

Downsizing Tips



Helping someone downsize for a move can be complicated. Where you see a houseful of stuff to sort and toss, that person will see a lifetime of memories.

Letting go of possessions is difficult for anyone, let alone someone who is moving. Unfortunately for most adults over 60, only a spouse's death and divorce is considered to be more stressful than moving into a nursing home or retirement community.

Below are some tips we hope will help make downsizing less stressful for everyone:

Downsizing tip: How to say goodbye to prized possessions

- ***Make the pile smaller by asking, "What is your favourite piece?"***

Assure that one or two "best" items can have a highlighted location in the new home. People sometimes feel OK about giving up the rest if they have a sense of control over the process and choose their favourite item.

- ***If it's meant to be a gift or legacy, encourage giving it now.***

Urge your parent or friend not to wait to pass down their items, remind them that there's no space for storage. Ask, "Why not enjoy the feeling of giving right now?"

Downsizing tip: How to sell

- ***Think twice before selling items on your own.***

Craigslist, eBay, Kijiji and other self-selling options are time-consuming when you're trying to process a houseful of goods. Be realistic: The value of an item isn't what you paid for it or how well made or special it is - it's what someone is willing to pay for it. If this way of selling is an option, avoid seniors having people come into their home to view items – this could pose a threat to them.

- ***If there are several items of high value, consider an appraisal.***

Go through the entire house; the appraiser will only come out once and is more interested in relatively large lots. Auction houses, whose goal is to sell items at the best price, are better options than antique dealers, whose goal is to get items for the lowest price.

Downsizing tip: The best way to sort

- ***Avoid tackling the whole house in one go.***

Though it's more efficient for you to plow full steam ahead, a senior is apt to be stressed emotionally, if not also physically. When organizing a senior's move, it's better to think in terms of months, not days.

Tackle one room or area at a time. About two hours at a stretch is ideal for many older adults, this duration of time allows for progress but keeps stress to a minimum.

- ***Frame your decisions with yes and no questions.***

Open ended choices put a reluctant mover on the spot, which is ultimately going to be more stressful. Avoid asking "which items do you want to keep", but present a more manageable yes-no option: "I've got your best linen, your favourite blue pair and yellow pair. Does that sound good?"

- ***Use the new space as a guide.***

Measure exactly how much closet or cabinet space the new place has and fill an equivalent amount of space as you sort. Mark off the comparable space so your parent/senior has a visual guide.

Beware of excessive multiples. In retirement living, your parent may only need minimal plates and cups as meals are served in the dining room, two sets of sheets is normally sufficient, one coffeemaker, one or two coats, and so on.

- ***Banish the "maybe" pile.***

A good rule is to only handle it once. The less decisive you are about what to do with an item, the more attached you (or your parent) risk becoming to it. Moving things in and out of "maybe" piles also takes time.

Tempting as it is to set aside tough sorts for later, unless there's room to "hold" them at a relative's house, it's not generally worth paying storage-rental fees (unless it's a very large estate and time is tight). That's because once they're boxed, people are less likely to look at the items ever again. Out of sight, out of mind.

Exception: Save time by boxing piles of paperwork, which doesn't take much room. Papers are time-consuming to go through and present an unpleasant task, casting a stall on your packing.

- ***Encourage the person(s) to focus on most-used items (and let the rest go).***

Be patient and follow their lead - what seems old and useless to you may be a source of great comfort and joy and therefore worth moving. Don't go by the newest and best; go by what they use.

Downsizing tip: How to donate

- ***Understand how charities work.***

The main donation outlets include the Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, Clothesline - Diabetes Association and Vicky's Values.

Mattresses pose the biggest challenge to get rid of as most charities will not take a used mattress. If you are downsizing from a two bedroom to a one bedroom, offer the bed to a family member.

Clarify whether they offer free pickup (a huge time-saver). Some charities will remove items from the ground floor only.

- ***Target recipients for specialty items.***

It's time-consuming to find willing recipients for everything, but it may be worth the effort for items that someone would be relieved to see in a good home. Examples: Schools may welcome musical instruments, old costumes, or tools. Auto repair shops and community maintenance departments may take tools and yard tools.

- ***Try the "free stuff" tactic.***

In some communities, setting items on the curb with a sign that says "Free! Help yourself!" will make items miraculously disappear.

Downsizing tip: What to discard

- ***If it's chipped, broken, or stained, toss it.***

Charities don't want non-working Christmas lights, snagged clothes, lidless plastic Tupperware, or any items that they can't sell, it is better to just dispose of them yourself.

- ***Don't be shy about tossing replaceable items.***

Not worth moving, donating, or even conferring about: old spices, junk mail, old magazines (yes, even all those *National Geographic* issues), outdated medications, unused toiletries, plastic food containers, candles, stuffed toys (most charities won't accept them), and the contents of the junk drawer (just hang onto change and spare keys).

- ***For a price, you don't have to haul it away yourself.***

The local garbage company may have limits on how many large trash bags it will take, and not all local dumps take unsorted trash, either. There are services available to remove appliances and furniture as well as smaller items.

Downsizing tip: Outside help is always an option

- ***Consider bringing in the pros.***

A fast-growing specialty, senior move managers specialize in helping older adults and are skilled at both the emotional and practical dimensions of late-life transitions. These experts can defuse a parent-child emotional clash while handling everything from sorting and packing through hiring movers and unpacking in the new place. They usually charge an hourly fee that varies by locale.

- ***Investigate one-stop solutions if time is tight.***

Deciding whether to sell, donate, give away, or throw away is stressful and takes a lot of time. Another way to outsource the tasks is to hold an estate sale.