

## **Tips to Declutter and Organize Your Home for Seniors and Individuals with Special or Challenging Needs**

**It's an old adage, but it's true: Home is where the heart is.** That's why, according to the [American Association of Retired Persons](#) (AARP), nearly 90 percent of seniors say they want to 'age in place' in their own home. It's also the reason that adults with disabilities would rather make accommodations in their own home in order to stay there after experiencing a life-changing disability, than move into a facility that can better accommodate their immediate needs. Below are some tips.

Aside from [making modifiable renovations](#) to a home to better accommodate equipment such as wheelchairs or walkers, [some simple decluttering and organizing can help ensure your home, or that of a loved one, remains a safe, comfortable, and familiar place of them to live long-term](#). A disorganized, or cluttered home on the other hand, poses a serious health risk to seniors and disabled persons. For example, a cluttered living room with too many closely placed pieces of furniture could pose a trip and fall risk. Or a bathroom medicine cabinet packet with expired medications could pose a safety risk if an individual with a cognitive disability becomes confused as to which medication to take.

According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), falls are the leading cause of injury deaths for Americans age 65 and older. Each year about one-third of seniors fall at least once. Such home accidents could lead to health complications and serious injuries, such as hip fractures, head traumas, and in the worst cases, death.

In addition, according to the [Community for Health Strategies](#), individuals with intellectual disabilities are [4 to 6 times more likely](#) than the general population to die in a fire, a fall, or from drowning, while studies have found that 75 percent of injuries to intellectually disabled youth, occur at home.

### **About This Quick Cheat Sheet:**

For seniors and disabled adults who want to remain in their homes, a decluttered and well-organized living space is essential to personal safety and wellbeing. This sheet was designed for seniors, disabled adults, and their caregivers, to offer a room-by-room decluttering and organizing resource. Review the recommendations and plan your own home organization project. By taking a proactive approach to maintaining a clean and tidy home, you and your loved one can live with confidence for as long as possible in home sweet home. We of course are here to help you at any time!

### **\*Organization and Decluttering Tips for the Living Room**

Most Americans spend a considerable amount of time in their living rooms. Throughout the day, the living room is the family's home base for reading, watching television, socializing, and completing other hobbies. Since the living room is a place where we spend so much of our time, it can easily become a place where papers pile up, unnecessary furniture is placed, and knickknacks and

souvenirs take up every possible surface area.

A cluttered living room can be difficult to navigate in a wheelchair or with a walker, and it can become a distraction or confusing environment for an adult with a memory or cognitive disability. Follow the tips below to organize your living room to keep the space clutter-free and safe.

#### **\*Consider Relocating Furniture**

If a mobility disability is a new development in your life, consider relocating or parting with a few pieces of furniture that may make navigating your living room a challenge. It's easy to accumulate furniture, chairs, end tables, and other items throughout several decades living in a home. Try to ask yourself what pieces you use the most, give you joy, no longer fit your needs. Don't worry about not having space for guests. Your day-to-day safety is most important, any guests will just be happy for the chance to visit. Make sure you have wide areas in your living room that allow you to pass by using your mobility device, like a walker or wheelchair.

#### **\*Keep Pet Toys in a Designated Area**

It's estimated that approximately 44 percent of all U.S. households have a dog, and 35 percent have a cat. Pets can be emotionally valuable support animals for seniors and the disabled, however, their toys could pose a trip or fall hazard if around the floor. If you have a pet in your home, designate a bin, tote, or box to store their toys when not in use.

#### **\*Install Storage Solutions**

If your living areas currently has souvenirs, gifts, and photos on every surface, consider installing shelves to move items off of usable surfaces, out of way. You may find that not all your belongings fit in your space. Consider which items you truly love and want to keep, and which ones you can part with-maybe gift. If you don't have room for something, but aren't ready to part with it, put in storage. Just make sure you have usable table space for day-to-day use.

#### **\*Designate a Space for Reading Material**

Books, magazines, and daily newspapers can be items that take up space, giving a room an untidy appearance. Designate a single area for reading material, such as a basket or conveniently located magazine rack. Every few months, commit to sorting through the rack to recycle or donate items you have read and don't need anymore.(3 month rule!)

#### **\*Organization & Decluttering Tips for the Home Office**

Your home office should serve as a functional work area where you maintain your calendar, pay bills, utilize a computer, and store records. Ensure your home office remains clutter-free and functional.

