

# Take Control Module 4-

## Decide Where to Begin



### Objectives

You will answer the question, “Where will I begin?” and develop strategies for tackling your project.

- 1 - Visualize your destination.
- 2 - Identify where you will begin.
- 3 - Learn how to let go of the clutter.
- 4 - Determine the smallest possible step to begin.

*“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”*

-Laozi

*“Sometimes we have to fight for what we love and care about. But sometimes, we have to find the strength to let it go.”*

- Unknown

## Instruction

"I don't know where to start, can you help with that?" asks Annie as we talk on the phone about her upcoming organizing appointment.

"Absolutely. It's what we do." I respond.

Getting organized is not just about buying cute bins at Target® to hold all the little shoes that are cluttering the foyer. So often we purchase bins and books, we watch videos and TV shows, and our organizing projects still don't seem to go anywhere. Let's say your sister comes over for the weekend to help you "clean up the mess." You work hard for hours and yet it seems that there is even more work when you finish than there was when you began. Where do we start so that we can be effective in our organizing projects?

In all honesty, you could start anywhere. I will share with you my four favorite places to start organizing and why. In the previous modules, we answered the question HOW to start. (If you need a review, go to this link to the end of this module: ['Additional Information.'](#)) Now we will dig into the WHERE.

When I analyze rooms and perform the exercise of seeing spaces, I begin to notice connections. I call these connections the "trickle down effect". If I implement a system in one area, such as organizing a clothing closet, I would then be able to hang the clean clothes that are lying on my bed. I could then sleep in my bed. When I am well rested, I'll feel more like doing the laundry that is piled in the bathroom and on the laundry room floor. When the space is clear, I will have a place to take care of myself with quiet rejuvenation time. I will feel whole and restored.

If I were to just pick up and fold the clothing in the laundry room, I wouldn't have a place to put it and I wouldn't solve my organizing conundrum!

What connections do you see in your space?

## **Visualize Your Space**

Close your eyes. Visualize your space or your destination with your project. What does DONE look, feel, smell, taste, sound like? You may do this for your whole project or just pick one area. Imagine the future, when you complete your project, describe, draw or paste cut-out images of what it is like:

## Where to Begin

You can work a little bit in many different areas of your space, but you will see greater progress sooner if you focus your efforts in one area. What can you work on that will have a "trickle down" effect?

## Four Great Places to Begin Organizing

### Your Bedroom



This is often my favorite place to begin organizing projects. It provides a safe haven as you work into other places in your home. A peaceful bedroom puts you first, and allows for peaceful sleep.

### The Kitchen



The kitchen can have that fantastic "trickle down" effect we were talking about earlier. When you organize the kitchen, you can store and prepare food more easily. This means you will eat out less, waste less food, save money and have access to healthier choices. The kitchen is the heart of many homes, and food is often central to family engagement.

## The Shed, Garage or Basement



Items stored in these places have often been placed here because you aren't using them, but don't know where to put them. Either you are avoiding the space because of your emotional attachments or because it has become completely overwhelming. In either case, clearing these spaces can lift a weight physically and

emotionally. Look for the "easy" stuff first, the items that are broken or that you don't care about. Schedule a donation service to come the next day to pick up your unwanted items.

## The Living Room



There are ways that we disconnect ourselves from those we care about. One way is letting our most intimate spaces become inhospitable. It isn't intentional, but it comes from habits that need to be changed. It's hard to tell which comes first; the hurt or distance in the relationship, or the living space being in disarray. But whichever comes first, feeling comfortable letting people into

your home allows you to open up space for company, and to reconnect with others. Once you allow others into your home again, you will feel encouraged to work on the parts of your home

that are dragging you down. So clear the living room and make it company ready, then organize the rest afterward.

As you create order in the place where you choose to begin, make sure that you go there and spend time enjoying the new atmosphere. Be intentional about the way that you arrange things. Be sure that you make it yours, and keep it yours. Notice the peace that you feel with the completion of the project. This establishes a “ripple effect” and the order will begin to spread. You will find there the motivation to continue. The desire to tackle the next space will grow as you enjoy the order in this oasis.

## Learn How to Let Go

Handling our possessions is a constant cycle. Our things come into our homes, stay for a while and then eventually leave. By keeping only what we treasure, we can do away with clutter and maximize the positive impact that our possessions have on our lives.

Acquisition Pathways, as you recall from Module 2 “Identifying the Source”, are the varying ways that things come into our space. We acquire our possessions in a limited number of ways. We are given items, we purchase them, or the items are left behind. Also in Module 2, we talked about the river of possessions that runs through your home. The Acquisition Cycle of Possessions, defined by Terry Prince, is another way to think about our relationship with our things. Terry Price CPO-CD<sup>1</sup> defines the Acquisition Cycle of Possessions as Acquire, Use, Dispose in her 2006 presentation “Overcoming Chronic Disorganization.”<sup>2</sup> After we acquire items, we have them for a given time. We could let go of them immediately, such as the junk mail we receive and throw out on our walk into our home, or hold on to them indefinitely, as in the household of stuff we leave for our families to sort through after we pass.

