

Life At Home



Michele Matties, a professional organizer, counsels Julie Fox in her home office.
(Globe Staff Photo /Matthew J. Lee)

Clutter experts there to help you get your act together

Make work, living space productive and efficient

By Rachel Travers, Globe Correspondent, 5/24/2001

MICHELE MATTIES can help you dig out from under. So can Sarah Buckwalter, Jane Lawson, and David Allen, to name a few more. These people are clutter, life management, and productivity experts.

When the newspapers, catalogs, tax receipts, bills, magazines, mail, and paperwork pile up too high on desks, tables, shelves, and the floor or in closets and drawers, they can come to your assistance, either in your own home or through their books and lectures.

Ultimately, you will learn how to purge and sort and put away.

Julie Fox is a satisfied customer. She runs a public relations business from her Boston waterfront home. She and husband Kevin Fox felt clogged by paperwork and thought they needed a new bookkeeper. Instead, a friend recommended Matties, who offers life management, financial management, and business and residential organization.

Her company is called No Worries. After talking with the couple, Matties developed a home budget for them, but found much more that needed to be done. Fox's work space was too cluttered, ineffective. Systems weren't in place. The top of her desk wasn't organized. Books were piled everywhere.

Fox knew she needed help and Matties knew what to do.

"I sort of liken hiring her to my clients hiring me," says Fox. "You need to be ready to do it. When I take on a new client, I need that person to work with me."

They threw away nearly 10 huge garbage bags of unnecessary paper, then tackled the physical layout of the small office and the underlying systems and files. Matties created a computer station, a little copy and mailing center on a cart, bought and stocked vertical bookcases, and created a "top of desk" system that now jumpstarts Fox's work each day.

The "top of desk" file holds categories of action: to-dos, to-reads, purchases, research, dates, calls, follow-up.

"It's been a fantastic experience," says Fox. "She's in the background and then you turn around and wow!" Fox acknowledges there were challenges that came with the projects, and changes she had to make, but says, "it's been a total benefit to my business."

Matties has been a professional organizer for seven years and knows how overwhelming and disheartening it can be to have a cluttered environment you desperately want under control. When she begins with a new client, they talk about what the concerns are, then do a walkaround.

"Frequently, what people think are their concerns change," says Matties. Her best advice is "before you start, think about your goals, your life goals as well as your decluttering goals. What is cluttering your life? Everyone holds onto more than you need or want."

WHERE TO FIND HELP

Here are some decluttering resources.

New England Professional Organizers
www.nepo-organizers.com

Sarah Buckwalter
Be Free! Organizing Services
617.923-HOPE
www.clutterhelp.com
clutterhelp@yahoo.com

Jane Lawson
The Clean Queen
978.535.7091
cleanqueen@bigfoot.com

Michele Matties
No Worries
781.938.7731
noworries@mediaone.net

"Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity" (Viking) by David Allen
www.davidco.com

"Organizing from the Inside Out" (Henry Holt and Co.) by Julie Morgenstern
www.juliemorgenstern.com

Sarah Buckwalter's business is called "Be Free!" She also asks that a client write down their goals, imagining what their house would look if perfectly organized. "It's important to have a good vision," says Buckwalter. When she comes to your house, she comes ready to work.

Mary Pilecki is a beneficiary of the Buckwalter approach. She has a three-bedroom house in Wellesley and is a senior vice president of Fleet Bank, in technology and process management. She's capable of organization, but nevertheless in need of help.

"My story began when I looked around and saw boxes and boxes of my dad's things," says Pilecki, whose father had died two years before. "In the cleanout, all kinds of things ended up in my house. I reached the point where I said, 'I can't live like this anymore,' but I knew I couldn't sit down to tackle it myself."

She got five local names from the New England Professional Organizers, an umbrella group, and chose Buckwalter. "Sarah was empathetic but businesslike. She came in for four hours on a Saturday, and we did the living room and the dining room. She even helped me load my car for the dump."

