How to Help Yourself Get Organized

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Missed assignments, lost keys, forgotten birthdays, late arrivals…

If you're chronically disorganized, you're probably very used to saying "I'm sorry!" And equally used to people being annoyed with you. That's because, from the outside, the fallout from organizational difficulties can look like carelessness, laziness, even indifference. People often assume that if you just *tried harder* and *paid attention* this could all be avoided.

What they don't see are the shame and anxiety, the frustration, embarrassment and real-world consequences that are often a daily reality when you're disorganized: Bad grades, lost jobs, friends and family who roll their eyes at yet another flurry of apologies and what, to them, sound like more excuses.

The problem is, that for many people — especially those with executive functioning issues or ADHD — figuring out how to get (and stay) organized isn't as simple as "trying harder." It requires new strategies.

Don't try harder, try differently

When you've been disorganized all your life, people who seem effortlessly organized are baffling. Do they have superpowers? Are you, the disorganized person, just terribly, hopelessly flawed?

Nope. Organization isn't a superpower, it's just a set of strategies and skills you don't have yet, and acquiring them takes time, trial, error and commitment. There's no cheat code, but you can learn, and once you do things really do get a lot easier.

There's no single, perfect way to become a more organized person. Organizational strategies are less one-size-fits all than what-thing-fits-you. But there are a few basics that can help.

Identify weak spots

One good thing about a lifetime of disorganization: You've got lot of historical data to draw from. Think about your strengths and weaknesses and identify specific problems — finding things in your mess of a backpack for example.

Nailing down your trouble spots will make it much easier to come up with practical, targeted solutions. For example, if you often can't find your keys because they're always falling to the bottom of your backpack or hiding out in pants pockets (pants that tend to end up in a pile on your bedroom floor), you could try putting the keys on a carabiner on your belt, or designating an always-put-keys-here spot in an obvious place.

Another advantage of targeting weak spots is that it makes getting organized feel less overwhelming. Working on a few specific things is more practical and more achievable than trying to reinvent yourself overnight..

Use tools

You don't have to become the world's most organized person, you just have to find strategies that make it seem like you are, and use them (like, really use them). External tools are the secret of the truly organized. Outsource your brain whenever you can; calendars, planners, phone reminders, helpful apps, storage solutions, a rubber band on your wrist — the options are endless. Also consider what has (and hasn't) worked when you've tried to get organized in the past — a pencil case you never used, a reminder on your phone you did. Find the ones you'll really use and put them to work.

But don't get bogged down in planning

One of the best ways to delay actually *getting* organized is by *imagining* all the ways you'll get organized (Cute calendars! Color coding! Buying new things!) Stop. A plan without action is just procrastination by another name. Your system doesn't have to look, or even be, perfect, it just has to work and putting it into practice is the only way to know if it will.

What actually works > what's supposed to work

Throwing yourself at a system that doesn't work for you is a recipe for exhaustion and disaster — even if it seems like *the* thing that everyone uses. For example, if you've always had a hard time putting clothes back in your dresser, try bins instead: One for pants, one for shirts, one for underclothes and one for laundry. If something isn't working, let it go and find a different strategy that will. Anything is better than chaos.

Sustainability is key

Find tools you'll feel comfortable using daily over a long period of time. For example, a beautifully organized planner might help for a month or two, but the more time and work your "solution" requires, the less likely you'll be to keep using it.

A few universal tips

True, organization is personal but there are some practical tips that pretty much always apply:

- **Write it down. "**I'll remember later" should be added to the category of famous last words. Always, *always,* write it down. A homework assignment, someone's number, a reminder to call so and so, whatever. Write it down and when you do, write it in a reliable place: Things like your planner, or the notes app on your phone are good options; the palm of your hand or some scrap of paper you'll shove into your bag never to be seen again are not.
- **Put the same thing in the same place every time**. No exceptions. Getting organized means building better habits and habits are built through repetition. Training yourself to always, always put the keys in the same pocket of your backpack (not in the pocket of your coat, which you may not be wearing tomorrow, or on the bed where they'll get buried) is the only way to be sure you'll know where they are when you need them.
- **Make easy-to-lose things bulky.** Big things are just easier to see and harder to forget. Time to start that keychain collection!
- **Breaking overwhelming tasks into smaller, more manageable pieces will help you get things done.** Choose smaller tasks that give you the most bang for your buck. For example, if cleaning your room feels totally impossible, making your bed or taking out the trash is a better use of your time than, say, reorganizing your sock drawer according to softness.
- **The simpler the better.** Sound familiar? I can't say it enough: Simple strategies and tools you actually use beat awesome and elaborate ones you don't.

Stop beating yourself up, and start moving on

Changing the way you approach organization is about more than getting a planner, or putting your shoes back in the same place every time. It's also about learning how to manage your anxiety when things don't go as planned.

And sometimes they won't. It can be hard to shake that pit-of-your-stomach panic that happens when you've messed up an important (or even not so important) task, or forgotten something big. The temptation to dissolve into a puddle of apologies and self-recrimination, to assume that others are as disappointed or angry at you as you are at yourself — can be overwhelming. Don't do it.

Things are very rarely as dire as they feel. First, take a breath. Take a walk. Get a sandwich. And once you're feeling a little better, ask yourself these questions: First, is the problem actually as catastrophic as it feels? For example, if you missed an assignment, does that really mean you're going to fail the class? Second, is it fixable? If so, what can you do to fix it? For example, if you overslept and missed a class, could you do extra credit to make it up?

And finally, and most importantly both for you and the person you're worried about disappointing, be it a parent, friend, boss or teacher: How can you avoid repeating the mistake in the future?

Try to remember: You're not bad, or careless or stupid. You're learning, and that takes time. So next time, instead of apologizing or making excuses, try advocating for yourself. "Organization is a challenge for me, but I'm working on it. Here's what I'm doing to change things…" Then take action and make the changes. Focusing on what to do next, instead of obsessing over what went wrong, is the healthiest and most useful place for your energy to go.

Getting organized isn't easy, but it is worth it. Put in the time and you'll be rewarded with less stress, fewer conflicts (and frenzied apologies), and a sense that things are finally under some control.

You've got this. All you have to do is get started and keep going.