



Cynthia Townley Ewer  
of [OrganizedHome.com](http://OrganizedHome.com)

FULLY UPDATED

# HOUSE WORKS



How to live clean, green, and organized at home



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of OrganizedHome.com

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For Steve, who knows why

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# My journey to an organized home

Folks who know me only through my writing imagine a lot of things: that I'm blonde (sorry, brunette here), that I'm tall and willowy (I wish!), and, most of all, that I am naturally organized, tidy, and frugal. That sound you hear is hearty laughter, and it comes from those who know me best: my husband, daughter, and son. They know the truth: that I was playing hooky the day that innate organization ability and financial skills were handed out.

I am not naturally organized, but I have learned how to be—the hard way. I know the exact day when my journey to an organized home began: December 25, 1983. That's when I realized that I had a problem with clutter and chaos, and that I needed to find a solution to create an orderly and happy home for my family and me.

It was the evening of Christmas Day. Recently divorced, I had sent my two young children to spend the day with their father, so I visited my parents' home for Christmas dinner. But when I returned to my little house late that night, broken glass littered the front porch. Someone had tried to break into my house while I was away!

I called the police and waited, shivering on the porch. An officer responded, approached the house cautiously, and slipped inside my front door. A few minutes later, he emerged, scratching his head. "Lady," he said, "I don't understand it. Your deadbolt held and the door wasn't opened—but somebody got in and ransacked your upstairs."

## Guilty secret

Embarrassed warmth flooded my face. "No, no," I protested, "that's just the way I left it!"

The officer peered at me keenly. "Do you know what it looks like up there?"

To my immense shame, I did. The two rooms that served as my home office, bedroom, and sewing area were knee-deep in crumpled photocopies, legal pads, fabric scraps, piled

clothing, holiday wrap, stacked files, spilled coffee, and dirty dishes. Dust festooned the corners, and a narrow path wound through the mess to the islands of my desk and my bed.

## New order

That night, I confronted the truth: I had a problem. I wanted to raise my children in a clean and comfortable home, but the place looked like a crime scene. I needed to learn what to do, how to do it, and when to do it to create the organized home my children and I deserved.

Next day, I began to search libraries and bookstores for guidance. I read books. I tried many different organizing methods. I learned about cleaning and began to plan and schedule housework in the same way as my business activities. Little by little, I learned how to conquer clutter, clean house, and run an organized home.

Did it work? Fast-forward five years to September 1988. I'd met a young doctor-in-training at the medical school library the week before, and this was to be our first date. My house was clean and orderly. My school-aged children were eating dinner at the kitchen table, as clean and orderly as it was in their nature to be. All was well as I opened the door.

My date followed me to the kitchen as I made coffee, and to my amazement, began to ask me about my calendar, my tickler file, and my family information center. I showed him my lists, my cleaning schedule, even the little note with the date and time of our date.



He seemed impressed, but I had a little sinking spell when the evening was over. How could I have shown this man my housekeeping system? What could he be thinking about my schedules and file cards and notebooks? They seemed a long way from the hip-mama image I wanted to project.

### Homemaking skills

Later, I learned that he was impressed, indeed. On the night he proposed marriage, my husband Steve told me that he knew I was right for him from that very first evening. A fourth-generation physician, he understood that a doctor's wife has to be organized, self-reliant, and independent in order to deal with the demands of her spouse's profession. Nothing could have shown that capability more clearly, he felt, than the visible evidence of my skills as a homemaker that he saw when he came to my house on our first date.

### Sharing the journey

Since 1998, I've taught those skills to the thousands of people who have visited my Web site, OrganizedHome.com—and more lately, to print readers who found the 2005 edition of this book. Along the way, I've learned much more than I've shared, traveling together with visitors and readers—male, female, older, younger—on the path to better home organization and management.

In this book, we'll take that same journey together. Our goal: a clean, organized, and cost-efficient home. The methods offered here worked for me, and they've worked for those who have found them on the Web or in the first edition of this book. Put them into practice and you'll find them working for you, too.

There's hope. There's help. Come join us!

*Cynthia Towley Ewer*

► **Need help** running a calm and cost-efficient household? Look to the Web! Clean your house, cut clutter, and save money with online tips and resources from OrganizedHome.com.





A woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is holding up a large, white, wrinkled sheet or fabric. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a bright, clear blue sky. The text "a well-run home" is overlaid on the lower right portion of the image.

a well-run  
**home**

# The problem: clutter, disorder, and dirt

How do you really feel about the state of the house? Here's a quick test: imagine that the doorbell rings. Is there panic in the pit of your stomach at the possibility of unexpected guests—or a bill collector? You're not alone. For many, clutter, disorganization, and dirt interfere with the day-to-day business of life at home.

