

What to Do with All Their Stuff

After a loved one dies, you might be left with hundreds of possessions, acquired over the course of a lifetime. There may be photos, furniture, clothes, jewelry, and general household items that all need clearing out. The task of sorting through all of this can be daunting and surrounding yourself with the things of a lost loved one can make the grieving process even more difficult.

When my mother passed suddenly, and I had recently lost my brother and father, I needed time to process their estates and to figure out what I was going to do. I was the last family member left, other than my two young children, and I was left to pick up the pieces. I was in no condition to start going through and getting rid of the things they had left behind.

I ended up moving my things into the house where my parents had lived. My things were added to all the things my parents had left behind, which included everything that they had acquired from their parents as well as A LOT of trinkets they had collected over the years. I felt I would be betraying them and their love by getting rid of anything.

Over the years all the stuff became an overwhelming burden. My house looked like a museum of furniture, dishes, trinkets, artwork, etc. that meant nothing to me other than the connection to my parents and brother. I had told myself that I needed to hold on to most of the stuff because I wanted to pass them on to my kids when they got older. What I didn't realize at the time was that they did not want or need any of the stuff, and they did not need the burden that I had been carrying all these years either. I had to start the process of clearing out my house no matter how difficult it was. All the stuff was weighing me down and holding me back.

My wife and I had a friend that helped us with the process, and I have to say she was wonderful. She came over to my house for three hours at a time. She taught us a system that was easy to follow and helped me move through the process quickly.

1. Don't try to do it alone. Get a friend or family member you can trust to help you go through things. Someone who will help you talk through the reasons you want to keep something and help you determine whether it is time to get rid of it.
2. Go through one room at a time. Choosing one room to start with and completing that room will help you to feel a sense of success.

3. As you go through each room, sort the items into five categories.
 - a. Keep – Only keep something if it holds specific meaning to you. If you decide to keep something, what are you going to do with it? Make sure you have a way to display it or use it. If it is just going to go in a box to be stored for someone else to find when you pass, you probably don't need to keep it.
 - b. Sell – Understand that you will not get what you think it is worth. Do some research on the items you think may be valuable, but we learned the hard way that most of the furniture, dishes, artwork, and other items that we sold were not worth what we thought. Consider using Facebook Marketplace, Offerup, Consignment shops, or Auction houses.
 - c. Donate – Consider donating some of the things to a charity in memory of your loved one, such as Tech for Troops, Dress for Success, Soles4Souls.
 - d. Throw away – If you have a lot of large items that you are trying to dispose of, consider hiring a company like 1-800-GOT-JUNK, College Hunks Hauling Junk and Moving, or Junk King. Please call a local expert if you come across something dangerous like guns or ammunition, paint, medications or other medical waste materials, chemicals for cleaning or pest control, etc.
 - e. Paper items – place all paper items in a banker box as you go. They are easy to pick up and move around. After you clean out each room, find somewhere comfortable to sit at a table and sort through all the paper items. You can make piles of photos, important documents, documents to file, paper to shed, etc.
4. Work no more than three hours a day (It can be very draining emotionally.). This is very important. Do not rush the process. You need to give yourself time to process everything emotionally. Don't be surprised if you feel exhausted after just three hours.
5. Donate or throw away items as you finish each session. Do not hold on to everything until the end. You need to see and feel the progress you make each time.