your Tech and Electronic Gear

New technology gadgets are fun and everyone wants to have the most current version. This means most of us end up with lots of dated tech and electronic gear. You can try to sell it on eBay or Craigslist. These are both great resources, but it does require you put aside the time to get it done—processing the transaction means email exchanges, phone calls, setting appointments, shipping it out and so on.

There is also another great way to get rid of your possibly valuable, but definitely toxic-to-the-planet, high tech devices and gadgets. Check out Gazelle (www.gazelle.com). At this site you can calculate the value of your gadgets and Gazelle will give you a quote and even send you a box or envelope to mail it to them, including prepaid postage! Gazelle will resell or recycle the product for you. While you might get a little less than you would on eBay or Craigslist, you won't spend nearly as much of your valuable time.

What do you do with all the tech gear and gadgets that don't work or the parts, pieces and components? Watch for local services that collect tech items. Schools and non-profit organizations often have weekend "tech collection days" to raise money or simply as a service. Also, check at a nearby computer and electronics stores that often take these items.

Finally, do a search on Earth 911 (www.earth911.org.) If you can't find a local service, you can at least make a suggestion on this site to let them

know you want a local service in your area.

Organizing for the Planet MUST KNOW website:

www.earth911.com

Earth 911 is an environmental services company that has consolidated environmental hotlines, web sites and other information sources nationwide into one convenient network. The site is well organized with a bevy of information to educate you on the 3 Rs and community-specific sources for your end-of-life items.

5. Discard Lotions, Potions and Notions, Including Meds

If you travel often, you may have a vast collection of unused hotel soap and shampoo samples. You may have only partially used lotions and soaps that you just didn't like. Most donation centers won't take your toiletries, especially if they have been opened and used. Instead, do a little research and find a nearby homeless or battered women's shelter. There are facilities like this everywhere. These places won't mind if you have an open bottle of shampoo or a half-used bottle of mouthwash you don't like. The people they serve can use these items either at the shelter or to start their new home. Make a call or two or ask around, keeping in mind that for obvious reasons, battered women's shelters in particular are prolific but usually discreet as to their location.

Now, about those unused or expired medications—first, please be advised that they are usually toxic to the planet. Flushing them down the toilet or putting them in the trash is not a good idea. You are poisoning your own land and water supply. Look for a hospital, medical facility or a drug store that will take your meds and reuse or

dispose of them properly. Earth 911 may also provide a local source.

See “Must Know” column box on previous page for contact

information. For supplements and vitamins, just dump them into the compost bin and recycle the bottle.

4. Get to Know Your Local Options for Trash and Recycling

Every municipality has programs for the elimination of waste and

most cities are trying to expand and deliver even more planet-friendly

options. I am privileged to live in San Francisco, where we have a

plethora of great options when it comes to recycling, toxic waste

elimination, composting and more. As a citizen, I get mail and

information about those options and I read up. As a customer, I was also able to actually go visit the waste facility and learn more details

about the program and even tour the facility. What is available in your

city or town? How can you learn more? I encourage you to find out

and get savvy. The more you are educated about the trash, recycle and

toxic waste services available to you, the more conscientious and

motivated you will be to eliminate your waste and clutter.

If you find your city of residence has very few options in this regard,

perhaps it's time for you and your neighbors to make some noise about

it. It ultimately may end up costing you a little more money in local taxes

but the future children of this planet will thank you.

3. Identify and Eliminate Toxic and Hazardous Waste

**“Toxic chemicals in our environment threaten our rivers and lakes,
our air, land, and oceans, and ultimately ourselves and our future.”**

—www.greenpeace.org

It's time to get educated on what toxic waste is and learn how to

eliminate that waste. You might be surprised to learn how many choices

there are for you to be responsible in this regard. For example, household batteries are very toxic yet surprisingly easy to eliminate safely. Many local hardware stores and Home Depots will gladly take your dead batteries. Yet, according to a recent survey on www.earth911.org, 70 percent of those surveyed said they either didn't know they could be recycled or didn't know how to do so. How to eliminate hazardous waste depends upon your locale. Check your trash service to see if it has options for you or check www.Earth911.com. The following is a list of typical household hazardous waste you can eliminate responsibly.