## Clean . . . and green!

**Taking aim on clutter** is a great first step to more sustainable living. Tackle domestic chaos and live a greener life with these tips:

- **Bag the bags.** Stow reusable shopping bags on a hook near the car keys. They'll be easy to grab on your way out the door—and will stop plastic supermarket sacks from invading your organized home.
- **Junk the junk mail.** Removing your address from direct mail databases and calling catalog companies with stop requests takes time up-front, but saves the household—and Mother Earth!—from being buried in unwanted paper.
- **Set free the surplus.** Recycling or repurposing unneeded appliances, clothing, tools, and craft supplies not only clears storage space, but also gives these items a new and useful life.
- **Waste packaging waste.** Smart menu planning means less reliance on single-serve or convenience food items—and a corresponding reduction in needless food packaging. Build a pantry and buy in bulk to keep packaging waste to a minimum.

Sound far-fetched? Not for the nearly 40 percent of us who find it difficult to maintain a clean and organized home. In 1997, the Soap and Detergent Association in the US surveyed women's attitudes about cleaning. Of the respondents, 21 percent, termed "Strugglers," spent the most time cleaning, yet felt the most discouraged about the state of their homes. Another group, the "Dirt Dodgers," who made up 18 percent of the results, cleaned only when absolutely necessary—and found it difficult to keep their homes neat and organized.

### Impossible standards

Add them together and you get us: the four out of ten people who are challenged by our lives at home. For all our numbers, we may as well be invisible. Modern media pummels us with misleading standards of perfection.

Even in real life, we seldom see the truth about our neighbors' clutter and chaos. At a friend's holiday open house, we admire the beautiful home, but don't realize that it was achieved only by tossing dirty clothes, surface clutter, and stacks of newspapers into a padlocked bathroom.

### Perfect pitch: the haves and have-nots

Take heart: you are not lazy, crazy, or stupid. You just need to learn the skills necessary to create a clean and organized home. Think of innate organizing ability as a kind of musical pitch. Some people have very little—they're the "tin ears" of the musical world. Others have perfect pitch: an inborn and accurate sense of which note is which and the relationships between them. The rest of us struggle at scales in-between.



In the same way, some folks naturally have an orderly relationship with their stuff. They keep things tidy without thinking, and they breeze through domestic life without turning a hair. They have the home management equivalent of perfect pitch hard-wired into their brains.

The rest of us have to work at learning organizational skills. But, just as we conquered musical scales and intervals, we can master planning and scheduling, cleaning, and clutter control. And, like a well-rehearsed recital piece, our organizing abilities strengthen and become part of us as we use them.

“Most of us are not born with organizing skills. They are something we must learn.”

▲ **Children’s toys** are one of the prime spawning grounds for clutter and disorder. Learning the necessary skills can help even the organizationally challenged to keep the problem under control.

### Doing what doesn’t come naturally

Problems arise when the two camps try to communicate. Tell someone who’s been gifted with a big slug of organizational ability about your new menu plan, and you’re apt to get a puzzled, “Huh? Doesn’t everyone do that?” On the other hand, it’s not always possible to benefit from the experience of a naturally organized person. For them, it comes easily, so they short-cut directions, assuming that the rest of us can follow.

Naturally organized people write way too many books about home organization. It’s easy for them, so it should be easy for the reader, right?

Wrong. It takes one to know one—and to teach one.

# The solution: skill sets and cycles

How do you go from chaotic to controlled, cluttered to clean on the home front? Learn four simple skill sets, and apply them to the cycles of home keeping. In this book, we'll start with the basic skills needed to declutter, organize, clean, and plan a well-run home. Then we'll apply these skills to the cycles of life in every home: food, clothing, surroundings, paper, and finances.

## Part One: Skills for a Well-run Home

In high school home economics classes, I learned to make bound buttonholes, set a pretty table, and bake a dozen cookies that were all the same size—but I wasn't taught the real skills needed to create a clean and organized home. How to keep clutter under control. How to organize and clean house. How to plan my time and family activities.

Think of Part One of this book as Home Ec 101 for the real world: an introduction to the four basic skill sets everyone needs—declutter, organize, clean, and plan.

**Decluttering your home** At bottom, the problem isn't about "stuff;" it's about the habits, personality traits, and thought processes that encourage the build-up of clutter.

In the declutter skill set, we learn a 20-minute method to banish clutter anywhere. We gain a deeper understanding of personality traits that encourage cluttering, and explore ways to fight the thought processes that tie us to our stuff. Finally, we share tips to deal with other people's clutter.

