

The Art of Downsizing or Rightsizing Your Home: What To Do With the Accumulated Possessions

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By Rachel Kodanaz



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BY RACHEL KODANAZ

As an older adult, contemplating or making the decision to downsize or rightsize a home can be all-consuming emotionally. Individual needs shift throughout the aging process, adding to a senior's unwanted anxiety about the need to simplify his or her lifestyle, to accept additional support, and to sort through accumulated belongings. At the same time, the older adult is overwhelmed by the complexities associated with a move and the burden placed on others. The idea of leaving the house that has been home for many years due to aging can create a tremendous amount of fear and uncertainty.

In most cases, the stress of transition is triggered by the anticipation of packing and moving a lifetime of belongings as well as saying good-bye to neighbors. The memories of raising a family or creating lifelong relationships with neighbors can be transferred to a new home with the senior. The art of downsizing is based on knowing the right approach for that person, having the ability to communicate at his or her level, and assisting the senior to close one chapter of the story while also beginning to write the next chapter.

The need to make a change to a future living arrangement occurs for a variety of reasons. For many seniors, declining health may warrant the need to eliminate the use of stairs or for those who use a walker, the necessity for hard-surface flooring to avoid falls. For others who are on a fixed income, rising costs associated with tax assessments and physical upkeep can trigger the need to downsize. As individuals age, daily living needs shift, necessitating additional assistance. A move closer to family, for example, allows for additional support and more regular interaction. Seniors tend to be less mobile, resulting in a feeling of isolation. When living closer to family, the opportunity lends itself to more frequent visits, a sense of security and well-being. For those who do not have the support of family, moving to an independent or assisted living arrangement provides continual interaction with others and a sense of community. Every day, more and more older adults are disconnected from their community. Social isolation and the associated health risks for seniors is a critical issue facing our communities today (Dobronravova, n.d.). For an older adult, knowing someone is nearby to provide aid when there is an emergency, a need for a quick trip to the store for essential needs, or just being available to share an afternoon together is heartwarming and provides a true sense of security.

When supporting seniors as they consider, debate, and decide the time has come to move from their primary home to a new living arrangement, be mindful that the process creates agitated and defensive responses. The transition for some is perceived as a loss of independence, as they are now in need of additional support. Often seniors will feel they are a burden to family members and will need to be reminded they were the caregiver earlier in their lives, with the roles now being reversed (Companions for Seniors, 2018). These emotions are mostly driven by the anxiety associated with sorting through an array of personal belongings, furniture, and other items that have accumulated over the years. For many, the overwhelming thought of deciding what to keep for the new home, what should be shared with other family

members, and what will need to find a new home can be daunting (Family Caregiver Alliance, n.d.). The actual sorting, thinning, and repurposing of personal possessions, however, can be stimulating and rewarding when following a systematic approach.

The Meaning of Personal Possessions

Personal possessions tell a beautiful story of a person's being. The items collected over a lifetime are physical extensions of their owner, showcasing the person's personality, interests, and expressions. The accumulated items are meaningful; they span a lifetime of events beginning with childhood, then personal milestones, memories of travel, career honors, and family heirlooms passed down from generation to generation. When looking past the overwhelming task of sorting through full closets and accumulated boxes, the situation provides older adults with the opportunity to share noteworthy stories with loved ones and reminisce about their life.

What is important for older adults and those assisting in the sorting of personal possessions to realize is that individuals save items for a variety of reasons. Not all personal possessions tell a story or need to be shared. Older adults range in age; the older they are, the longer they have had the opportunity to accumulate. As a population, seniors share many commonalities, yet they differ in their relationship with physical objects. Saved items are often vital, as they provide a sense of accomplishment and wealth. Cultural variations and differences in financial security may result in some individuals clinging to physical items for safekeeping, while others may be quick to discard them. Even within a family, two children helping parents downsize might differ in their opinion of what is important to keep for their parents. One sibling might be a "keeper" while the other might be a "tosser." The best resolution for handling these differences in opinion is to lay out the pros and cons to determine a reasonable compromise. For example, If one of the siblings is not comfortable parting ways with a particular item and the other does not feel it is necessary to move the item, pause the discussion on that particular item, allowing for emotions to settle. The key to success is to find the balance between different personality types, allowing all parties to share their opinions and to have their voices heard.

