



Easier Downsizing

Start early for less stress when sorting through a lifetime of stuff

By Ellen Ryan

When Nan and Evan Freund decided to move closer to their children in California, they chose a 1,500-square-foot home in a continuing care retirement community. It was a big change from their 3,000-square-foot Victorian rowhouse in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood.

"After almost 50 years in the house, we needed eight or nine months to sort and pare things down," Nan Freund says.

Devoting time to go through household items and memorabilia is key, she says. Getting a head start on sorting through possessions cuts down on stress and panic, making way for clearer decision-making and an easier move.

"Starting well ahead reduced our stress level, allowed us to make good donation decisions, and probably saved us money," Freund says.

Enlisting a third party, such as a professional move manager, can also make the process easier, removing emotions and adding expertise. "Working with an organizer was a critical factor in our

downsizing process," Freund says. "Her knowledge and support were invaluable."

Early and often

If moving to a smaller home is in your loved one's future, set aside months — not weeks — for downsizing. That's guidance from experts Mary Beth Radeck, owner of Caring Transitions Chicago NWS, and Marnie Dawson, owner of Chicago's Dawson Relocation Services.

Dawson recommends starting two to six months before the move date. Many older adults wait to move until one spouse dies or suffers an emergency, which means they may need to make

choices under the double burden of grief and a tight deadline.

But they don't need to wait until they move to downsize their belongings.

When an individual plans his or her estate, Radeck says, it's a natural time for them to consider how they will dispose of their belongings, even if there are no immediate plans to relocate.



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Either way, “If you have 50 years’ worth of stuff,” Dawson says, “can you realistically go through it all in two weeks?”

Starting early can save money, as well. Junk haulers and storage lockers cost big bucks. A calmer dispersal process is less pricey and may even bring in money if you sell items through a consignment shop or get a tax deduction for donated goods.

Dawson recalls one couple she recently worked with who was forced to move an entire household in three weeks. “Everything had to go at a quick estate sale or into the trash,” she says. “It was sad.”

When an older adult begins to gradually pare down their belongings, they will have more control of the process. “If items need to be stored, they’ll start to make decisions about the additional storage expense,” Radeck says. “If it’s too expensive, they’ll make the choice to downsize — their choice.”

Making tough decisions


The downsizing process clearly involves physical labor: digging under beds, reaching shelves, lifting boxes. Yet, emotions get a workout, too.

“When family tries to get [a loved one] to let go of items, it can have the opposite effect. Many times, she holds on

tighter, because these things have come to define her,” Radeck explains. “Seniors literally hear all the time from their grown kids, ‘Mom, Dad, you have to get rid of this stuff.’ Mom and Dad translate this to mean, ‘We don’t value your experiences, your history, the lifetime of memories here.’”

Keep things positive and focused on the end goal: moving to a new place less encumbered by a lifetime of items. Plus, it can be gratifying to give treasured items to people who appreciate them.

Radeck’s advice: Individuals can choose heirlooms to give to family members on birthdays and holidays. If a college grad or divorcing relative is setting up a new household, that’s the perfect time to offer them kitchen or living room basics — from pans and utensils to lamps or a coffee table. (Just not the china cabinet. No one wants that.)

Think positively, about meaningful items the individual wants in their life going forward, rather than what needs to be disposed of, Radeck says. “With more time to process, downsizing is so much easier and gratifying for everyone.” 

Best Advice from the Experts

For the older adult downsizing:

Have a family conversation. “People often don’t know what items their kids want,” says Marnie Dawson, owner of Chicago’s Dawson Relocation Services. “Be real and honest. Over the holidays, maybe you can tag possessions, make a list, make a spreadsheet, whatever works.”

Don’t wait to give things away. “If an adult child wants the dining table that’s going to your new place, that’s a no. But if you weren’t planning to keep the tablecloths your daughter likes, let her have them now,” Dawson says.

For the family caregiver:

Step back. “Empower the person who needs the help. Let them be in charge,” says Mary Beth Radeck, owner of Caring Transitions Chicago NWS. “Get a third party to help so you’re not telling them what to do, which often demotivates by undermining the senior’s personal power and hurts your relationship, just when you’re needed the most.”

Frame matters positively. “Talk respectfully about the great new life ahead, to help see the way forward and avoid a sense of ‘They’re taking my house away! Who wants to live in an apartment?’ which can wear away their self-esteem,” Radeck says.

Focus on items that are touchstones. “Instead of [going through] every single thing in the house, help to select what they feel truly defines them — what they would never leave behind,” Radeck says. “This will free them immensely.”

Check your personal opinions. Be positive and supportive. If it’s impossible to downsize enough, get a storage unit, even if that means keeping more than you planned. “It’s not a failure, because the most important thing has been preserved, your relationship,” Radeck says.

Downsizing Resources

AARP

Search for “downsizing” on the AARP website for resources on what to get rid of and how to guide family conversations. AARP also has a useful book, *Downsizing the Family Home*, and accompanying workbook.

aarp.org
888-687-2277

National Association of Senior & Specialty Move Managers

Move managers specialize in transitions associated with senior moves, from organizing, sorting, and unpacking to saving money and reducing stress.

nasmm.org
877-606-2766