

As seen in the "Ask the Organizing Expert" Column in the Lake Oswego Review and the West Linn Tidings.

Question: I have little piles of clutter all over my house. I try to organize them, but they keep reappearing. How do I get rid of them?

The annoying clutter pile has a life of its own. It grows on the kitchen counter, the bedroom dresser, in the mudroom and on the desk. Some prefer to hide in junk drawers. If you're planning a party, you might be inclined to scoop your clutter into a paper bag and hide it in the closet, where strangely, it seems to grow even bigger. There's no doubt clutter can invade any home, one pile at a time.

But why do these piles form and what can we do about them? Let's examine a typical pile of clutter: yesterday's mail, a gift card, a recipe from the newspaper, a sweater that needs to be returned, 3 legos, 2 hair ties, coins and a thumb tack, a shirt without a button, sunscreen, a party invitation, summer camp brochure and one broken glue gun. In general, these items are simply "delayed decisions." Here's how to tackle them:

Yesterday's Mail: Nothing feeds a clutter pile like bringing in the mail. Funnel bills, receipts and reading material into a basket on your desk and tend to it later, but make sure you process it at least once a week. Recycle junk mail and newspapers on a daily basis.

A Gift Card: Do you keep your coffee mugs near the espresso machine? Then you know the logic of placing items close to where you will use them. A gift card isn't much good on your kitchen counter, so tuck it in your wallet, and it will be there when you need it. The same goes for coupons.

A Recipe from the Newspaper: Are you collecting recipes, travel ideas, gardening tips and financial advice? Some experts say eighty percent of what we file is never used again, so be careful how much info you tear from magazines and newspapers. Instead, use the internet for quick searches and bookmark interesting websites.

A Sweater that Needs to be Returned: Place a bin near the garage door for all things leaving the house - library books, returns, items for donation, dry cleaning. Grab the bin on your way out and deliver as you go.

3 Legos and 2 Hair Ties: Do your children leave a trail of tiny trinkets wherever they go? Give each kid a box and have them gather up all that is theirs on a nightly basis. Make sure they know where to put it, or the clutter simply moves from one room to another.

Coins and a Thumb Tack: A good junk drawer is perfectly okay in any household. It's the logical place for small office supplies and random odds and ends. Keep it tidy by using a drawer organizer with lots of divided sections.

A Shirt without a Button: Unfinished projects don't have to be clutter. They can be grouped together and kept in an out-of-the-way place, but ONLY if you've identified their next step. Do you need to buy some thread? Find a button? Carve out some time? Put the task on your calendar so you won't forget to do it.

A Bottle of Sunscreen: Are there homeless items in your clutter pile? Take time to decide where they should live by asking these questions: Where would I look for this? Where will I use it? Where do I store other like items? Sunscreen, for instance, might live best with the beach towels, but could also work in your golf bag or near the gardening supplies.

A Party Invitation and Summer Camp Brochure: Sometimes we use items or papers as reminders when our calendar and task list would be better options. Note the event on your calendar and recycle the invite. Add the camp's website to your to-do list and ditch the brochure.

A Broken Glue Gun: Would you be surprised if 50, 60 or even 90% of your clutter was destined for the trash? Expired coupons, busted toys, out-of-ink pens are a few examples. No sense living with these clutter hogs - send them to the recycle bin or trash can.

Piles of clutter are a completely normal part of household life. They creep in during busy weeks, after vacations, while you're sick or during times of change. They remind me of weeds in a garden – barely noticeable at first, and easily managed with a quick nip in the bud. But left alone, clutter piles grow and multiply into unsightly messes. Armed with the knowledge that piles of clutter are really just delayed decisions, you can eradicate them item by item. Then relish the sight of your clean and sleek countertops.

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