

Behind clothes doors

NIKI SULLIVAN; The News Tribune

Some immutable facts: The size (insert impossibly small number here) jeans in the back of your closet will never again be in style – even if you do get back down to your middle school weight.

The horrendous sweater you paid lots of good money for, then never wore because it was utterly unflattering ... well, you're never going to wear it.

And the same is true for the other 80 percent – yep, a full 80 percent – of things in your closet.

The good news is, if you get rid of the stuff you don't wear, you'll actually feel like you have more. To prove this, we talked to experts in the field: two professional organizers and a certified clotheshorse.

The clean team

Meet Steve Webber of Steve's Organizing LLC. His own closet is pretty basic, but he's not out to pare your closet down to two shirts and a pair of pants.

“What typically happens is you wear 20 percent of what you own. The 80 percent just sits there and collects dust and causes clutter,” which only leaves you dreading getting dressed, Webber said. Identify and get rid of the clutter and you'll feel like you've got a new wardrobe, he says.

Maggie Gardner, also a professional organizer with Simplify, believes in stocking high-quality basics that flatter and adding seasonal pieces to accent them.

Her top rule: “If it doesn't look good or fit, it doesn't matter how much you spend on it. You need to get rid of it.”

Last but not least, Rebecca Dashow owns Dame Lola clothing boutique in downtown Tacoma. She estimates she has 150 pairs of shoes, but she still manages to keep her closet in good shape.

She believes in the oft-cited golden rule of closet cleaning: “If you've had it for more than a year and haven't put it on, get rid of it.” Exceptions, however, can and should be made with coats, vintage pieces and things you'd wear only occasionally, such as cocktail dresses.

Here's our experts' advice – in not-too-overwhelming bits (and a list of buts) – on how to clean out your closet and get it in working order.

What's the payoff? You'll go into your closet every time knowing that everything in it fits and flatters. The organized space will also cut down on dressing time, they said.

Plus, if you donate your castoffs, you can walk away from the palazzo pants knowing that they'll be put to good use by someone else.

Write down your goals: Gardner recommends making clear goals – such as having a clean, well-organized closet with a functional wardrobe – and referring back to them when there's a dilemma.

An important goal for Gardner is having clothes only that are flattering to your figure.

“It starts with knowing what looks good. Ask friends about specific outfits they really like,” Gardner said. She also recommends books such as “What Not to Wear” (based on the TV show of the same name). Once you do find out, she said, it's empowering.

For someone like Dashow, with limited closet space and (seemingly) unlimited clothes from trendy to vintage, it's crucial to stay organized: In-season clothes are in the closet; out-of-season clothes are stored in well-organized plastic bins, zip-up plastic wardrobe protectors and boxes.

Once you've got your goal, start editing: “When making decisions, if it doesn't support your goals, you must get rid of it,” Webber said.

“Look past the emotional part and come from a functional standpoint.”

You'll feel better in the end, and likely won't notice that something's gone.

Don't think you have to do it all that day: Take baby steps.

After a cleaning-out session, Gardner recommends putting the bagged clothes out of sight. She follows this rule with wardrobes and offices and finds that people often go back through old things if she doesn't.

Take the clothes to Goodwill, or give them to friends. Either way, the bonus is that you know your trash (and we mean that in the nicest way possible) will be someone's treasure.

“My sister-in-law loves it when I go through my closet,” Dashow said.

If you and your similar-size friends are ambitious, you could even host a clothes swap. Just be careful not to stock your closet with all the same kind of ill-fitting, out-of-date things you just got rid of.

Got that?

But, but ... what if it comes back in style? “If you're waiting for it to come back in style, I think you're using space not wisely,” Webber said.

Gardner said that when items do come back in style, they typically have updated details. Translation: “You'd want the newer one anyway.”

So no use taking up closet real estate with such “investments.”

The exception is with timeless pieces, Gardner said. A client with family in India had beautiful tunics that Gardner had to convince her not to throw out. She said they were so well-made and beautiful, it didn't matter that they weren't of-the-minute. (And, what do you know, tunics were everywhere this year.)

If you insist on keeping those tapered-leg, high-waist jeans around, “Put it in a container, and get it out of your working closet space. Who knows? Styles do unfortunately come around,” Webber said.

Dashow keeps vintage coats she got from her grandmother and other timeless pieces but is realistic about things that she knows aren't flattering or fashionable.

Sounds easy enough, but ...

What about those clothes I'm going to fit into after (insert excuse here)? This one's unanimous from our experts: Toss them.

Don't keep clothes that don't fit, or use an excuse (post-baby weight ranks right up there) to avoid giving your wardrobe the attention and paring it needs. “There are pants that'll look great” for any figure, Gardner said.

If you must, there's always storage. Or, you can keep one motivational pair of pants laying around. Just don't abuse it!

But I won't have anything to wear: Couldn't be further from the truth: Gardner recommends stocking high-quality basics – two or three pairs of slacks, two or three nice shirts and two pairs of shoes that all coordinate – then adding accessories and accent pieces to suit the season.

That means that, at any one time, she has about 20 to 25 pieces (including jeans, shirts, the works) for the season.

But don't worry, even if your walk-in is packed to the teeth, you're probably wearing only that much anyway.

She emphasized springing for higher-quality basics because the cut is typically more flattering and the fabrics wear better so they'll last.

“If you do it right, anything looks great,” Gardner said. That means no more trying on 10 outfits in the morning, trying to decide what looks passable.

Dashow, as you can imagine, has more than 25 pieces per season. But that doesn't stop her from keeping only what looks good.

For her, that doesn't mean sticking to a strict set of guidelines.

“Fashion is supposed to be fun,” she said. And even if you don't think you've got the body for some trendy clothes – like skinny-leg jeans – you might give it a try.

“You might be surprised to find that a certain cut fits,” she said, saying that denim is practically a science these days, so there are skinny-leg jeans, for example, with higher rise, stretchier fabric and a more accommodating fit for different shapes and sizes.

Plus, if it’s not for you, it can help reinforce the ways you should dress to suit your body type.

But just cleaning my closet won’t make me organized! Help! Webber said the key is that organization is a learned behavior that anyone – yes, even you – can master. But don’t think giving your closet a once-over will fix all of your problems.

Instead, you have to build a skill set and work to reinforce the newly learned skills.

“My job as an organizer is to transfer a skill set so that when we’re going through the process, they can take the ball rolling,” he said.

Get ready for a pep talk: Even the experts sometimes accumulate piles of clothes.

The key is getting back on the wagon, they said.

At the end of the week, Dashow takes the time (while waiting for a phone call, for example) to hang and fold the clothes she’s heaped on a stool – not the floor – throughout the week.

OK, now that I’ve sorted things, I’m going to have to build a new storage closet: Hold it right there! Storing everything isn’t the answer, and a garage full of boxes and containers of clothes just waiting to come back in style is, as Webber pointed out, probably not the best use of real estate.

On that note, Gardner and Dashow said having the proper tools – whether it’s wooden hangers, plastic storage bins or rolling wardrobe racks – is crucial. If it helps you stay organized and is space-efficient, that’s what counts.

But ... you didn’t tell me how to actually organize my closet. By color? By style?

The real secret is, everyone has a different organizational style, Webber said.

He and Gardner prefer hanging slacks, button-up shirts and other categories together, while Dashow arranges things by color, so her closet looks more like a rainbow.

“It really depends on your style of organizing,” Webber said.

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