Empowering Seniors to Make Decisions

When the time is right to start the process, creating a balance between permitting the senior to feel empowered to make decisions while striving to accomplish the task at hand will require patience and

a great deal of flexibility. The emotional and physical reactions portrayed by older adults in this process are authentic. The art of downsizing or rightsizing is based on creating an individual process, effective interaction, and cleverness in communication. For greater success, manage the mindset of the older adult by introducing the notion of thinning, sorting, or sharing belongings rather than throwing them away. Specifically, older adults will be more willing to part ways with an extra winter coat if they know someone else will benefit. Seniors tend to cling to items that are family heirlooms or keepsakes. Therefore, encourage the senior to share the item now by passing it on so both parties find pleasure in the possession. There is nothing more special than creating a unique bond when a grandmother observes her granddaughter displaying a shared piece of jewelry or a grandfather's timepiece passed down from generation to generation.

There are practical interactions and approaches proven to be successful when supporting older adults who are in the midst of changing their living arrangement. These include:

- **Create a safe environment.** Make an atmosphere that is physically comfortable, free of pressure and preconceived outcomes by those who are assisting. Be cautious of cognitive interaction as individual interest and participation in the move will vary. Practice thoughtful and watchful interaction to avoid making others feel threatened by decisions they have to make.
- **Guide rather than force.** Empower older adults to make decisions allowing them to feel in control, rather than that someone else is forcing them to behave in a certain way. A perfect approach is to provide choices, rather than ask open-ended questions, as it minimizes contemplation.
- **Use of terminology.** Word choice can set the tone. Using the right vocabulary will allow the senior to engage with and relate to the process, rather than becoming defensive. Asking the senior to thin out his or her shoes, rather than get rid of a pair of shoes, provides a softer approach. This can be followed by specific questions regarding the shoes: how long has he or she had them, are they comfortable, how often are they worn, the ease of putting them on or taking them off, or which shoes are worn with which outfit. This approach will engage the senior and thin the shoes at a more rapid stride.
- **Maintain a reasonable pace.** Start early and end early. Earlier in the day when all parties are rested is the perfect time to start. Approach the task with vigor while remaining slow and steady. If the senior appears to be less engaged, be sure to slow down or take a break.
- **Communicate goals.** Depending on the timing of the pending move, create a plan specifying which rooms will be tackled on what day, ensuring that not all belongings need to be sorted in one day. Plan accordingly by communicating daily goals and celebrating accomplishments.
- **Inspire engagement.** The process can be a fabulous bonding moment to learn more about the older adult by asking questions, listening to stories, and embracing the fond memories the items represent.

Additionally, reminding the senior that “less is better” for a variety of reasons will help the older adult prioritize what is needed. The notion of “less” allows for a more organized home, eliminating the stress of searching for items when needed. A room with less clutter also reduces the danger of tripping and falling, which is a common occurrence with seniors. For older adults who are on a fixed income, moving and storing unused belongings is prohibitively expensive.

Building the Right Team

Before the process can begin, build the appropriate team of individuals made up of family members, friends, and/or professionals who can successfully work with the person who is moving. Depending on the size of the team, assign roles and tasks most suited to the personality of the team member. Whether there is a team of one or five, use the concept of each role to help guide the process and not overwhelm the older adult.

Potential team members include:

- **A trustworthy confidant.** This is the special team member who assists the senior when making sentimental decisions, providing a balance of comfort, honesty, and genuineness. The person's intuitive nature helps anticipate needs before a need arises.
- **The workhorse.** This strong, physical, hardworking person could be referred to as the “runner.” This person is willing to carry boxes to the car, garage, or basement without disrupting or interfering with decision-making, or questioning judgment.
- **The organizer.** This is the “spreadsheet coordinator,” the person who excels at making phone calls, arranging pickups, and photographing and documenting items.
- **The packer.** This person is great at packing and

labeling boxes and items. He or she has incredible space awareness, can fit a surprising amount into small spaces, and knows how to protect valuables, whether they are moving with the senior or getting passed on to a future generation.