#### **\*Free Up Space with Digital Record Keeping**

The biggest challenge decluttering your home office will likely be organizing your paperwork. For seniors who have spent decades in their homes, or adults with health challenges who have accumulated significant medical records, a home office can quickly turn into a room with piles of papers covering every surface. Maintaining a usable, functional office will be essential to staying organized, especially for adults with memory or cognitive disabilities.

Start decluttering your home office by sorting your files. Shred any records you are sure you no longer need. Keep your shredder in a place that is easy to reach and access, but not in a place that could cause a trip incident. For all other files that you want to keep, but don't need to maintain as originals, create digital copies, and discard the paper. Ask a loved one or family member for assistance deciding what needs to be saved, and what can be discarded, and in creating your digital records if necessary. If you have any questions about specific documents, ask a lawyer or your accountant.

#### **\*Keep Work Surfaces Free of Knickknacks**

As you did in your living room, sort through souvenirs, gifts, knickknacks and other items that are taking up valuable surface space in areas of your home office that should be used as *work* space. Install bookshelves for the belongings you want to keep, and remove unnecessary items from the room by putting them in storage, gifting, donating or discarding them - we can help!

#### **\*Organize Office Supplies**

Spend time just cleaning and organizing your desk drawers. Discard any office supplies that are no longer functional (who doesn't have a drawer full of broken pencils, pens that don't write, and bent paperclips?). Decide what you really need to keep. Make sure the items that you use regularly are easiest to access. For adults with a memory or cognitive disability, label drawers and bins so that items can easily be found and put away when not in use.

#### **\*Make Sure Furniture is Accessible**

Seniors with arthritis, or individuals with mobility issues, make sure desk drawer handles can be gripped comfortably. For those in a wheelchair, make sure your desk is the proper height for wheelchair use, and know that you may need to replace your existing desk with a wheelchair accessible model.

#### **\*Create System for Sorting Mail**

Stacks of mail that piles up daily may start to threaten the organization of a tidy office. Create a system for incoming mail that needs to be sorted, and outgoing mail such as bills and personal correspondence. Consider placing designated "in and out" bins on your desk to help seniors and those with memory issues stay organized and address invoices and other items in a timely manner.

#### **\*Keep Calendar in a Visible Location**

To keep your social calendar, appointments, and other important dates organized and at the forefront of your mind, keep a calendar in your office in a highly visible location. Use it to write down reminders for yourself. They can be anything from loved ones' birthdays, to reminders to re-order prescription medications—whatever you need to track regularly. If you have visiting PT, nurses, elder care keep a spiral notebook for each to sign in/out and leave notes.(also helps family members)

#### **\*Organization and Decluttering Tips for the Kitchen**

Decluttering your kitchen will not only help you maintain a clean, well-organized home, it will protect you from the risk of illness associated with spoiled or unsafe foods. Follow the tips below to organize your kitchen for safety.

### **\*Clean Your Refrigerator and Freezer Regularly (or have a family member or service do)**

Plan to review the contents of your refrigerator once every month to throw out items that have expired. During this process, wipe down shelves, drawers, and other interior surfaces to remove spills, crumbs, or food particles that could rot over time, creating a risk of bacterial or mold growth. If your loved one suffers from a cognitive/memory, or vision impairment, plan to help them with this process. Deli and fish check more often.

### **\*Make Sure Important Items are Within Reach**

Many kitchens include storage space on upper shelves, cabinets, and above appliances, however, attempting to reach such items could post a fall risk for seniors, or be impossible person reliant upon a wheelchair. Have family member or service move all down to reachable height. Make sure items that you'll use on a daily basis are within reach and not saved on tall shelves. As you sort through dishes, pans, and serving items, make sure you dispose of any items that are broken or dirty beyond the cleaning power of a dishwasher or strong hands.

### **\*Organize Your Pantry**

Pantry items typically have longer shelf lives, however for best day-to-day convenience and efficiency, you'll want to make sure the items you use most frequently, like cereals, pastas, and canned foods, are in the front row, while items you utilize less frequently, such as baking supplies, are toward the back. As part of your regular refrigerator cleaning, be sure to clean your pantry too, wiping down surfaces to remove crumbs and food debris that could invite ants and other unwanted critters into your pantry.

### **\*Put Utensils through the Box Test!**

Over time, it can be easy to accumulate utensils, however, for seniors who no longer have children living at home with them, they can typically benefit from eliminating utensils they no longer need to keep drawers clutter-free. Try putting your utensils in a plastic or cardboard box to determine which items you truly need, and which you can dispose of. As you need items, take them out of the box, and once clean, put them back in your drawer. At the end of the month, any items you haven't used should be donated. Just like you did in your home office, utilize a drawer organizer to keep utensils neatly sorted and easy to find.