If we look at items as only passing through this cycle, it may be easier to let them go when necessary. We dispose of our items in a few specific ways. They may be recycled or trashed, given away, sold or lost. As we dispose of items, new ones come into the cycle. When this cycle

---

<sup>1</sup> CPO-CD – Certified Professional Organizer Chronic Disorganization

<sup>2</sup> [2] The Cycle of Things, Handout - Home Clutter Support, Terry Prince, Elk Grove, CA. 2003.

becomes out of balance, we are either acquiring too much, too frequently, or we are disposing of too little, too infrequently. This causes the 'Use' stage to bulk up.

Recall from Module 2 what pathways you identified that bring items into your space. Reflect also on whether you had too much in, not enough out or a little of both.

## **Your Decision Making Muscle**

Barbara Hemphill, professional organizer and author of "Taming the Paper Tiger," identifies clutter as unmade decisions. From this point forward, I want you to work your 'decision making muscle.' Just like working your gluteus maximus in a tough workout at the gym, this decision making muscle can be strengthened the more you use it. And, you will find that the more you strengthen it, the easier it will become and you will be able to use it for longer periods of time. To this end, I am going to give you three questions to ask yourself to determine if you should keep an item.

You have committed to taking ACTION and using your decision making muscle to move you forward in your project.

The title of a book by Dana White says it best, Don't Grab a Floatie - Drain the Ocean. Organization is about creating space for you and the life you want to live. But the definition of clutter is chaos. You cannot organize clutter. You need to let go of the clutter in order to create the life you want. You should not just stay afloat in the clutter but drain the ocean that surrounds you. How can you drain the ocean? Begin making decisions on the items you surround yourself with.

### **Three Questions to Determine whether You Keep An Item**

As you go through this letting go process, you are going to focus on three questions to reduce the clutter and determine whether or not to keep an item.

#### **1. Do You LOVE It?**

The first and most important question is, do you LOVE the item? Does it bring you joy? Items that you love, bring you joy when you look at them and use them. They are not kept out of

obligation, or for any other reason. The majority of what you own should fall into this category and the remaining small percentage should fall into the next two categories.

## **2. Do You USE It?**

The second question is, do you USE the item? Your lawnmower, toaster, and toilet paper fall into this category. If you are familiar with Pareto's Principle or the 80/20 rule, you will find that the majority of your effectiveness at home comes from a small number of items. In other words, 80% of what you use comes from 20% of what you possess. You only use 20% of what you own! I've even heard this number can be as low as 10%. Given that statistic, you could let go of 80% of your possessions and find that you were not using them anyway. But I am not going to ask you to part with 4 out of every 5 items. You will know what feels 'right' for your situation.

## **3. Do You NEED It?**

The last question is, do you NEED the item? Often we overstate our need of the things we possess, and it makes it harder for us to dispose of them when the time comes. There are four things we NEED to exist: Food, Shelter, Water and Air. If these needs are met, then this question is satisfied and cannot continue to apply to other items. For example the statement, "I NEED these fabulous Manolo Blahnik shoes," does not qualify and should be replaced with, "I LOVE these fabulous Manolo Blahnik shoes."<sup>3</sup>

## **Project Steps**

As you approach each area you will use the following steps to tackle your project:

1. **Take a step back** - You are already doing this in the planning stages you have followed from the Welcome Module to Module 3. Be mindful. Every new project and area on which you work requires you to step back and plan.
2. **Prioritize, set goals** - You completed this step in Module 3 but it is important to set goals for the larger project; for example, "I will organize my home to be company ready within the next 365 days." And also the medium projects, "I will declutter the living room

---

<sup>3</sup> If you find this distinction between Love, Use and Need interesting, you may want to check out [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#).



to make it company ready in the next 30 days.” And even smaller projects such as, “I will downsize my book collection by picking my favorites keeping no more than 2 books for every 3 that find. I will do this over the next week.”

3. **Identify the Clutter** - In Module 2, you identified the clutter in your life and its source.
4. **Make an appointment with Yourself** - You will not get this project done if you wait to feel motivated or have the time to do it. So, put it on your calendar or in your schedule to work for 15 - 30 minutes a day. You can even block out bigger chunks of time; 1-3 hours if you have a task in mind. Use a timer to stay on task.
5. **Gather your tools** -
  - a. Box for donations
  - b. Trash Bag and/or recycle bin
  - c. Basket - to take items back to other rooms
  - d. Pen & Paper - to jot down notes as you think of things to do while you are organizing and decluttering.
6. **Create a Supportive Environment** - This could mean asking a friend to join you for the project or putting on music. 70 beats per minute (bpm) or less is relaxing, great for paper sorting and more than 70 bpm is energizing, great for living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms.

