

1 GETTING STARTED

Getting organized and simplifying is all about making decisions. When you are looking at piles of unsorted paper or other clutter, you are looking at piles of postponed decisions! In order to deal with your clutter, you need to decide what to do with each thing in each pile. This can seem daunting, especially if your mind is filled and often overflowing with “mental clutter.” This mental clutter is at the root of your disorganization.

Have you ever noticed it is much easier to get something done when you’re in “the right frame of mind?” This usually means, for the time being, you have cleared everything else from your mind and are ready to focus on the task you have chosen. It sounds simple enough, but how many times have you been disappointed because you couldn’t stay focused, felt overwhelmed, and sometimes didn’t even know where to start?

When it comes to getting organized, simplifying, and deciding what to let go of and what to keep, your mind plays a powerful

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role. It is much easier to focus and move forward when your mind is clear. And when your mind is clear and in order, you can create more order in your surroundings. This is so because when your mind is clear and in order, it is much easier to make decisions. Making decisions is the key to creating clear spaces in your mind, your home, your office, and your life.

What is “Mental Clutter?”

Your mind is a very busy place. It is filled with your mental lists of things to do, problems to solve, and plans for the future. It also filters the flood of information that bombards you from your daily life conversations, the media, and the Internet. Your mind may be cluttered with anxiety, doubts, fears and worries that might be part of your life and dragging you down. There are memories from your past and concerns about the future. Then there are all the negative thoughts and words of self-criticism that keep running through your head, because you’re not getting enough done! No wonder you might be stuck or even paralyzed. You could be feeling inadequate, depressed, and overwhelmed. Any thought or experience that makes you feel bad about yourself is also mental clutter. This “mental noise” keeps you from moving forward.

When you become more conscious of what is cluttering your mind, you can learn to clear it out. Clearing the clutter in your mind first, makes it easier to clear the clutter in your home, your office and your life.

How wonderful would it be if you could simply wave a magic wand and, presto, everything in your home, your office, and your life was organized, and stayed that way? Wow! Here’s the good news: You already have something within you that can help you create the order that you want, and keep it that way. Your “magic wand” is your magical mind!

Here’s more good news: When you continue to clear the clutter from your mind, it is much more likely that you will continue

to keep your home, your office, and your life clutter-free. You can learn to use your magical mind to *get* organized, and, you can use your magical mind to *stay* organized!

Do You Have Any “Mental Clutter?”

I don’t know anyone who is free from mental clutter. There is always more coming in, and therefore always something to clear out. The key is to become more aware and conscious of what clutters *your* mind, and find ways that work best for you to clear it out. Mental clutter includes thoughts and feelings like those listed below.

Can you identify some of your mental clutter?

Agitation	Doubts	Pain
Anger	Embarrassment	Paralysis
Annoyance	Exhaustion	Regret
Anxiety	Fear	Resentment
As soon as I...	Frustration	Resistance
Being stuck	Grief	Reluctance
Blaming	Guilt	Self-criticism
Burdened	Hopelessness	Self-doubt
Chaos	Hurt	Self-hatred
Complicated	I can’t	Self-judgment
Conflicts	I don’t know how	Shame
Confusion	If only...	Stress
Depression	Impatience	Tension
Desperation	Inadequacy	Unworthiness
Disappointment	Limitations	Worry
Disgust	Negativity	
Distractions	Overwhelm	

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In addition to these self-defeating thoughts and feelings that make up some of your mental clutter, think about all the other things that are “on your mind” as you go through your daily life. Look at the list below for some possibilities.

What do your mental to-do lists include?

Addresses to change	Electronics to assemble	Insurance claims to submit
Accounting to do	Emails to write	Invitations to design
Advice to get or give	Errands to run	Letters to write
Appointments to make	Estate Planning	Lost belongings to look for
Bank statements to reconcile	Estate settling	Magazines to go through
Bills to pay	Events to plan	Making plans
Books to read	Exercises to do	Monies to collect
Calls to make	Fees to negotiate	Movies to see
Catalogs to review	Finances to figure out	Paint colors to choose
Cleaning to be done	Food to prepare and eat	Paperwork to review
Childcare to arrange	Forms to complete	Papers to write
Clothes to wash or repair	Furniture to move	Papers to sort
Clutter to sort!	Games to attend	People to call
Credit problems	Gardening ideas	People to confront
Debt problems	Gifts to buy	People to forgive
Decorating ideas	Health issues	People to thank
Directions to review	Hobby ideas	Phone numbers to remember
Disaster Planning	Homework to do or oversee	Photographs to copy/sort
Dishes to rinse	Information to gather	
Donations to make	Instructions to figure out	