### **\*Organize Cabinets**

Pot and pan lids are pesky items that can easily clutter up cabinets. Attach a magazine rack to the inside of a cupboard to store them or put tp organizer if possible. Make sure heavy items, like Dutch ovens, are not saved in cabinets or drawers that could be straining for a senior or adult with mobility issues to reach and lift. If they are used frequently enough, they can be left on top of the counter. (only make this exception for a few very frequently used items to ensure counters don't become too cluttered). Store small items, such as spices, on a lazy Susan inside a cabinet for easy access and better organization.(clear out any never used)

### **\*Use Your Refrigerator for Reminders**

If you or a loved one has a memory or cognitive disability, consider keeping a shopping list, daily to-do list, or checklist of home reminders attached to the front of the refrigerator where they can be seen frequently throughout the day. Also, include a list of emergency contacts, such as the local fire department, pharmacy, and contact information for doctors, neighbors, and family members.

### **\*Organization and Decluttering Tips for the Bathroom**

Bathrooms are at risk of being cluttered by small bottles, half-empty tubes, and—of greatest concern—expired and unsafe medications. Keep your bathroom clutter free, and safe, with the tips below:

#### **\*Clean Your Medicine Cabinet Regularly**

A medicine cabinet full of expired medications could put seniors and adults with a vision or cognitive/memory disability at risk. If you or a loved one were to accidentally consume an expired medication, it could lead to a serious health complication. Seniors and disabled adults should plan to clean out their medicine cabinets on a regular basis. Family members and caregivers should be part of this process to ensure the clean-up is done, done accurately, with safe disposal of expired items.(all your local authorities for drop off) For the items you keep, make sure they are stored in their original containers, and properly and clearly labeled. [Click here](#) for information on how to safely dispose of expired medications from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

#### **\*Dispose of Unnecessary Bath Products**

If your bathroom cupboard is full of half empty bottles of lotions, sunscreens (check expiration date), creams, gels, and other bath products, dispose of all items you are not currently using. Any products that have been stored for a long time may discolor or start to smell, so make sure such items are thrown away.

#### **\*Store Accessories/Small Appliances Where They Can be Easily Reached**

To assist seniors and adults with mobility issues, make sure small appliances like hair dryers are stored within reach. Don't put yourself at risk of falling or injuring yourself by reaching down to access them from the back of the under-sink storage cabinet. Consider installing shelves for easy access or hanging a heat proof holder.

#### **\*Clean Drawers, Shelves, and Dust Surfaces**

Bathrooms are places that can quickly become dirty with dust, powder residues, tiny hairs, and other unsightly dirt and debris. Plan to clean your bathroom regularly, or get help from a loved one, especially if you suffer from a vision, mobility, or memory disability, or arthritis. Make sure the insides of drawers and shelves are wiped down and kept clean and free of molds and other potential illness-causing bacteria.

#### **\*Organize Your Shower for Safety**

Only store bottles, soaps, and other items in your shower that you use daily, and that fit in space provided. Not only will this declutter the shower area visually, it will help to avoid a slip and fall from bottles that tumble off shelves or tub ledges, or leak slippery soaps. Also, consider hanging towel rack inside the tub to minimize the risk of a slip and fall while leaning to reach a towel from a pile on the counter. Discard old loofas that could be building up bacteria, and plan to use washcloths that can be regularly cleaned in a washing machine instead.

#### **\*Organize Small Items**

For small, disposable bathroom items that are used regularly, such as cotton balls and swabs, organize them in small baskets or containers on an easy-to-reach shelf for daily use, rather than

under a sink or in a cabinet that is difficult to reach.

#### **\*Organization and Decluttering Tips for the Laundry Room**

Make sure laundry room is neat, tidy, and that heavy bottles of detergents and cleaners are easily accessible. Organize your laundry room or designated laundry area to be decluttered.

#### **\*Store Detergents and Bottles on Easy-to-Reach Shelves**

Rather than storing heavy bottles of detergents or cleaners on high shelves or in low cabinets that could be difficult to reach for seniors or adults with mobility issues, place on conveniently located shelves near the washer and dryer. Consider installing shelves directly above, or adjacent to your appliances for the greatest convenience.

#### **\*Pre-Sort Dirty Laundry**

Consider separate hampers for items such as towels or clothes, or invest in a [hamper with compartments](#) that will allow you to pre-sort items.(or hang items needing spot cleaning over side of basket) An ideal hamper is lightweight, or on wheels, so that dirty clothes can be easily transferred to your laundry room area without posing a trip and fall risk.

