

# Organizing Done Your Way



## Your Organizing Style puts your strengths to work for you.

Have you felt disorganized all your life? Been told that you were sloppy or lazy, not trying hard enough or just careless because you couldn't find things?

You may have heard of different learning styles – some people learn by reading, some by listening, and some have to hold it in their hands and do it themselves or they'll never catch on. Organizing styles are similar.

If you try to organize your home or your office (or your life) by someone else's method, it's like a leftie trying to cut with right-handed scissors: you may be able to manage it with practice, but you'll never be as good as if you were using your own scissors, and it can mess up so much along the way.

So -

- **How do you figure out what your organizing style is?**
- **How do you put your organizing style to work for you?**

## Figuring Out Your Organizing Style

How do you know what your organizing style is? It's all a result of how you think and learn. How you think and learn follows from the three main ways we experience our world:

- **Physical**
- **Mental**
- **Emotional**

The interactions among our physical, mental, and emotion responses can help us figure out how to create our individual organizing structures.

## Physical Experience

We receive sensory impressions every waking and sleeping moment of our lives. We hear sounds, we see items, we feel our bodies as we move, we taste and smell food. We take those details in, process them and use them to understand our surroundings.

Each of us has strengths and weaknesses in our abilities to examine our physical world. The effects on our organizing of those strengths and weaknesses can be obvious: someone who was born blind will process information quite differently from someone who goes blind after being sighted, and they will both of course take in "data" completely differently from a sighted person. The differences can be hidden: someone born with ADD, a neurological condition, processes information entirely differently from someone who does not have ADD. Someone whose ADD goes undiagnosed until their mid-30s processes information differently from someone whose ADD is diagnosed at 13. And every person with ADD processes "input" uniquely from every other person with ADD. Even a person's height has its effect.

In fact, just changes in the weather can impact our ability to get up and active. On the extreme side, Seasonal Affective Disorder can be a major roadblock to any action. More typically,

“it’s too hot to be comfortable” or “the roads are snowbound and I can’t get out” can be real obstacles.

## Mental Experience

The mental aspect of our lives can be broadly described as that “left brain, right brain” talk. Left-brain thinkers tend to be analytical, linear and time-oriented. Those right-brain minds tend to be more creative, less aware of time, less comfortable with detail. And the right-brainers and left-brainers ANNOY each other. While right-brain, left-brain theorizing is useful, it’s also limited: there is a tremendous amount of cooperative activity between the two sides of the brain, and growing evidence that the brain can rewire itself, for example after an accident.

But left brain/right brain can be useful as a tool for sorting out “How were you taught?” Linear, structured, detailed organizing systems are typical in school and business: left-brain systems. If you don’t comprehend such systems easily, you may have heard “You’re lazy, stupid, not trying hard enough, (fill-in-the-blank)” far too frequently as you grew up, or as you’ve tried to succeed at jobs. If you weren’t supported in creating your own structures, you haven’t been taught systems, you can’t succeed. You need creative, right-brain systems that draw on your personal ways of thinking about the world. Maybe you remember people’s names instead of company names, or the image on a logo instead of the words. . Maybe you joke that “Confusion brings out the best in you.” That could be true.

## Emotional Experience

Emotions are always the toughest part of organizing yourself. Your experience of your physical world can create emotions: maybe the smell of pine trees reminding someone of a favorite vacation spot, the smell of laundry getting associated with a clean house and accomplishment. Maybe a favorite song reminding you of college days. But the links aren’t always pleasant, nor does a typically pleasant sensory impression always evoke a pleasant response. The way you were treated, as a typically or atypically organized person, evokes emotion. Every interaction you’ve ever had with your family, your friends, your workmates and strangers on the street evokes emotion. The circumstances of your life, day-to-day every day, create emotion. And those emotions become a part of how you organize.

For example, a person who grew up poor may have a very acquisitive instinct, trying to keep everything she’s ever owned to keep away poverty, or having a habit of buying multiples of items to demonstrate his wealth. A person whose parents were neglectful may turn to possessions for comfort. A very visual person might need a cluttered environment to feel grounded. You may be a generally very linearly organized person, but you’ve just divorced, been sick, your child is sick, and now you’re completely overwhelmed and disorganized: you’re tired enough that you’ve put the milk in the cabinet. Getting organized can become a very emotional process all by itself. Many people identify the emotional work as the most difficult hurdle. Let’s be honest, what’s harder – figuring out if you like colorful boxes, or if you’re scared to death of letting go of THING X because you think doing so dishonors someone’s memory? The good news is there are techniques you can be taught to distance yourself from your emotions as you organize.

## How do you discover your strengths and weaknesses, your ways of interacting with the world, anyway?

You can coach yourself. Just pausing every once in a while to ask yourself: “How am I this moment? Is it working for me?” can be instructive. Positive and negative answers are both clues to your thinking style. Catching yourself as you act on habit is also a learning experience. For instance, I don’t wear a lot of jewelry because I have metal allergies. But sometimes you have to. When I wear jewelry, by the end of the night, I want nothing more than to get it off and toss it away from me. But I also routinely head straight to my desk to check e-mail, remind

myself of my son's schedule the next day. I was losing a lot of jewelry. I finally looked at my habits, got a small, pretty little box, even labeled it "jewelry", and it sits on my desk. I haven't lost any jewelry since.

Think about how you operate when you don't realize you are organizing: when you lose your keys, how do you try to find them? Do you visualize where you last saw them? Do you remember what you were doing with them the last time you used them? Do you remember the clink they made as you set them down on the table?

Our challenges can be innate, just how we're wired, or what's thrown at us. A very physical, athletic person left wheelchair-bound after an accident is going to be forced to process her world differently. So discovering all of our strengths and weaknesses is crucial.

