



## The Basics

# How to get rid of your folks' stuff

It's natural to be overwhelmed by emotion and your parents' lifetime accumulation of things. Use these ideas to save time, your sanity and your family relationships.

By [Liz Pulliam Weston](#)

Sometimes, it comes down to empty Cool Whip containers.

Appraiser Julie Hall has seen thousands in her career, spilling out of kitchen cabinets and jockeying for space with other flotsam -- margarine tubs, bread twist ties, string, rubber bands, plastic bags, pencil nubs -- accumulated by the parents of her clients.

Hall's job is to help these adult children clear out the family home after their folks have died or moved to nursing homes. But the sheer amount of stuff, worthless and valuable, piled up by Depression-era parents is often overwhelming.

"This generation is a generation that doesn't get rid of much," Hall said, "and some of them are downright hoarders."

Children facing this task often react in a way they hadn't expected -- not with grief, Hall said, but with anger.

"They feel Mom and Dad had plenty of time to deal with this stuff during their life," Hall said. "They're furious. Then they feel guilty because they're angry."

### Family relationships can suffer

And that's just the start of the bad feelings that clearing an estate can provoke. Fights among siblings over stuff can end in lifelong estrangements. Even those who get along can disagree over what to keep and what to discard, dragging the home-clearing process out for months or even years.

Hall has seen enough discord and problems in her years as an "estate contents specialist" that she authored a book, "[The Boomer Burden: Dealing with Your Parents' Lifetime Accumulation of Stuff](#)," filled with advice for surviving the process. Among her tips:

**Focus on family unity.** Most likely, your parents wanted their children to get along, not bicker over stuff. When making decisions, focus on respecting your parents' memory and consider each others' feelings, rather than just your own agenda.

**Beware the vultures.** That said, there may be neighbors, relatives or "friends of the family" ready to swoop in on the goodies. Some may even justify their actions as "saving" valuables from other, less worthy heirs. If your parents didn't leave someone in charge, such as an executor, appoint someone to secure the house immediately and change the locks. Make sure everyone understands that taking items without the others' consent is theft.

**Hire an appraiser.** As Hall is fond of saying, just because something's old doesn't mean it's valuable. Likewise, some stuff that looks like junk may not be. (Hall once rescued an old, valuable Louis Vuitton trunk from a garbage bin after an overwhelmed heir threw it out.) You want a professional to help you identify what's worth keeping (or selling) and what isn't.



**Decide what to do with the valuable stuff.** If your parents didn't designate who gets what, that task falls to the executor, unless you can work something out an equitable distribution with your siblings. The valuable items no one wants (or that no one can agree on) can be sold at an estate sale or auction, with the cash distributed to the heirs.

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Here's what you need to think about when your folks leave behind a home.

**Try to have all your siblings present for the clear-out day.** Once the valuable items have been sold or removed for sale, you can schedule a day to clear out the rest of the house. Include everybody, if possible: You need the help, and having everyone present to make decisions can help prevent later recriminations.

**Arrange for charitable and trash pickup two or three weeks in advance.** Charities often require advance notice for at-home pickups. You'll also want to find out whether the city will haul away a lot of extra trash or whether you'll need to rent a Dumpster. If there are paint cans, pesticides or other hazardous materials in the home -- and there probably are -- contact the nearest hazardous-waste disposal site for its location and hours.

#### *Continued: Shred*

### Spiders, shredding and supplies

**Arrange for a shredding service.** The cost varies by community, but you can often get a commercial shredding service to come to a home for less than \$100, Hall said. Any discarded paperwork with personal financial information, including Social Security and account numbers, should be shredded.

**Bomb the place.** Attics and basements may be overrun with insects and spiders; if so, Hall recommends setting off bug bombs a week in advance.

**Accumulate the necessary supplies.** Hall recommends getting:

- Thirty to 50 sturdy boxes.
- A box of 100 heavy-duty trash bags.
- At least six rolls of packing tape.
- Permanent markers for labeling boxes.
- A tool kit with screwdrivers, pliers, a measuring tape and a hammer.
- A hand truck.
- A wheelbarrow.

Those working in the house should wear work clothes and be supplied with:

- Leather and latex gloves.
- Respirators or dust masks.
- Kneepads and back supports.

Also supply plenty of water, soft drinks and snacks along with any meals your crew might need.



**Designate a "safe" room and a "donate" room.** Items that have been promised to the heirs get moved to the safe room; everything that's going to charity moves to the donate room. **Look for hidden treasures.** Hall, who has found diamond jewelry atop attic rafters, money between the pages of books and valuables buried in flour, recommends checking the following:

- Clothing and shoes.
- Drapery hems.
- Canister sets (dump the flour or sugar through a colander).
- Books.
- Ice cube trays.
- Toilet tanks.
- Balls of duct tape.
- Picture frames (between the mats and the pictures).
- Attic rafters.

**Take each bag of trash immediately to the curb.** You don't want people tripping over bags, and getting the junk out of the house will give you a much-needed sense of progress.

### Get your own house in order

**Use the experience to simplify your own estate.** There's nothing like sorting through someone else's clutter to inspire you to get rid of your own.

In fact, if you have kids, Hall suggests making their life easier by starting to:

- Get rid of the junk. If you haven't used it in the past year, ditch it.
- Give away family heirlooms while you're alive (and can enjoy the reaction).
- Make a list of who gets what when you die.

Hall recommends hiring an appraiser to go through your home and give you approximate fair market values for your better stuff. Also include on the list items that have sentimental value.

If your children are adults, you can circulate this list among them, letting them tell you what items they'd like (with the understanding that asking for something doesn't mean they'll get it).

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Then you, the parent, should decide who gets what, using the values the appraiser has given to keep things approximately equal. Don't bother with putting stickers on the items, Hall said, since stickers can fade, fall off or be switched. Print up a new list with this information and give copies to all your kids so there are no surprises.

Will they fuss? Probably. "But they'll get over it," Hall said. But because you've made the tough decisions, she said, "they won't end up hating each other."



*Liz Pulliam Weston's new book, "Easy Money: How to Simplify Your Finances and Get What You Want Out of Life," is now available. Columns by Weston, the Web's most-read personal-finance writer and winner of the 2007 Clarion Award for online journalism, appear every Monday and Thursday, exclusively on MSN Money. She also answers reader questions on the [Your Money message board](#).*

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