



Senior Series

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Tips on Downsizing: Moving from the Family Home

Although both single and married individuals may move many times during adulthood, relocating in later life often involves "downsizing" to a smaller home. Instead of buying something larger to accommodate a growing family, older adults are frequently interested in having less space and fewer home maintenance responsibilities. For some, selling the family home can be a result of a disability, an illness, or the death of a loved one. For others, this transition is based on a desire to be near family or to experience a new retirement lifestyle in a different area of the country. Regardless of the reason for the move, downsizing from a family home can be a physically exhausting and emotionally draining experience. In many cases, possessions have been accumulated over a number of years and not everything can (or should) be moved. What results is the need to sift, sort, donate, and dispose of a variety of personal items.

Below are a few suggestions on how to get started, what to do with all you have, and tips for keeping things peaceful.

How to Get Started

- **Start with the rooms you use the least:** In most family homes there are rooms that are not always used on a daily basis, such as guest bedrooms, basements, or living rooms. Start the sorting process in these rooms and avoid cluttering the areas of the home used regularly.
- **Start with large items:** In order to feel you are making progress, in each room start with the largest items and move towards the smallest. For example, identify what you will do with the furniture before you start on the knick-knacks.
- **Have a sorting system:** Sort items by using stickers, making piles, or making detailed lists of what will be kept, what will be given away and to where, and what is still undecided.
- **Write down family history:** Take the time to write down special memories or any family history that is connected

to special items. This information will be cherished for generations to come and will contribute to the value of family heirlooms.

- **Work in scheduled blocks of time:** Plan to sort items for periods of no more than two hours at a time. The process of revisiting memories and making decisions about items you have lived with for many years can be emotionally difficult. You will feel less overwhelmed and make better decisions if you take regular breaks and allow yourself time to digest what is happening.
- **Start early and don't rush yourself:** Be sure to plan plenty of time for the sifting and sorting process. Take moments to laugh at old pictures, read old letters, and grieve for losses. If you can't decide what to do with an item, set it aside and return to it later. Work at a pace that is comfortable for you and your situation.

What to Do With All This Stuff

- **Keep the items that you treasure the most:** Make a list of items you refuse to part with and keep that list in sight as you sort through other possessions. You may need to amend this list as you come across new things but it will remind you that everything is not of equal value.
- **Consider bequeathing items now:** Identify those items you want certain family members to have and consider what items you are willing to bequest now. Remember, you may get more pleasure out of seeing your grand-
- daughter enjoy your china at the next family event than knowing she will have it after you are gone.
- **Get rid of things you no longer need:** Be realistic about what items you use regularly and what items you are just used to having around. The electric carving knife you use at Thanksgiving may not be as necessary as the toaster oven you use every morning.
- **Consider having a garage sale or home auction:** Having enough items that are likely to net a profit (furniture, antiques, electronics) may make the effort of having a garage sale worthwhile. Alternatively, if your possessions are potentially of substantial value, consider holding a home auction. You can often hire a service agency to catalog and appraise your possessions and coordinate a home auction for a percentage of the profit.
- **Donate to charity:** For those items you cannot give away as gifts or sell for profit, make a tax deductible donation to charity. Often traditional charity organizations will pick-up donated items. Consider thinking of specific organizations for specific items, for example, donating your professional wardrobe to an abused women's shelter or employment assistance program; donating books to the local library sale; offering furniture to the Red Cross for fire victims; or giving old instruments to a school music program.
- **Have the kids remove their "stuff":** Don't hesitate to tell the adult children it is time to collect their childhood belongings and store their own mementos.

tos. Give them a deadline that works with your schedule and warn them that anything leftover will be donated to charity. You may be surprised at how much they decide not to store themselves!

Dividing Things Peacefully

- **Agree on a system:** In order to avoid disagreements among adult children and other family members, create a clear system for identifying who gets what. One idea is to assign each family member a colored sticker and identify items accordingly. An alternative is to have family members take turns choosing items they would like to have. In both cases it is good to clearly outline what items are available for the taking.
- **Be sure everyone gets something special:** Even though disagreements may still occur, agreeable solutions may be achieved more readily if everyone feels they received something meaningful to them.
- **Encourage negotiation:** If disagreements happen despite your efforts, encourage family members to negotiate amongst themselves. Someone may be willing to trade an item with financial

worth for something with more sentimental value. If these exchanges occur, be sure not to take offense.

Leaving a family home can be a bittersweet event that involves revisiting many painful and joyful memories. During the process of downsizing we may be surprised at how attached we have become to our possessions and how difficult it might seem to part with them. It is important to remember, however, that it is the relationships in our lives that give us the most pleasure. A life filled with possessions is no competition to a life filled with family, friends, and meaningful connections.

Sources

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Author: Christine Price, Ph.D., Extension State Gerontology Specialist, The Ohio State University

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Keith L. Smith, Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, OSU Extension

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