Hazardous waste which can be disposed of responsibly

Medications

Batteries

Fuels

Electronics

Technology gear, computers,

mobile phones

Aerosols

Fluourescent tubes, CFLs

Pesticides and other garden

chemicals

Mercury

Ammunition, explosives

Road flares

Latex paint

Oil paint and other finishes

Solvents and thinners

Asbestos

Cleaning solutions including
ammonia, bleach, TSP, allpurpose
cleaners, metal polish
Used cooking oil
Fire extinguishers
Roofing tar and adhesives
Used motor oil and auto products
Photographic chemicals
Pool chemicals

2. Build a Home Recycling Center

For those of us challenged with clutter issues, the problem may begin because we are very busy people. If something isn't easy to do and systems aren't in place, clutter accumulates. A great way to make the practice of disposing of your green clutter easy is to build a Home Recycling Center. A great location for this is in the garage, the kitchen or the entrance area of your home. A shelving system or cabinet with wide and deep shelves is best. Get, or better still, repurpose bins and label them. Bins of all sizes can be used, depending on the category. The following is a partial list of the typical kinds of categories for which you will want bins:

- Recycle—separate ones for paper, plastic, cans, etc., if necessary
- Toxic Waste
- Donation items
- Office and Craft Supplies
- Books
- CDs, DVDs
- Tech/Electronics
- Medication
- Glasses/Optical wear
- Lotions/Potions/Soaps
- Terracycle Brigade—see chart below

Get the whole household involved in building, contributing to and disposing of the recycle items. For more information, the University of Iowa has published a great two-page document entitled "Create a Home Recycling Center." If you can't find it online, I have it posted on my website in the Tool Box section at www.balancesf.com

Organizing for the Planet MUST KNOW website:

www.terracycle.net

Terracycle is an extraordinary operation that turns "trash" into useable stuff. Send them your juice bags, for example, and they will turn them into colorful purses and pencil cases and resell them at Target or Walgreens. They'll even donate money to your charity of choice for each item you send them. Start or join a "brigade" and start recycling your trash.

And now for the number one best way to eliminate your clutter sustainably:

1. Stop Shopping!

This may be the most difficult, yet ultimately the most important way for you to reduce your clutter and serve the planet at the same time. For many of my clients, buying too much is a big reason for clutter in the first place. It's a challenge, because we are living in a consumerist world with a "he who dies with the most stuff wins" philosophy. By embracing sustainability and the idea of serving your planet, you will covet the idea of reducing the size of your "footprint," in this case, the amount of stuff you have.

One idea is to choose one month of the year (or one quarter or even an entire year) where you simply do not buy anything at all except consumable items like food and toilet paper. For that period of time,

make do with what you already own. No new books or magazines; read what you have. No new shoes or clothing; wear what's already in your closet. No new furniture or household items; enjoy your current décor. You might be surprised how easy it is. Perhaps you will even rediscover old stuff that you have missed or forgotten you had.

If you need more encouragement, I highly recommend you watch a 20-minute online animation of the consumerist society called, "The Story of Stuff" narrated by Anne Leonard (www.storyofstuff.com). It may just raise your ire enough to make this no shopping idea really easy.

On the days when you are allowing yourself to shop, be a little bit more conscientious about it. Many professional organizers will tell you about the "one in, one-out" method. That means that when you are ready to buy a new pair of shoes, for example, you know that when you go home, you have to get rid of an old pair of shoes. If you aren't ready to do that, then walk away from the register.

Turning Matter into Energy

I come back to my philosophy that everything around us on this beautiful spinning Mother Earth is some form of matter and energy. And guess what? Clutter is a big chunk of heavy, negative matter. How is clutter supporting you in your life? Indeed, it is not. When you consider your own clutter, consider this: that pile of paper wants a purpose; that closet full of who knows what is not serving anyone. Get busy making decisions about your stuff. Is it active and serving you in your life? If it isn't, get it out of your space and off to serve someone else. Reduce, reuse, recycle—it's good for you and it's good for the planet. Turn matter—your clutter and disorder—into positive

energy where everything is in it's place waiting to serve you.

I want to clarify some nomenclature here. In the conversations about sustainability, we planet words, like save the planet, don't pollute our planet, or in my terminology, "get organized for the planet" to "sustain this planet for all of our children". But the truth is, the planet is not the finite entity here, we are. We are the vulnerable beings that will not survive if we don't all work together in big ways. Indeed, The scientist have been saying this for years. While we may say "save the planet", the planet will survive us. It's our ability to grow food, to have water, to not be flooded and on fire or experience chronic natural disasters that will have people moving all over the globe.

The planet will survive us. That's the bottome line. So however someone may say it:

be green

save the planet

live sustainably

take it seriously. Because it is indeed us and our children who are at risk..