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Decluttering: Why is it so hard?



Three out of five (61%) of adults over 60 feel they have more stuff than they need. And yet many of us find it emotionally painful to cull our belongings.

While the physical labor of “right-sizing” is daunting, perhaps more powerful—and surprising—is the emotional challenge. For instance, you may feel that letting go of grandmother’s wedding dress is like putting her in the trash. Or that if you discard your high school debate trophy,

it’s like that part of you has died. Or that giving away the fabric you bought to make a quilt “one day” is like abandoning your inner artist. It’s human nature to imbue belongings with meaning, and it’s those heartstrings that give us pause.

Some tips to help you let go

Recognize that some belongings need “safe passage.” You want to find a place or person who will cherish and appreciate them. This will take time. But if you are persistent and start well before a deadline—six months or more before a move, for instance—you have a greater chance of placing them in good homes.

Build momentum. If you cull strategically and make it a routine, it gets easier over time. Start with large items, maybe a mattress or golf clubs you no longer use. Large items are an easy first win. Next, turn to items currently gathering dust in the basement, attic, or storage. These are often a quick release. Turn to the clothes closet after that. The comfort of your existing clothes may help you let go of those garments you no longer wear. Files are the next. They take time to go through. Consider bulk shredding rather than doing it yourself. (The IRS says you do not need to keep records any longer than three years.) Photos, old letters, and journals are the last. If you don’t recognize the people, it may be time to let them go. As for that letter from your high school sweetheart, maybe save it in a box labeled “throw away.” Some things are too precious to let go of during your lifetime, but perhaps too private for others to find.

Keep your eye on the prize. If you are downsizing to move, keep in mind the goals and life you imagine with your new digs. Who is the new you? It’s easier to let go of the you-from-the-past if you focus on your future self. If you are decluttering on principle, remember that people who have completed the project say they feel so much lighter. It’s an accomplishment that leaves them feeling freer to explore new vistas.

Hire a professional to help early on. Especially if you are on a deadline. A person trained in late-life moving can help you honor your feelings and streamline the process.

Looking for help? Give us a call 206-456-5155.



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Aging Wisdom supports individuals and families in King and south Snohomish Counties as they plan for aging.

Give us a call at 206-456-5155 to find out how we can support you.