



Helping clients get organized is more complicated than dealing with physical stuff, says Katherine Lawrence of Space Matters. Sometimes it unearths a whole realm of personal problems — like depression and anxiety.

ORGANIZING

A Certain Sort

by Amy Biegelsen

Professional organizers help clients in the unending search for order. Someone's got to do it.

Professional organizer Cara Kinning has run into a tough client. No matter what kind of filing strategy or organizational system Kinning and the client discuss, nothing sticks. Between visits, the client designs her own system that seems to work for her, but then doesn't maintain it. Nevertheless, the client continues to make appointments. Kinning, who owns Organized for Life, is starting to worry she's not making sufficient progress.

"She's read every book on organizing out there," Kinning confides to her colleagues at an Olive Garden lunch meeting for professional organizers in Virginia. "We've talked about time management and rewards systems," she says. But nothing seems to work.

Does the client display signs of ADD, ADHD — maybe depression? asks Debbie Bowie, owner of Simply Organized, who takes a holistic approach

and sometimes uses feng shui to restore order to her clients' cluttered lives. "It might be a power issue," Bowie opines. "She's going to resist no matter what."

To Sue Marie Bowling, it's not a power issue at all. "Any system is only as effective as my discipline is to use it," chimes in the owner of Prescription for Order.

"Raise your rates," adds Hope Platt of There's Hope.

The field of professional organizing (not the Teamster kind) is full of people helping folks longing to stay organized. Think "Clean Sweep," the popular TLC show. They are less glorified cleaning ladies and more applied psychologists. Each one comes equipped with a unique strategy.

Professional organizers serve a diverse array of clients, from seniors to businesses to new moms. Their networks span across several professions.





SCOTT ELMQUIST

Local members of the National Association of Professional Organizers meet regularly at the Olive Garden to share advice and offer support.

Realtors, interior decorators and even professional scrapbookers might pair with or cross-refer clients to an organizer.

When an organizer tries to engage clients in changing their habits, a space can quickly transform into an emotional landscape. Closets reveal racks of optimistically sized blue jeans. Junk drawers that contain accumulated mementos emerge as deposits of guilt related to the event or person they memorialize.

Alisha Gray-Johnson of Messless is phasing out her social work career to spend more time organizing. "I go into houses, and they're just in chaos," Gray-Johnson says. She's found that organizing is a way to deal with the chaos more directly.

Bowie, of Simply Organized, says she's tired of just cleaning up. She likes working with clients who are "transitioning, not just stuck." She has worked with clients moving into a new home after a divorce, for example.

In cases where clients are trying to get rid of excess clutter, she has sometimes agreed to take a piece of furniture into her own home. "If a client is attached to it, then they know where it goes," Bowie says. "Then you've got bits of energy in your space."

For Bowie, it goes both ways. As a small-business owner looking ahead to retirement, Bowie started reading up on financial planning. She initially intended to learn about the market to take better care of herself, but she now uses what she's learned to help her clients in their own lives.

Although television shows like "Clean Sweep" have done a lot to bring organizing as a profession into public view, the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO) has been around since 1985 to help organizers network and stay abreast of the latest organizing trends.

More recently, a group within NAPO formed the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization. "You can usu-

ally spot a chronically disorganized client pretty quickly," says Katherine Lawrence, owner of Space Matters.

Lawrence says clients break down into groups. Single-serving clients might be moving or need help setting up a home office. Organizers go in once and check back, but it's usually a solvable problem, not at all chronic.

On the other end of the spectrum are people with active lives. They might be trying to balance a job, family demands, heavy involvement in their communities, maybe even travel on top of it all. So organizers may discuss strategies, like picking a favorite piece of a child's artwork at the end of the school year rather than hanging on to crates of it for posterity. Such clients want help maintaining their space rather than just reorganizing.

The chronically disorganized are people who have never been organized, have failed at trying to be and whose chaos causes problems at work or at home. Those people are working toward a lifestyle change that takes time to achieve.

"Once you manage to get them using systems you put in place," Lawrence says, "you've still got to deal with the backlog" of accumulated paper and objects.

Lawrence says the study group helps organizers look for red flags, signaling problems outside the organizer's sphere, such as OCD, depression, fear or anxiety.

But people don't have to have extreme circumstances to want a little organization.

Lawrence was working as a data analyst at Capital One when she realized that she was beginning to outgrow her house. All the keepsakes and sentimental things were taking over.

"What is all this stuff?" Lawrence recalls asking herself. "Why am I keeping every book I ever bought? If you keep everything from your past, it negatively impacts the day to day.

"You have to think about your life now and what you need." ■