

Making Space for Healing

There's a leaden heaviness to the grief felt upon losing a loved one that can be tied to both what we feel and what we touch. The numbing sense of loss is often punctuated by anger about the unfairness of it all, and the need to adjust to a new normal can be disorienting. Beyond that serious emotional toll that comes with losing a loved one, though, comes the psychological and physical labor required to mine through the items they left behind. We're not usually taught how to clean out a house after someone dies, which, like grief, is an incredibly personal journey. But that doesn't mean guidance isn't welcome. Below, grief counselor Diane P. Brennan, LMHC, and organizational expert Patty Morrissey share their best tips for how to make space for healing.

Enlist others to help.

Know that you don't have to embark on this process alone. "Ask family members and friends, or hire a professional to assist you," says Brennan. "This can help manage emotional triggers and reduce physical strain while going through your loved one's possessions."

Give yourself time, but not *all* the time.

It can be difficult to know how long it will take to clear out a space, so setting a deadline for when you want to be finished can help to keep you on task and focused. "Approach this with enough time, but don't keep it open-ended," says Morrissey. "For your sanity, it helps to know there's an endpoint."

Note what you want to keep, and invite family members to do the same.

Before starting, consider how you want the process to go in terms of what you intend to keep. Having this vision ahead of time will help you to sort through items in a focused, productive way. "Make a list of things that you need for your own home," says Morrissey. "This will help you go into the situation without being overwhelmed. You'll have a plan to retrieve the items that are most meaningful to you and that you need for practical purposes for your own home."

From there, consult family members about the items they want to keep—and ask them to be specific about what they want for sentimental reasons and what they could use for practical purposes. "Consider asking them for their input in advance, or send them pictures of items if they're not able to be with you in-person," says Brennan. And if 15 people start fighting over Grandma's engagement ring, there's a way to work it out. "Use a lottery system to fairly divvy up any items that are wanted by more than one person," says Morrissey. "Set a few dates for pick-up, and communicate a deadline to spare you the stress of having to limit the complexity of scheduling with so many people."

Get rid of unnecessary items first.

After dividing up the items that you and loved ones want to keep, create—or at least be mentally aware of—a hierarchy of the remaining items that will be most difficult to part. “Consider starting with those that have less emotional attachment or significance,” says Brennan. “This will help you begin without your grief being deeply triggered.”

Celebrate what your loved one loved most.

Part of my eventual inheritance is an enormous collection of *Wizard of Oz* memorabilia, and I just don’t see myself keeping every single “There’s No Place Like Home” throw pillow or Toto teapot. If your loved one also has a special collection, spend some time finding its next owner instead of simply tossing all of it in the bin. “Use a platform like eBay or Mercari to sell to other collectors, or do some research to find a specialty shop,” says Morrissey. “The focus here is on the joy of passing on those items to someone with a shared interest.” Also understand that you’re under no obligation to keep someone’s prized collection of anything. Keep what’s meaningful to you and what honors your connection to your loved one.

When in doubt, snap a pic.

On days when you have the emotional capacity, explore the home like an archaeologist and record unique belongings as you go. Research shows that taking photos of items helps you part with them, so charge your smartphone or break out the Instax. “Consider making a flat lay ‘portrait’ of your loved one with some of their signature items. A cigar, Hawaiian shirt, and tennis racquet that made Grandpa, Grandpa. Or the lipstick, hair curlers, ear-marked books, and remote control that made Grandma, Grandma,” Morrissey says.

Sell, donate, or discard the rest.

If you have the financial bandwidth, hire an estate sale company. Otherwise, make a team of family and friends to help donate, discard, and run a sale. “Think about what will be best for you, both physically and emotionally, and follow your plan,” says Morrissey. It’s a difficult time, so whatever is a reasonable option that provides ease is encouraged.

Create a ritual for a final goodbye when you are finished.

“This could mean saying a prayer, reading a poem, or playing a song that your loved one enjoyed,” Brennan says. “Make it the last thing you do before leaving the house.”

Adapted from original post by Mary Grace Garis on *Well + Good*: “How to Clean Out a Loved One’s House After They Pass and Make Space for Healing”

*If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460 or email griefsupport@palliativecare.org
for more information, resource and support.*

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