

cover story

Order in the house

Can't find the car keys or that overdue electricity bill?
Maggie Alderson discovers how to restore order from chaos.



FILE \$19
FROM IKEA

Would it take you longer than 45 minutes to find your home insurance policy? Do you have to brace yourself against falling debris every time you open a cupboard?

Yes? You need to get organised. Life doesn't need to be that hard. I know because I now have the instant antidote for the kind of frustration you feel on days when you can't find the bill for the phone, which is about to be cut off. I look in my kitchen cupboards.

The perfectly tidy and organised shelves - from sweet ingredients on the top shelf, down through canned and dry goods, to plates, bowls and serving platters at the bottom - induces an instant state of calm. Just imagine having a whole house like that ...

Consultant Carol Posener says home organisation shouldn't take nearly as long to achieve as we think. Like an exercise regime, the hardest part for most of us is starting, which is why Posener launched her business Get Organised! five years ago - to be a kind of personal trainer for home organisation.

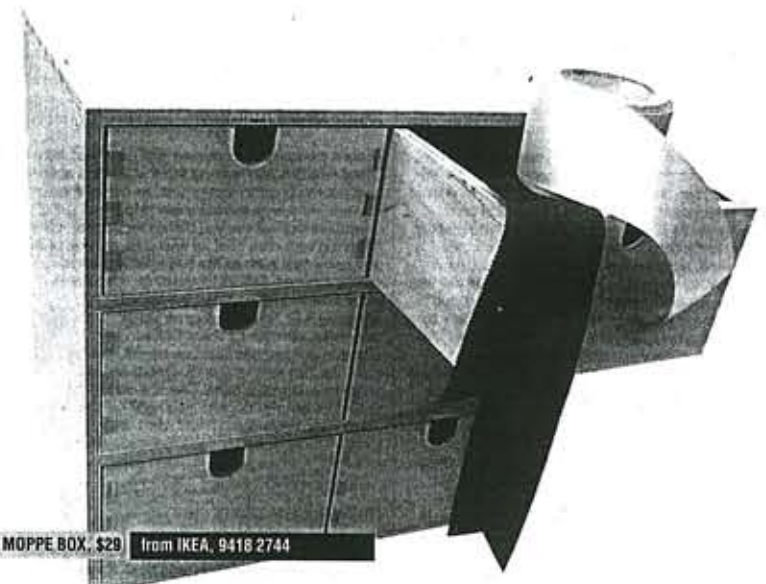
She hatched the idea after working as a temporary secretary and finding she had to reorganise every office she went to before she could get on with her job. Demand for her services is so great she now employs several other organising elves.

I can vouch for the benefits of professional help; the only reason my kitchen cupboards are such a glory is that when I moved in I hired a company called The Finishing Touch to unpack. Not only did they do all the work, they organised things a million times better than I could have, which is why some of their clients call them back every six months to do it all again.

Posener says people get in touch with her because they can't find anything, or life is just becoming impossible because of the clutter and junk everywhere. "People are so busy," says Posener. "A lot are working from a home-based business; they've got children to deal with. There is so much on people's plates they don't have the time to handle everything, so they call us in to streamline it all."

"We go through everything - the garage, the kitchen, the attic, wardrobes. We take things away for people, sell things, go through every cupboard, make sure you can see everything, so it is easy to find things."

They also set up systems for the stacks of



MOPPE BOX, \$29 from IKEA, 9418 2744

paperwork that come with modern life, to end the pile syndrome (as in piles of paper all over the house).

"Tax information is quite a burden on society," she says. "A lot of people don't know what to do with it all and then, suddenly, they have to do something about it and they don't know how. One couple called me to help them with papers they had been collecting for 10 years - they just didn't know what to do."

Posener has discovered that the benefits of having a de-cluttered home go much deeper than being able to find the gas bill. "I've studied feng shui to incorporate into my business," she says. "My teacher said you're already doing feng shui - clearing clutter so things can flow in people's lives. If you have clutter in your house, you've got clutter in your life and it's on your mind until it's dealt with, even if you don't realise it."

Organising tips

Experts say the key to keeping a house organised is simple, absolute and almost as old as houses: have a place for everything and put everything back in its place. Every time.

First steps

Review your clutter. Do you ever look at the magazines you hoard? If you don't, chuck 'em. If you must keep them, put them in neat piles on book shelves or in labelled boxes. And that's a good rule for all those precious bits and pieces: photos, children's drawings, love letters. Keep them grouped in labelled boxes.

If you don't need it any more, get rid of it - now. Decorator Thomas Hamel says: "The worst thing is when clients say, 'We'll send it to storage...' Forget it. If it goes to storage it's there for life and you are paying the storage fees."

Objects divide into two categories: those worthy of going on show, and all the essential ugly stuff that is better hidden. CDs and videos do not add anything to your decor and are much better kept in cupboards or shallow drawers than "displayed". Assess your possessions on this basis. The less you have on display, the calmer your house will feel.

Zone all your storage areas mentally into active space and archive space. The active space is everywhere that is easy to access. Anything more laborious to get into, such as the loft, the garage and under the house, is long-term archive space. High shelves and cupboards and the back of deep cupboards should be treated as archive space even if they are in the living room.

Divide your "stuff" into things you will need in the short term and things you just need to keep, such as tax records. Put the latter into archive boxes and stash them in a long term storage area.