**Organizing your home** A well-organized home makes life flow smoothly, speeds cleaning, and means you'll never have to look for misplaced items again ... well, most of the time.

In the organize skill set, we focus on the three basic rules of home organization. We establish a place for everything, bring the family on board, and create activity centers to focus space and possessions. Finally, we look for storage solutions to contain clutter and make living spaces work.



**declutter** ▲ see pages 18–35



**organize** ▲ see pages 36–47

**Cleaning your home** It's not how long you clean. It's not how hard you clean. It's how efficiently you clean that makes the difference between grimy and gleaming.

In the clean skill set, we cover the basics of speed cleaning—cleaners, tools, and methods. We find out how to clean the way the pros do, fast and well. We stress teamwork, explore ways to bring children onboard, and share cleaning tips to get the family out the door and on to better things.

**Planning your home** It's an old saying: if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. Planning daily routines, housework schedules, and family activities is key to smooth sailing at home.

In the plan skill set, we explore the secrets of checklists, calendars, schedules and to-do lists. We share timesaving tips and point out time-traps to avoid. Finally, we discover the organized family's power tool: the Household Notebook.

## Part Two: Cycles of an Organized Home

Around the house, the calendar turns—and so do the basic cycles of home life. Food and cooking. Clothing care. Dealing with clutter, cleaning, and organizing. Paper handling and bill paying. In Part Two, we apply our newfound skill sets to each of these major cycles.

**Food** In this first section, we tackle all aspects of food: menu and meal planning, grocery shopping, and food storage. We declutter, organize, and clean the kitchen, setting up activity

centers to make it easy and quick to get the family fed. We also tackle bottom-dollar issues of energy efficiency, kitchen appliances, and setting up a pantry.

**Clothing** Section Two takes us into closets, dressers, and drawers as we organize all aspects of keeping ourselves clothed. We plan wardrobes, declutter, and organize the clothes closet, clean out clothing clutter, manage seasonal storage, and learn the best ways to launder and care for our clothing investment.

**Surfaces and systems** In Section Three, our surroundings start to shine. Here, we learn to care for walls, windows, floors, and furnishings, maintain bedding and mattresses, and get acquainted with household systems that keep us comfortable and safe. We focus on home safety and energy savings, too, as we make home a clean and comfortable place to be.

**Room to live** Section Four offers room-by-room help for clutter, cleaning, and organization issues. Whether it's the family room, children's areas, bedroom, or bath, we cut the clutter, get organized, and clean up quickly and well.

**Paper and finances** Section Five tackles the paper chase: sorting, organizing, and filing the paper in our lives. We learn which documents to keep, how to keep them, and create centers for efficient bill paying, deskwork, and paper handling.



**clean** ▲ see pages 48–71



**plan** ▲ see pages 72–87

# The solution: **do it your way**

Learning basic skills—how to declutter, how to clean—is only the first step on the road to better home management. To reach the goal of a clean and organized home, we must craft our own personal home management habits and routines. Any method we select must work with our unique personality, lifestyle, and strengths.

In home management, as with pantyhose, there is no such thing as “one size fits all.” One person’s list-based routine seems scattered and annoying to someone who prefers the tighter structure of a daily planner. Your neighbor swears by the scheduling advice she found online, but the tight blocks of time in her day don’t work with your more casual approach. Your sister thinks it’s essential to have all counters and surfaces bare of distractions; you can’t work well unless you can see your tools and supplies.

## **Get personal**

Knowledge is power—but self-knowledge is empowerment. Moving from disorder and chaos to effective, orderly living requires more than simple information or one person’s

“There is only one right way to get organized: yours.”

example; it requires personally devised solutions that will work for you as an individual—not for your sister or your neighbor or anyone else.

Throughout this book, we’ll help you tailor advice and recommendations to suit your own personality and family lifestyle. We’ll identify your “clutter personality”—the habits and thinking that have caused you to become a clutterer (see *pages 30–1*)—and offer strategies to help you work in harmony with it.

Instead of establishing one level of “clean”, we’ll help you assess your own family’s needs and constraints, so you can reach the right state of “clean enough” for your home.

## **Where do I start?**

It’s easy to pick up a book about home management, read along, laugh at the jokes, and put the book down again. Translating that experience into a cleaner, more organized home is another matter.

If you find yourself looking around your disorganized home and thinking: “Where do I start?” the simple answer is: you start where you are, then take a single step.

Getting organized isn’t a race—it’s a journey. On a journey, what matters is the trip, not where you start or how fast you make it, or where other people are along the way.