#### **\*Organization and Decluttering Tips for the Bedrooms**

Bedroom is a place where unnecessary items, books, gifts, and other belongings can quickly pile up, leaving a space seeming cluttered and unorganized. Minimize items stored on tops of surfaces like dressers and nightstands for an overall tidy appearance.

#### **\*Donate Old Health Supplies**

Do you have a drawer in your bedroom cluttered with old pairs of glasses and hearing aids? Keep only your daily use pair, and a spare, and then donate the rest. [Click here](#) for information on organizations that accept donated eyeglasses, and [here](#) for information on organizations that accept hearing aids.

#### **\*Donate Clothing**

Parting with clothes can be difficult for many people. Whether you no longer wear an item because it doesn't fit, it's out of style, or because it's just no longer a favorite, there's always the fear that if you part with it, you may want it back. Work with a family member to donate those clothes that you truly don't need anymore. If you haven't worn the item in over a year, you likely won't miss it, and it should go in your "donate" pile. Need more tips on deciding which clothes to part with, and which to keep- we can help you! For the items you've decided to keep, organize your closet by color, season, and like items, to make it easy to find what you're looking for throughout the year.(signage for visually impaired)

#### **\*Declutter with Shelves**

Add shelves to your bedroom to store gifts, knickknacks, framed photos, books, and magazines that are taking up space on top of dressers and night stands or part with them. Just as you did with your living room, only save those items that are the most meaningful, and that you enjoy seeing every day.

#### **\*Do Not Store Items Under Your Bed**

For seniors and adults with mobility or memory issues, do not store items under the bed. Not only is under the bed storage hard to reach, and easily forgettable, it could pose a trip and fall hazard if items are not stored completely underneath the bed, also harder to clean on regular basis.

#### **\*Organization and Decluttering Tips for Hallways and Staircases**

Your hallways and staircases shouldn't require too much decluttering, but it's important to understand that for the safety of seniors and adults with vision or mobility issues, these areas must be kept clutter-free to prevent accidents. Make sure hallways are free from furniture items, such as cabinets or small tables that narrow spaces. Make sure carpets and rugs are flat, and that carpets are not peeling up at the corners or in entranceways to help minimize the risks of trips and falls. For hallway closets, put coats through the same donation test as you did for the rest of your wardrobe. There are always charities in need of donated winter coats, especially in the fall and winter season.

#### **\*Organization and Decluttering Tips for the Garage, Attic, and Basement**

Home storage areas, such as garages, basements, and attics, will likely require the most heavy-lifting from a decluttering perspective, as these areas often become storage spaces for unused furniture, and heavy boxes. Seniors and adults with disabilities should plan to seek the assistance from a family member or organizing services before attempting to declutter these areas alone.

#### **\*Eliminate Garbage**

Start by throwing away or recycling items that are clearly garbage, such as broken pieces of furniture, dirty boxes, half empty containers of cleaning or yard supplies, or miscellaneous building supplies. Purge down.

#### **\*Discard or Donate Old Sporting Equipment**

Seniors may be holding on to bicycles, skis, tennis racquets, and other sporting equipment that belonged to them in years past, or to their children. If you are no longer in a place where you're able to use such items, get rid of them, making room in garage for items you do need to store, like a spare wheelchair or a scooter. If you have some supplies that are still in good condition, consider donating them to a worthy charity – we can provide you a resource in your area.

#### **\*Install Shelves**

Install shelves to store small items, such as small tools and supplies. Organize such items in a toolbox or bins so they can be easily found in the future. Also use your shelves to store seasonal yard or home supplies, like windshield washing fluid or weed killer. Get them off floor.

#### **\*Get Rid of or Store Unused Furniture**

If you've been storing a bedframe and box spring in your basement for several years, it's not likely you'll be needing it anytime soon. Donate it, or throw it away if it's not in good condition. If you are holding on to valuable pieces of furniture, or family heirlooms, but don't have room for them in your house, consider putting them in storage with the help of a family member or better yet gift to them now and have them take away and use!

**\*Home is where the heart is.** You likely feel that every item inside of your home is associated with a meaningful memory. If you feel like decluttering your home is forcing you to part with items you hold dear, remember that belongings are just intangible things, and that removing them from your

home will never erase the memory they represent.(solutions available in digital or coffee book form) Even though it can be difficult to declutter your home, once the work is done, you'll realize that a clutter-free home is easy to navigate, manage, and maintain.

**Most importantly, a clutter-free home will keep you safe so that you can remain in your home, as long as you choose to do so.**