20 Tips to Declutter Your Home

Lifestyle expert and columnist Marni Jameson shows us how to downsize or just clean up our houses
by Marni Jameson, AARP Bulletin (bulletin/), March 2016

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If you have more than one story in your home, start purging items from the top rooms first.

This article was adapted from AARP’s Downsizing the Family Home: What to Keep, What to Let Go by Marni Jameson (Sterling Publishing Co., 2016), available at aarp.org/downsizing (http://www.aarp.org/downsizing) and bookstores.

1. Wedding dress

If no one is going to wear it again, have some nice pillows made out of it. Or save it to wrap bouquets in your daughter's wedding (/home-family/friends-family/info-05-2013/son-daughter-wedding-marriage-advice.html). Or clip off a piece of fabric and display it in a frame with a photo of your wedding day.

2. Love letters

Keep them if they're yours. But if they're your parents', they're not really yours: They're part of a romance between your parents, never meant for you. Burn them ceremonially and send the love back into the universe.

3. Boxes of photos

Throw out landscape shots. Pick three with people in them from each vacation or holiday. With the rest, pull out the great shots. Send the keepers to an online scanning service to store in the cloud, or make albums.

4. China set

If you like it, use it. If you don't, sell it through eBay (/technology/how-to-guides/info-04-2011/cash_for_trash_on_ ebay.html). Be realistic, though. Not long ago, fine china commanded a nice price. But today's consumers want fine tableware that's safe in the microwave and the dishwasher.

5. Antiques

Take high-end antiques to a local antiques dealer, who can take them to an auction house. Find out what the house's take is upfront (typically 10 to 15 percent) as well as where it will place the starting bid.

Join the discussion: Chat online about home ownership and home improvements (http://community.aarp.org/t5/Home-Improvement/bd-p/bf85)

6. Greeting cards

Their job is to greet you over the holidays. They did that. Now you throw them away. Or put them in the recycle bin. If you saved the envelopes, you can go through them to update your address book.

7. Old appliances

Like a yard sale online, Craigslist (/technology/how-to-guides/info-04-2011/cash_for_trash_on_ ebay.html) is the right venue for usable appliances. With local buyers, you skip shipping costs. Tip: Sell only (/money/scams-fraud/info-09-2012/how-to-sell-your-stuff-safely-online.html) to buyers who pay cash and will pick up the item. When they come, have someone with you.

8. Your kids' stuff

It's not your job to save everything from your children's lives. Box up what belongs to the kids, and send it to them. Or tell them to claim it now — with the date you plan to have the house cleared out — or never.

9. Books

If you're going to read it, or it just feels too much like family (The Cat in the Hat), put it on your bookshelf. If not, give it away. You can drop books off at a library or donation center. Or call around for a charity that will pick up.

10. Luggage
That graduation gift from your grandparents? If it's in decent shape, sell it at your own or a neighborhood garage sale, and tell stories of where you've been. If not, donate it to a charity (/money/budgeting-saving/info-2015/donate-to-a-good-cause.html) such as a women’s homeless shelter.

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When deciding what to get rid of, make three piles: toss; donate; and sell.

11. Hand-me-down furniture

Consignment stores (/home-family/your-home/info-2014/declutter-sell-items-online.html) can be a godsend for a chair or sofa in good condition that worked for someone else — but not for you. They sell it and usually split it 30/70 (30 percent to you), but sometimes 40/60.

12. Clothes

Can you answer yes to “Do I love it?” “Do I need it?” or “Will I use it?” If not, then out it goes. It doesn’t matter whether “I only wore it once,” “It’s in good condition” or “It was expensive.” Then make three piles: toss, donate, sell. (/money/budgeting-saving/info-06-2013/clean-out-your-closet-and-make-money.html)

13. Jewelry

Decide what to keep, then give family members their choice. Sell the rest on eBay. Polish the jewelry and light it well, then photograph items in high resolution from several angles. Include a close-up of any label or stamp.

14. Art

Appraising fine — or not-so-fine — art is an art in itself, so you might need an appraiser who specializes in that area. You don’t want to give away that ugly painting or sculpture only to find out it later sold for $50,000 at an auction.

15. Old tennis racket
"But I might play again someday!" Living your life for one day in the future robs you of today. If that racket is old and outdated, give it away through Freecycle. If it’s still in good shape, sell it on Craigslist.

16. Curio collection

Select three pieces to keep, then photograph the rest, and put the photos in an album alongside the display. EBay is the place to sell smaller, more valuable items like collectibles.

17. Musical instruments

Craigslist is already flooded with dead musical dreams. Spread the word around your neighborhood; ask your kids' former music teacher. Even if you sell at a loss, it will fill a home with music. Just not your home.

18. Closet

Rather than fishing through and deciding what to eliminate, take everything out, down to the bare walls. Then physically put back items. Choosing to keep, rather than choosing to let go, will net in clinging to fewer things.

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19. Paperwork

Scan important papers — birth and marriage certificates, school records, wills and other legal documents — electronically, and back up your hard drive. Store originals, organized, in a lockbox or sealed plastic tubs.

20. Household junk

Marni Jameson is a nationally syndicated home and lifestyle columnist.

(VIDEO) How to Have a Great Yard Sale: Garage sale expert Lynda Hammond offers tips to make your next yard sale a success.

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