Label storage boxes with attractive labels, or buy a label maker.

Storage solutions

Invest in attractive storage solutions and you'll be more inclined to keep the systems you have created going. A house full of ugly brown archive boxes is enough to make anyone give up.

If the fabric boxes at Figott's Store and the like are too expensive, get lateral. IKEA has a range of utilitarian wooden boxes you can customise and stationery stores have cheap cardboard ones you can cover. IKEA also has mini drawer stacks on wheels that are great for keeping stationery sorted. Label the drawers: envelopes, birthday cards, sticky labels, wrapping paper, etc.

Hamel suggests using chests of drawers in halls and sitting rooms for storing photographs and memorabilia. Stripped metal filing cabinets look great for paperwork and all those must-keep-this-pages-torn-from-magazines.

If you are committed to a house or flat for a while, built-in shelves are worth the investment because they make much better use of every nook of space.



KLINGA BOX, \$9 from IKEA



ROOM CRATE, \$49.95; MAGAZINE HOLDER, \$12.50; AND TRAY, \$19.95 (each) from Grace Bros, 9238 9111

All around the house, group together disparate objects that are in constant use - like the four remote controls that lie around on the coffee table, or the lipstick and sunblock you use every day - in small wicker baskets. It instantly looks tidier, but they are still easily available.

Divide drawer and cupboard spaces with shallow baskets, cutlery trays, plastic dividers and wire drawer systems (available from The Storage Shop).

If you have one really hopeless clutterbug in the family, give them a large decorative bowl near the front door to put all their bits and pieces into, rather than littering it throughout the house.

The bedroom

Review your clothes, shoes and accessories and donate the things you don't wear to a clothing bin. Divide the rest into winter and summer and store the season you are not using.

Aim to have only one garment per hanger so you can see exactly what you have.

Invest in the right hangers for different garments. Hamel says nothing looks worse than a wardrobe full of jumbled hangers. He makes his clients invest in matching sets. At least get rid of the wire ones (shudder).

Develop your own system for organising folding garments - by colour, work/weekend, long sleeve/short sleeve, whatever works best for you. Develop Benetton-shop folding skills.

Sort pantyhose by colour and weight and keep in separate drawstring bags on hooks on the back of wardrobe doors. Divide bags, scarves and other accessories using a system that works for you.

Review towels and bed linen and get rid of the stuff you don't use any more. Apart from French antique linen, most towels only have a life of about three years before they start to look shabby.

Hamel recommends storing bed linen grouped in sets, divided by bed size. So one shallow shelf for queen-size sets, another for single beds, children's beds, etc.

Like clothes, bedding should also be filed according to season, with somewhere to store blankets and doonas in summer.

Kitchen

Here's hoping this is too obvious to say: have your mugs, cups, coffee and tea near the kettle; your herbs and spices, pots and pans near the stove; and cutlery and china near the table.

Posener says revolving carousels are good in the pantry for spices so you can spin them around and see everything.

Don't push ingredients to the back of deep cupboards. You'll never know what you have (use the far reaches as archive storage for rarely used glasses or ugly wedding presents).

If you can't have a hand-built kitchen with the shallow shelves Hamel recommends for china, plate-stackers make the most of cupboard space. Mug hooks and hanging wine glass racks perform a similar function.

Kids' rooms

Wicker hampers, old trunks, ottomans, hope chests ... Hamel suggests pressing into service any large, lidded containers that don't look too ugly so the kids can chuck things into them - then at least it looks tidy.

Under-bed storage trays are good for smaller toys. Big pencil pots are also a good idea.

Paperwork

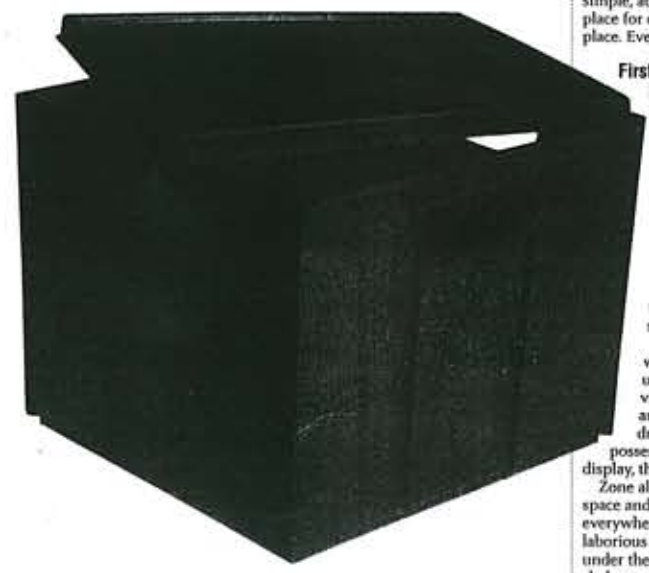
This is the killer for most people. Posener suggests you: Keep all your paperwork in one place with bills in a separate folder that you can't miss.

Go through your paperwork at least once a week - sort it, take action, then chuck it out, or file it. Don't allow a "filing" tray to build up.

If you can't bear having a filing cabinet at home, use large ring binders that keep everything in order, clearly labelled.



SOLUTIONS BOXES, \$29.95 - \$34.95 from Freedom Furniture



HANDY BOX, \$7.25 from K-Mart, 9212 2566