

**From The Chicago Tribune, February 8, 2004:**

**Organized life is just beyond all that clutter**

by Bob Condor

Her days of disorganization are over, but Marilyn Paul remembers them. Vividly.

Some of the bad memories: Being "invited" to leave an important work project. Not asking friends to dinner because her apartment was too unkempt. Several years of unfiled taxes and sleepless nights worrying about whether her IRS debt was \$1,000 or \$50,000.

"I tried really hard several different times to do what personal organizers recommend," said Paul, a business management consultant and partner in the Boston-based Bridgeway Partners. "I made lists, cleaned up my desk, vowed to be on time."

It didn't work. Paul always fell back into a pattern of clutter and running late for appointments. One day, without any major episode such as being asked off a project or missing a plane (she routinely made flights by minutes), Paul simply decided that "I couldn't sort through all the piles on my desk and in my office and house for the rest of my life."

So Paul followed her own advice. She works as a consultant to businesses undergoing changes, including new management, new market strategy, new laws to follow.

"I work with clients all the time who are stuck in place," Paul said. "I thought, 'Wait a minute, I'm a specialist in helping people deal with change.' I figured out maybe it was time to apply my own [consulting] principles to getting more organized."

It worked. Paul became what she calls "organized enough" to no longer face deflating clutter on her desk or stress out about being late (she has shifted to the punctual side). She filed her back taxes, paid the penalties and doesn't cringe when the calendar page turns to April.

Not surprisingly, people in Paul's life noticed the changes and asked what she did. Paul explained herself, then wrote a book. It was published in hardback last year.

It's now out in paperback (Penguin Compass, \$14) and has one of the all-time great titles: "It's Hard to Make a Difference When You Can't Find Your Keys."

"My goal is help people realize being organized is not what they think," Paul said. "We need to measure organization not by neatness but by stress level. An organized life is so much easier to live."



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Paul developed a seven-step approach: (1) Establish your purpose; (2) Envision what you want; (3) Take stock; (4) Choose support; (5) Identify strategies for change; (6) Take action; and (7) Go deeper to keep going.

"No one changes until the person understands how disorganization is extremely costly to them," Paul said. "We all can get ingrained in our excuses, denial and blame of others."

Paul suggests establishing a purpose for organizing that goes deeper than the obvious benefits, such as locating paperwork more readily or being on time. Consider doing your job better or faster or both, reducing tension with loved ones or making room for more creativity.

Becoming more creative through personal organizing?

"Clearing your personal space gives you more mental clarity and less stress," Paul explained. "Disorganized people say they don't want to be like organized people because the organized people are uptight or cold. It's not at all that way. Feeling less stressed out gives us the opportunity to live more fully engaged."

Finding support is another cornerstone of climbing out of a canyon of disorganization. For instance, one of Paul's clients instructed her teen son to clean his room one night only to hear the boy respond, "Mom, are you kidding? This whole house is a mess." That prompted the mother to finally get organized, and her son became an ally in the project.

Co-workers and friends can provide necessary support by holding you accountable for commitments. Paul suggests you can make a "contract" with others, say, about keeping your promises or delivering materials on time.

Another big help is hearing other people's struggles to stay organized. Paul discovered several allies during her path to organization, including one outwardly impressive colleague who confessed to many disorganized habits (such as routinely invoicing clients six months late and losing airplane tickets).

"Disorganized people are all around us," Paul said. "Find one or two and talk to them. They help you without shaming you. You can motivate them to get more organized and less stressed too."