## But What Do You Do With It?

You have picked the room where you will start. You have gathered your tools. You have set your timer. Now what? You just dig in! Pick a small place to begin, such as one bookshelf or one drawer and pick up an item. You ask yourself “Do I love it?”, “Do I use it?”, “Do I need it?” If you answered yes to any of these three questions, then the next step is:

1. **Put it AWAY.** Sometimes a space seems cluttered just because items are not put into their assigned homes. Items may not have an assigned home. Be sure to pick up and put away after you use your things. If an item does not have a home, assign one or reconsider keeping the item. If your possessions do not fit into their assigned space, then that is another clue that you have too much.

If you answered no when you asked, “Do I love it, use it or need it?” then you have two choices:

**2. Give it AWAY.** Parting with our possessions can be difficult. Sometimes it seems they possess us more than we possess them. However, giving away your stuff can help ease the pain of letting go. First, if you have items that are part of your family history, be sure you ask the members of your family if they want the item or know who it should go to. Books, knick-knacks, photos, even old letters, may be valuable, and can be irreplaceable when it comes to documenting the family history. You may also give away by giving items back to their original owner, donating to charity or freecycling<sup>4</sup>. Another option for finding new homes for your items is The Stuff Stop,<sup>5</sup> this is an online resource that allows you look for agencies that need what you are discarding. If your possessions have historical or cultural value, you might consider organizations like theaters, museums, or historical societies. These places are in need of things from certain periods or things that identify cultural and social styles or types. Grandpa’s felt fedora may take it’s place on stage and help bring authenticity to a scene in “Death of a Salesman,” instead of taking up space in the basement.

**3. Throw it AWAY.** If your stuff is damaged beyond repair or just plain trash, you can throw it away. Please recycle when possible. Earth911.com is a website that will help you find recycling options for a wide array of stuff. You can also contact your local department of waste management or landfill for more details on recycling and refuse in your area.

It is easy to become overwhelmed when acquiring and disposing of your possessions has become out of balance in your own possession cycle. Keep in mind the three stages of the cycle (acquire, use, dispose), the three questions to ask yourself (Do I love it, use it or need it?) and the three options on what to do with your stuff (put away, give away, throw away) in order to do away with clutter for good.

## The Smallest Possible Step

Change happens in small steps taken consistently over a period of time. Imagine the Grand Canyon being carved by individual drops of water of millions of years. What is one step you can

---

<sup>4</sup> Freecycle.org An online message board system that matches items given away with people who need them.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thestuffstop.com/>

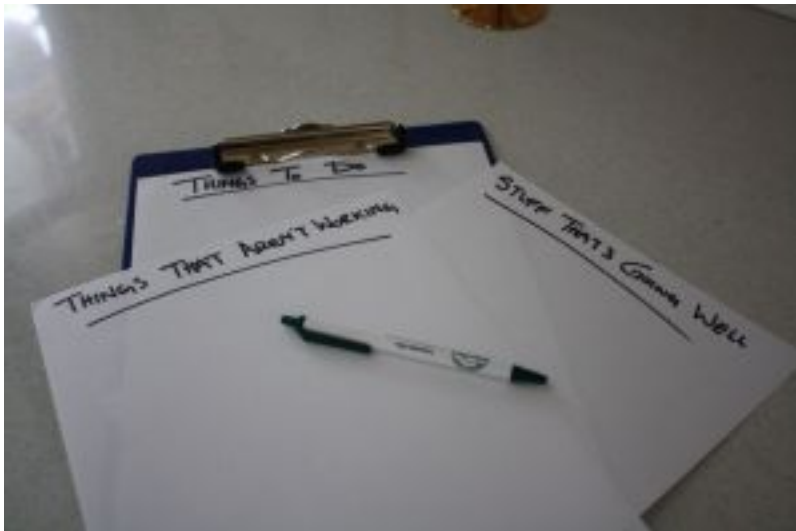
take in your starting space to work towards change? If you are in the closet, can you hang 5 pieces of clothing? Could you decide on whether to keep or part with 5 items? In the living room, could you pick up 5 pieces of trash and put them in the bin? In the bathroom, are there expired medicines or empty bottles to discard? Could you group all your medicines into one box or cabinet? You may have noted a great first step on your "to-do list" as you were touring your house. Look there for inspiration. Then, do this small step every day.

## Additional Information

### HOW to Start Your Organizing Project

Walk back into your house and put your car keys down. You are not going to start your project by leaving the house or purchasing organizing gear. Find 3 pieces of paper and a pen. Then walk around your house. Look around. What is nagging at you? Label your papers, "Things to Do", "Stuff That is Not Working", and "Things That Are Working Well". If you want, you can indicate

the rooms you are in as you go.



Now, as you tour your house, fill in your paper. Write down everything that comes to your mind. If you need another sheet (or two), get them and if another heading makes sense, add it.

This process could take you 15 minutes or up to an hour. I want

you to SEE your space again.

## Tasks

- Complete the exercise on page 3 to visualize your space/destination
- Select where you will begin your project: \_\_\_\_\_
- Gather your organizing tools into one place - use the list on page 9 to start
- Work on your project for 15 minutes a day.
- This week, plan to take at least one bag of items to be donated.
- Identify your smallest possible step to start your project.
- Complete the [Review of Module 4](#)