So the not-at-all-simple fact is: all of the ways in which we understand ourselves and our world are knotted together so firmly they can never be separated. But you can work to understand the different elements involved, and then take small, slow, careful steps to use that enlightenment to enhance your ability to control your surroundings. And you can get help.

## Putting Your Organizing Style to Work for You

So what have you found out about yourself? Now that you have an idea how you learn and how your mind works, and maybe, please, you've thought about how your emotions affect the organization of your life, how can you use that knowledge to make your organizing easier?



### Here are some suggestions:

**Are you a visual person?** Does "out of sight, out of mind" apply to you? Perhaps you interact with your world best through seeing – a visual person. A person who is very visual might go beyond "seeing is believing" to "not seeing is losing" in a big way. Put a document in a file folder, put the file folder in a sorter, put the sorter in a cabinet, close the door and the visual person may never find the document again. You might need to keep documents in an open bin, so you can peer into the bin and can find the documents. I've read a case study in which an extremely visual person strung clotheslines across the office. Next, he hung clear sheet protectors to the lines with clothespins. Documents went in the sheet protectors, every document was visible and nothing was ever lost again.

Or you might respond to colors. Use colored bins. Experiment with the colors: pastels might make you ill, neons are just wonderful. Or pastel blue is great for one particular box/subject, but everything else has to be storm-dark.

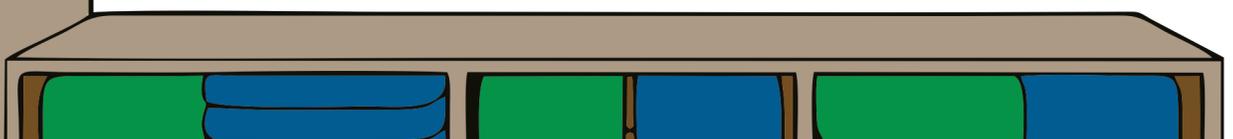
In your workshop, instead of putting your tools away in a tool box and never being quite sure what is where, hang them on a rack where you can see them, and always know where they are.

**Are you happiest when you're moving?** Don't organize for long sessions at a time without taking breaks to stretch or jog in place. Make yourself work for your systems – store some of the things you need across the office so you'll have to get up every once in a while.

**Do you react to the physical feel of things?** Go with it! Let yourself have textured boxes. "Anchor" items you lose with something you like to touch – so add something to the keychain, make sure the glasses are in a case that feels good.

**Do you have well-developed senses of taste and smell?** Light a candle while you work. Chew some gum or have a piece of candy. Make sure you aren't hungry, or snack while you work, or you may get distracted.

**Are you a verbal or a hearing-oriented person?** If you learn by talking things through, talk with yourself. A verbal person might do just fine with "traditional" folders and cabinets, but that



classic “ABC” ordering is a little tough. She might need to label the file holding the bills with “THIS IS THE REALLY IMPORTANT STUFF” and put it in the front of a drawer, top drawer. Another verbal person might really REALLY need to talk to himself while he’s putting the milk in the fridge, but the cereal in the cabinet.

**If you learn by hearing,** make sure you hear yourself. Talk to yourself as you go – not just “the milk goes in the fridge, the cereal goes in the cabinet over the sink,” but “the bills to pay are in the blue file” as you add a bill to the blue file. Maybe you need to play some music while you work. See if jazz or rock & roll keep you going, and keep your mind attuned to where and how you’re keeping track of stuff. Or maybe you keep talk shows running in the background.

**Are you an emotional person?** If you are letting go of items, it will help you to donate them to a worthy cause. Try keeping a representation instead of the item itself – for example, a photo of something instead of the thing. Having someone help you, whether it’s a friend, family member or a professional, may help you maintain emotional balance and/or distance while you work.

**Do you like to think things through?** Make a plan. Be thorough: research, plan, act, refine the activity as you learn what is and what isn’t working. Remind yourself that it’s OK that you may not have the same sentimental attachment to your possessions as other people.

**Maybe you rely on your instincts?** Let yourself think/feel/say your reactions to your materials - “This feels right,” “This feels wrong,” “I need to think about this” or “I’m not sure.” If you rush your decisions, if you go against your feelings, you might regret or resent the outcome. Let your body guide your pace.

**Your organizing style is as individual as you are.** Like another person’s shoes, another person’s organizing style never quite seems to fit — but shape your organizing techniques to your personal style, and you can walk through an organized home, an organized office, and an organized life.

I have drawn very deeply from the following books in writing this pamphlet:

*The Processing Modalities Guide*, Denslow Brown  
*Making Peace with the Things in Your Life*, Cindy Glovinsky  
*The ICD Guide to Challenging Disorganization For Professional Organizers*, Kate Varness, Editor  
*ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life*, Judith Kohlberg & Kathleen Nadeau  
*Organizing for the Creative Person*, Dorothy Lehmkuhl & Dolores Cotter Lamping  
*Conquering Chronic Disorganization*, Judith Kohlberg  
*Women with Attention Deficit Disorder*, Sari Solden  
*Organizing from the Inside Out*, Julie Morgenstern  
*SHED Your Stuff, Change Your Life: A Four-Step Guide to Getting Unstuck*, Julie Morgenstern  
*One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way*, Robert Maurer, Ph.D  
*Throw Out Fifty Things*, Gail Blanke

There are many others which have influenced me as well.

**Casual  
Uncluttering** LLC  
Relax. And Organize.

©2015 Lauren Williams

[www.casualuncluttering.com](http://www.casualuncluttering.com)

Lauren Williams, CPO, CVO 425-947-3976

[lauren@casualuncluttering.com](mailto:lauren@casualuncluttering.com)