Too often, folks frustrated by the condition of their homes see getting organized as a hundred-yard dash: an activity with a beginning and an end and a lot of heated pounding in between. “I will clean things up,” they vow, “and this time, it’s going to stay that way!” A week later, they have little to show for all the effort, because they haven’t effected the real change that will solve the problems of disorder and chaos.

To make that change, take a single step toward better organization, right where you are. Tomorrow, take another step toward better home life. And another. And another. Just as chaos and disorder didn’t spring full-blown into your home in a single day, so it won’t be conquered in one day, either. The important thing is to take the first step, make the first change—and just keep traveling.



► **Start small.** Developing good habits, like clearing up clutter that has accumulated at the end of each day, provides easy-to-see results that will help to keep you motivated.

## Find fellow travelers

Anyone who's taken a walk with friends knows that sharing and friendship make even the roughest climb easier. It's no different in your journey to better home management. Look for like minds to walk with you and lighten the way.

There are a number of places where you might find potential fellow travelers. In your community, be alert for friends or neighbors who might form a support network for your get-organized efforts. Seek out a "declutter buddy": a friend who brings a detached view to decluttering sessions. Without the ties that bind, she'll help you see your stuff in

“The important thing is to take the first step—and just keep traveling.”

a new light and help you release it; next week, it's your turn to help her clear out the closet. Check with church groups, clubs, or parents' associations to find other folks with whom to share your progress; their support will make all the difference and will help to keep you motivated and enthusiastic.

Dedicated support groups can be a wonderful source of accountability and motivation. In North America, Clutterers Anonymous (CLA) applies the Twelve Step program first modeled by Alcoholics Anonymous to issues of clutter and hoarding. Other clutter recovery support groups are offered by counseling centers or volunteer organizations. Community education services or church groups may offer classes and workshops on home management.

The Web offers a wealth of interactive support groups to help members inspire one another to get organized and run a sustainable, cost-efficient household. Friendly online communities share success stories, offer accountability, and cheer members on as they cut clutter and improve home management. Check the



Resources section (see pages 248–9) for Internet groups to help you cut clutter and save money at home.

Online or in real life, change is easier to come by when shared. Look for others to travel the road with you, to encourage you when you are flagging and to inspire you with their example, as you move toward your goal: better home and personal organization.





skills for a  
**well-run home**



# Skills for a well-run home decluttering your home

**“Getting organized”** means different things to different people, but in most disorganized homes, you’ll find clutter.

**Clutter gets between** you and the things you want to do. Living in a cluttered home, nearly every action is handicapped and impeded. Either you’re wasting time looking for something you need, pushing clutter out of the way to create a workspace, or you’re simply distracted by the scatter of out-of-place items.

**Problem is,** attacking the clutter itself won’t resolve the issue, because the “stuff” is just a symptom. What causes clutter is a cluster of personality traits, thinking, and behavior. To rein in clutter at home, you have to start with you: your thoughts, your habits, and your day-to-day behavior patterns.

**Reversing the tide** of clutter is a slow and steady job, but the rewards are great. In this section, we’ll focus on basic methods to STOP clutter and retrain the family to a new, uncluttered outlook.



# Clear clutter: the **STOP** clutter method

Household clutter is made, not born. Its hidden cause? Deferred decision-making. Each item of clutter in your home represents a frozen decision or an incomplete action. Worse, the stale energy of piled clutter attracts more clutter, accreting together into an avalanche of pent-up “must-do, should-do, wanna-do” decisions that are tiring even to contemplate.

For example, bringing in the mail, you notice a catalog you’d like to browse, so you set it aside on the counter. Next day, three more catalogs, a stack of bills, and a page of pizza coupons land in the pile, and by the week’s end, the lone catalog has mushroomed into an unwieldy stack of magazines, letters, bills, permission slips, and store receipts that will take an hour to sort, file, and finish—and you still haven’t found time to peruse the new catalog. The STOP clutter method

fights clutter at the heart by thawing the decision-making process. It’s short,

◀ **Keep it brief.** To prevent flagging spirits, declutter in short sessions of between 15 and 20 minutes.



sweet, and powerful, and is designed to help you blast through all those frozen decisions quickly—no more sitting on the fence in the face of chaos! By forcing you to make decisions rapidly, you cut through the mass of clutter and regain your organized home. Using the STOP technique, you’ll attack clutter in four easy steps: Sort, Toss, Organize, and Put away (see *opposite*).

## STOP clutter tools

The tools you’ll use for each STOP clutter session are simple. They’re designed to set limits, encourage decision-making, and make it easy to wrap up each session of cutting clutter. You will need a kitchen timer, three large boxes, and a garbage bag.



sort ▲



toss ▲

**A timer** Stopping clutter, like acquiring it, is a long-term process of short steps. Too often, the initial excitement of attacking the clutter problem causes people to bite off more than they can chew—or decide, store, or put away in a single session. Result: torn-up drawers, stacks of “I-dunno” items and a sense that the job is never finished.