- **The coordinator.** This leader is the “coach” who cares for the team by providing nourishment, managing the schedule, and adding humor when necessary. This person acts as the team leader by communicating schedules, assigning responsibilities, and advising friends and family members when they are needed.

The Magic of Six Piles©

A plan is now in place and a team has been established, so the process is ready to begin. The most practical place to start sorting through belongings is the back of a closet or a second bedroom: areas of the house where unused items typically accumulate. Most likely these items have been stored for years, losing their emotional connection or meaning. This facilitates easier decisions regarding whether to save, toss, or share items with a family member.

A proven method for sorting, thinning, moving, sharing, and repurposing personal possessions is to apply the logic of creating “piles.” The size of the item will dictate whether the particular item is in a physical pile or an assigned pile. I have developed a systematic approach of examining an item and immediately deciding which pile it belongs to: kept for the senior, shared with a family member, donated to a great cause, sold, disposed/recycled, or set aside for another time to make a final decision (Kodanaz, 2019).

Here’s how to apply the Magic of Six Piles©:

1. **Keep.** When deciding on clothing, footwear, and accessories be sure to keep items that fit comfortably, are easy to put on and take off, and are machine washable (avoiding dry cleaning and ironing). Keep picture frames, wall hangings, trinkets, and emotional keepsakes that will provide comfort and familiarity to the senior in their new living arrangement.
2. **Share.** Items that provide a connection or memory to others should be shared with family members and friends. This may include articles of clothing or household items. A common practice after the pile has been established is to assign the item(s) to a specific person or develop a distribution plan for each item.
3. **Donate.** Items that are no longer useful are best shared with those who can benefit from the items. Donate them to an organization whose mission

redistributes donated items to people in need.

4. **Sell.** Items that have monetary value can be sold via online applications, neighborhood listings, or resale shops.
5. **Dispose.** These are items considered to be trash or recyclable. To protect the older adult, be sure to shred documents containing personal information.
6. **Ponder:** Items that aren’t ready to join the “keep, share, donate, sell or dispose of” piles go here. Placing an item in the ponder pile provides a stop-gap solution without disrupting the process or distressing the senior.

The ultimate goal is to thin, sort, and repurpose items. If the team is successful in reducing the number of stored boxes by at least 50 percent, great success has been achieved.

Keeping the Memories of Possessions Alive

There are two reasons to save personal possessions: when the belonging tells a story, and when it offers a connection to a loved one. Timing is of the essence; therefore, capturing the story of a possession prior to cognitive decline or even death provides an opportunity to share the possession’s legacy for generations to come. Be sure to take pictures of items and capture the story, documenting it in a format to be shared with others. For instance, create a physical or digital book for the senior to bring to the new home so it can be shared with new friends or with future generations.

The connection to possessions can be lost when a family member passes away. Therefore, encouraging older adults to take action now will provide opportunities to share legacy possessions and discourage procrastinating the sorting and thinning process. Most importantly, a message to older adults: Please be sure not to leave the burden with your children after you pass. Engage now while you can.

The True Art of Downsizing or Rightsizing

The key to downsizing or rightsizing is to make this about the senior’s own journey. No two experiences are the same. Although these techniques are here to help guide older adults as they dive in and explore uncharted waters, facilitators should be patient and allow older seniors to embrace those aspects that resonate the most with them. Make sure they come back later to fill in the gaps, and layer in what makes the most sense. And as they walk through their journey, their story will emerge, and it will be transformational. •CSA



Rachel Kodanaz is a heart-minded professional who has spoken passionately to national audiences for twenty years, addressing all aspects of aging, loss, and growth that come with life's transitions. Rachel has published numerous articles and blogs, recorded podcasts, and appeared on *Good Morning America*. Her published books include *Finding Peace, One Piece at a Time: What to do with yours or a loved one's possessions*, the best-selling *Living with Loss One Day at a Time*, and *Grief in the Workplace*. For more information, visit www.rachelkodanaz.com or email rachel@rachelkodanaz.com.

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