Buckwalter also filled bins with paper to recycle, gathered things for Goodwill, created and labeled files, and created a place for everything. She and Pilecki have had six sessions since then, "all very intense and exhausting," says Pilecki, "but worth every hour."

This is not a luxury. She has taught me a thought process: Do I really need to keep this? I can now let go of stuff. I've learned to value my space more than the things in it."

"I'm not going to need her forever," Pilecki says, but for now, "I would rather go without somebody cleaning my house than without Sarah."

Housecleaning, however, is what brought Jane Lawson to become an expert on clutter. A Russian emigree, she

came to this country with no English and few skills. She began cleaning houses, then developed new methods to clean houses faster and easier. She self-published a book, "Housecleaning Jane Lawson's Way," then began applying her insights to clutter control. Though she still does house calls, she spends a larger portion of her time teaching. Her popular "Conquer Clutter in Your Home and Office" is offered through the Boston Learning Society, Boston Center for Adult Education, and Cambridge Center for Adult Education. Lawson's amusing and energetic take on clutter makes her audience feel she's been spying on them: She knows the foibles of devotees of yard sales and Christmas Tree Shops and teaches her own golden rule: One in, one out.

She also teaches tackling the big picture, and offers simple advice, like keep your "to read" file folder by your bed, in the kitchen, or even in your car, and use spare moments to your best advantage.

Time management is part of decluttering, and most of these consultants will address the subject. If you take the time to create space, then put things away regularly and set up effective systems for the things you must do, you will ultimately be more productive.

Staying on top of things and being productive is David Allen's area of expertise; he is known as the guru of productivity. The author of "Getting Things Done" relates this back to clutter.

"Clutter is only clutter when it doesn't belong where it is permanently, and what it's supposed to remind you about is not immediately evident. It's what I call 'stuff,'" says Allen.

"Clutter drains you," Allen continues, "because it represents unclear and unfulfilled agreements with yourself. Each piece of it is hooked on to some part of your psyche, locking it down and continuously pulling on your energy. ... It's the constant noise in the room you don't hear until someone turns it off."

The Chinese practice of Feng Shui (pronounced fun schway) addresses personal and household energy, and suggests that if you reduce clutter, you can change your life. This is a popular notion and many professional organizers incorporate this framework into their decluttering. Lawson addresses "what clutter does to you and why" in her lectures. Matties explains that "everybody has a place in their home where they don't want to go because it drains you." This could be as small as a closet or a drawer, or as big as a bedroom.

Buckwalter calls these "clutter magnets," and knows that these spots weigh you down both physically and emotionally. "It keeps you in the past and leaves no space for the future," she says.

All the experts agree that creating space has a liberating effect, and for \$40-\$100 an hour costs less than therapy.

If you want to try something on your own, they say, start small - and finish the project. Purge a coat closet. Donate all items that haven't been used during the last year. Throw out all your old coat hangers and purchase simple, heavy, wood ones. This keeps the hangers from bending under the weight of the coats, prevents them from becoming tangled, and gives a visual impression of an organized space.

Even in a clothes closet, declutterers say, having hangers that are all the same type looks and feels more organized.

Tackle the dining room table, particularly if it hasn't seen dishes on it for a while. The prevailing advice is to handle each item there, one by one, and deal with it. Things will be thrown in the trash, put in their proper place, or you will create the proper place to put them in, like a well-marked file. Then have a candlelit dinner with your family, or by yourself.

Start small, set goals, stay focused. Professionals agree that clarity will replace your clutter.

This story ran on page 08 of the Boston Globe's City Weekly on 5/24/2001.

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WHAT TO DO

This is a formula called S.P.A.C.E. offered by writer/organizer Julie Morgenstern in her book, "Organizing from the Inside Out."

Sort: Identify what's important to you and group similar items.

Purge: Decide what you can live without and get rid of it (Donate it, sell it, store it, toss it.)

Assign: Decide where the items you keep will go. Remember, make it logical, accessible and safe.

Containerize: Make sure they're sturdy, easy to handle, the right size, and that they look good. The art of containerizing is to do it last, not first.

Equalize: Spend 15 minutes a day to maintain what you've done.