Using a timer to keep STOP clutter sessions short and complete keeps the declutter momentum going, and prevents burnout. You’ll use your timer to start—and stop—each session so that you can finish the put-away step and leave the newly decluttered area clean and ready for use.

**Three boxes** The put away, storage, and sell/donate boxes lie at the heart of the STOP clutter method. Labeled “Put Away,” “Storage,” and “Sell/Donate,” they’re the decision-making engine that drives the declutter process.

Use sturdy, good-sized boxes, preferably with handles and lids. Look for records boxes (sold in office supply stores), or scour supermarkets for lidded produce boxes. Handles make it easy to circle the house at the end of each STOP clutter session, emptying the Put Away box. Lids help you stack the Storage and Sell/Donate boxes as you gather out-of-season items or set aside boxes for donation or a yard sale. Lids also help to cut the temptation to peep inside and return decluttered items to their old haunting grounds. Out of sight is out of mind!

**A garbage bag** An opaque garbage bag or garbage can is star player in a STOP clutter session. Here’s where you’ll entrust all the true trash, the quicker, the better. Black garbage bags prevent the declutterer (or family members) from having a change of heart. If it can’t be seen, it won’t be returned to the scene.

### Taking it a step at a time

To harness the power of the STOP clutter method, assemble your boxes and garbage bag and set the timer for 15 minutes. The timer’s bell will tell you when it’s time to stop deciding and start putting away. Working in 15-minute increments (plus another 5 minutes to return put-away items and stow the tools), you stay fresh and motivated to do the job.

**1 Sort** Turning to the day’s chosen clutter cache—the area around the telephone, for example—take the first step and sort the items being decluttered. Quickly move through the pile of clutter that surrounds the phone, making a quick decision about each item: should I keep this here, put it away, sell it, or throw it away?

If the item belongs in the area being decluttered, sort it into a pile of like items: pens with pens, paper clips with paper clips, and notepads with sticky notes. If the item is an intruder that must be put away in another location, such as a pair of socks, consign it



organize ▲



put away ▲

to the Put Away box. Surplus items that can be donated to charity or sold are tossed into the Sell/Donate box, the proper place for the plastic flower pen and the clunky grocery list holder. Items that more appropriately belong in household storage areas—such as light bulbs left over from December’s holiday decorations—are tucked into the Storage box.

**2 Toss** As you sort, toss trash straight into the garbage bag. Expired coupons, supermarket receipts, scribbled bits of paper, non-working pens all go straight into the garbage bag.

**3 Organize** When the entire area has been sorted and the trash tossed, it’s time to organize. Take a good look at the newly decluttered area, and find ways to organize the items that belong there. Corral pens next to the phone in a pretty coffee mug. Place the phone book neatly beneath the phone

base. Consider ways to organize the area for best use; can you replace messy message slips with a hanging write-on/wipe-off white board?

**4 Put away** When the timer rings, or the area is cleared, it’s time to put away any out-of-place items identified during the STOP clutter session. Take the Put Away box and circle the house, returning items to their proper places. Toss the garbage bag into the garbage can, and return the timer and boxes to a closet or shelf, where they’ll await the next STOP clutter session. As the storage boxes fill, add them to a storage area and begin a new box. Decide when you’ll attack the household’s next clutter magnet and note it on your calendar (see *Planning Your Home*, pages 72–87). Finally, admire your new, organized telephone area. Using the STOP clutter method, you’ve created a working center for phone calls and messages.

## STOP clutter step by step: the junk drawer

All homes have at least one of these: a drawer for small, often-needed items. The contents of this catchall arena seem to expand like bread dough, multiplying at will whenever the drawer is closed. When the mess reaches the rim of the drawer, it’s time to STOP clutter.



**1 Sort.** Assemble your tools: timer, boxes, and garbage bag. Set the timer for 15 minutes. Open the junk drawer, and begin the sort step. Sort items that belong in the drawer into like piles, and keep sorting until the timer’s bell rings or the drawer is cleared.

**2 Toss.** Throw any trash, broken, or valueless items into the garbage bag. Place items that belong elsewhere in the Put Away box, and tuck any items for storage in the Storage box. Surplus items that are still useful go to Sell/Donate.

**3 Organize.** Once the drawer is empty, organize the survivors in the cleared space. Use drawer dividers to separate batteries from postage stamps, pens from store coupons. Bundle or bag small items to make them easy to find.