Planning a move	Reservations to make	Things to repair
Preparing for a new addition	Scrapbooks to put together	Things to return
Preparing for income taxes	Sorting to be done	Things to sell
Problems to solve	Sports to watch or engage in	Travel arrangements
Programs to watch	Taxes to pay	TV programs to record/watch
Projects to complete	Tests to take	Volunteer work to do
Performances to attend	Tickets to purchase	Websites to explore
Photographs to sort	Things to borrow	Work demands and problems
Pictures to take	Things to clean	Writing ideas
Relationship issues	Things to buy	

When you look over these long lists, it might add all the more to your mental clutter, because you weren’t aware of how much is actually cluttering your mind. You could feel even worse and think even more negative thoughts about yourself and your stuff and the mess you’re in. Your inner critic could be quite loud! Take a couple of deep breaths and do your best to let this be okay for now. Know this is all part of the process of creating conscious order. As you begin to identify what makes up your mental clutter and you become more conscious of it, know you are already on your way to clearing it out. When you want to make changes, awareness is the first step!

In this book, you will find many ways to clear the clutter from your mind, your home, your office, and your life. Once there is some extra space in your mind, and you get clear about what’s important to you and what you want to experience, it will be easier for you to decide what to let go of, what to keep, and where to put it. It will be easier for you to get organized, and it will be easier for you to *stay* organized!

You, Me, and Your Mental Clutter

Having worked as a professional organizer since 1987, primarily in people’s homes and home offices, I have seen firsthand how awful people feel about their spaces, their piles, and their clutter. There is shame and embarrassment, anxiety, fear, and many words of apology, self-criticism, and self-judgment. Does any of this sound familiar? You are not alone!

You might feel even worse if others in your household or office are also judgmental and critical of you. Other people’s comments create more tension, more shame, more anxiety, and more self-defeating thoughts. I am here to help you let go of your debilitating thoughts, and the feelings that go with them, and find alternative ways to respond and move forward.

In addition to helping you identify and clear out your mental clutter, I will also help you replace those old thoughts and feelings that are dragging you down, with new thoughts and feelings that will lift you up and motivate you. How you’ve been thinking up until now has not been “wrong.” However, some of it may no longer be working for you, to get you where you want to be. You will learn more about “right thinking” so you can get the results that you want.

It is also my intention to help you change your focus and see your clutter from different perspectives. It is so easy to focus on everything that is *not* working. It is important to be aware of this in order to make changes and become more organized. In fact, as you’re getting started, talking about what isn’t working can begin to create some space in your mind, because you’re releasing some of what’s cluttering it. It is also important, however, to consciously focus on what *is* working and what you want to create. It is this shift in focus that can move you forward more quickly.

After listening to clients talk about and show me everything that isn’t working (which is important to do initially), I then do my best to ask some important questions: What would you like your space to look like? What would you like to experience in each space? How

would you like to feel in that space? There’s often a pause...and then there is usually a shift (and even a shy smile). They have changed their focus away from their clutter and challenges.

I want to facilitate your shift as well. Without minimizing where you are and how you got there, I want to take you from dwelling on whatever piles and clutter you might have that have caused you so much grief, to a place of hope and possibilities.

I want to help you shift your thinking from what is *not* working to what *is* working, and to what is *going to* work for you. I will help you decide where to start, and come up with a plan that honors where you’ve been, where you are now, and where you want to be. It is my intention to encourage and inspire you as I suggest ways to move forward to reach your goals. I know this book will give you the results you desire.

After several years of “rollercoaster” organizing, where things would stay neat for awhile and then pile up again, a new client knew she had to do something different so she could *stay* organized. She had heard about my approach and called because she “needed to get her mind in order,” so she could get her apartment and home office in order, and keep it that way. We used the concepts, exercises, and suggestions I am about to share with you.

We worked together to assess where she was already organized, and where she was not. This made it easier for her to prioritize her organizing projects, and also helped her acknowledge where things were already working. She was quite surprised about how many things were in order that she hadn’t thought about before. I also helped her get clear on what was important to her and what she wanted to focus on, what she wanted her spaces to look like, and how she wanted to feel in those spaces.

By answering key questions, she gained a better understanding of some of her challenges and why she’d been unable to break her old patterns; she became aware of all the ways she was sabotaging her desire to get and stay organized. I suggested she start paying attention to all the thoughts and words that were going on in her mind that were perpetuating her roller-coaster style. With guidance and gentle reminders, she learned to let go of the old

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ERNEST HOLMES,
AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER,
FOUNDER OF SCIENCE
OF MIND AND RELIGIOUS
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thoughts that were dragging her down, and replace them with new thoughts that made her feel better. She began to look at her clutter differently and release her attachment to a lot of it; she learned to pass on to others the things she once valued and no longer used. I also helped her look at time differently and encouraged her to take time to take care of herself. As we continued to work, her life felt more in balance, she was less stressed, and she was delighted with her progress, one step, one pile, one space at a time.

