

Clean is Safe

Decluttering strategies for Senior Citizens

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Why is decluttering important?

Fall Prevention

The importance of fall prevention for seniors is obvious. As you get older, your balance and muscle tone can become compromised, making you less able to recover your balance if you trip over something. The less stuff you have around the house, the less stuff there is for you to trip over.

Respiratory Issues

The more stuff you have around the house, the more places there are for dust and mold spores to collect. Many people have dust mite and mold spore allergies, so the fewer places there are for dust and mold to collect, the less likely you are to experience respiratory issues in your home.

Fire Safety and Emergency Access

The more items there are in your home, the greater the risk for an accidental fire, and the more difficult it may be for rescue personnel to navigate your home if there is ever an emergency. The ideal is to have clear pathways at least 30” wide throughout the entire home, so that if EMTs need to bring in a stretcher they won't have difficulty navigating around all your furniture and other items.

Collecting versus Hoarding

Any time you discuss the issue of decluttering people inevitably wonder about the issue of collecting versus hoarding. Below is a chart that outlines the differences between someone who is a collector, versus someone who fits the clinical definition of a hoarder.

Collectors	Hoarders
Items are displayed prominently throughout the home according to themes.	Items are not arranged in any kind of thematically consistent display.
Items that are not displayed are carefully packed away so as to preserve their value.	Items are left in piles, or haphazardly stuffed into bags and boxes.
Storage areas are orderly, and boxes are labeled according to contents.	Storage areas are over-stuffed, and items are in a disorderly jumble.
The collector knows the provenance of the items they own, and can tell you when and where they purchased most -if not all- items.	The hoarder often does not know all that they have or where most of their stuff came from, and cannot remember when they obtained those items.
The home features display areas, and there are clear pathways throughout the home.	There is no clear order to shelved items, and some rooms are so full of stuff that the rooms no longer serve the purpose they were originally designed for.

Strategies for Paring Down

The process of cleaning out should be addressed in a manner similar to dieting. If you go on short term purges, but then go back to your normal habits, you'll end up with just as much stuff around the house as you had before. Successful decluttering requires long term changes in your habits. Here are some things to keep in mind to help you declutter in the future.

Never look at material objects for what they are, look at them compared to what you already own: It's easy when you're walking through a flea market or dollar store to say “Oh this is nice,” and pick up an item just because it's cheap. Instead of looking at things as something you can pick up, say “Is this something I really need?” and “Do I already have items that are comparable, or that serve the same purpose?”

Keep the best of what you already own, and get rid of the rest: You don't need a backup for everything. Go through the things you own, keep the items that are of the best quality, and get rid of everything else. One example of how to do this is to go through your basement and garage and keep all of your American-Made tools, and get rid of everything that's made in China or Taiwan. Another option is to go through your cupboards and keep only your best containers and dishware, and get rid of anything that is mismatched, or belongs in the recycle bin.

Make cleaning out a long-term process: Instead of trying to clear everything out of your house in a single weekend, make it into a long-term project. Take a box at the beginning of each month and dedicate yourself to filling that box by the end of the month. Pick a box that you're confident you'll actually be able to fill. Once the box is filled, tape it off and put it into a pile. When you get a decent weekend where the roads are clear, take all the boxes and donate them to an organization like Goodwill or Salvation Army.

Use a scrapbook to keep old pictures and articles: Instead of keeping piles of old magazines and newspapers around, cut out pictures, articles and cartoons and put them into a scrap-book. Keep paring down and force yourself to get down to just one book of the most interesting items.

Pull things out of closets and storage and put them where you can see them: It's easy to forget how much we own when everything is hidden away in storage. Once you reach the point where you can start pulling things out of storage and moving them out into the main area of your home, you're likely to realize you have a lot more stuff you can get rid of than you may have originally realized.