Within six months, this client had cleared out and reorganized every space in her home, and she was thrilled. That was six years ago. As her life changes, she continues to monitor her self-talk, acknowledge what is working and what she has accomplished, and keep in her mind what is important to her. Her surroundings are still beautiful, comfortable, orderly, and peaceful.

Throughout her process she continues to appreciate and use her magic wand—her powerful, magical mind, her thoughts, her words, her imagination, and her feelings—to create and sustain the order she desires. You can do the same!

How to Use This Book

Use this book in a way that works best for you. Highlight, underline, and circle what has meaning to you, add stars or sticky notes, fill in your answers to the questions, or use a separate notebook and leave this book just as it is, with no marks at all. Do what feels right to you. It's your choice!

The key to using any concepts, advice, tips, or suggestions offered, is to try them out to see if they work for you. Some may not resonate or make sense at all. Others might. Still others might really motivate and inspire you, and some will just feel right. Be open to new ideas and new possibilities. Play with them, and enjoy the process of experimenting. It might lead you to discover a whole new way of getting organized that is your very own. That's the best way of all! I often say to my clients and students, "There is no one way to get organized. Take what works and leave the rest."

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How Long Does it Take to Get Organized?

This is a question often asked by clients, and over the years I've finally come up with the answer that makes the most sense: It depends how much stuff you have and how quickly you can make decisions!

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Let's Get Started!

The clients who have had the best results and continue to stay organized are those who have taken the time to do the mental work that helps them stay on track. This allows them to make good decisions and keep up with the changes that come about during their life's journey. They recognize that identifying and clearing out their mental clutter before they start a project or another round of decluttering (often with just a few Key Questions) helps them get into the right frame of mind, get started, and move through their things more quickly. They recognize and have experienced firsthand that it is very powerful and helpful to start with the invisible before working with the visible. Once they discover how powerful their magical, invisible mind is, they begin to relax into the process, and soon their progress is quite remarkable. They recognize that letting go and lightening up in their mind is invisible, and that the results are very visible.

No matter how long you've held onto things or put off sorting through things, or beaten yourself up about it, please know that it is possible for you to become better organized and let go of the things that no longer serve you—both invisible and visible. You have within you everything you need to move forward, including the willingness to try out new ideas, new approaches, new tools, and new perspectives.

More than 30 years ago, as a mother and homemaker, I cut a quote out of a calendar and posted it on my kitchen bulletin board. I didn't fully understand it at the time. I just knew it was inspiring and spoke to me. Every once in awhile, I still read it and

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“*You have powers you never dreamed of. You can do things you never thought you could do. There are no limitations in what you can do except the limitations in your own mind as to what you cannot do. Don’t think you cannot. Think you can.*”

DARWIN P. KINGSLEY,
EARLY 20TH CENTURY
BUSINESS LEADER

use it as a reminder of how powerful I am, and that I have the ability to clear out the limitations in my own mind. I now believe it wholeheartedly. And I believe it for you! Here’s the quote, from Darwin P. Kingsley, an early 20th Century business leader: “You have powers you never dreamed of. You can do things you never thought you could do. There are no limitations in what you can do *except the limitations in your own mind* (italics mine) as to what you cannot do. Don’t think you cannot. Think you can.”

Take Time to Do the Mental Work

Many people are very eager to get to the “doing” part of organizing. They want to buy new containers, clean out a closet, and see immediate progress. Perhaps you are anxious to get started as well. I recognize this, and it is certainly one way to approach all of your clutter.

However, in my 20-plus years of experience as a professional organizer, I’ve discovered that people are more likely to *get and stay* organized if they take the time to first ask and answer some very important questions. I assure you that the time you take to think about what follows will make it easier for you to clear your mental clutter, make decisions about what to let go of and what to keep, and create the orderly spaces that you desire. Going slower, and being more mindful in the beginning, will soon allow you to move forward more quickly and to stay with it!

Because your mental work lays the foundation for your greater success in doing the physical work, this book is divided into two parts – the inner clutter and the outer clutter.

The goal is to take you from where you are right now, as you’re reading this book, and take you where you want to be, guiding you through your process, one step at a time. I want to help you identify and clear out the limitations of your mind, motivate and inspire you, and make it easier for you to decide what to let go of and what to keep. Let’s get started!

PART ONE

THE INNER CLUTTER