

LAUREATE GROUP

*Helping older adults and their families
manage the challenges of aging*

Seniors trying to downsize? Tips to get rid of all that stuff.

Are you one of those people who have discovered that somehow, someway, someone snuck into your house and left behind a whole lot of stuff? How did it all accumulate in your house? And what is in those boxes in the back bedroom that aren't clearly labeled?

If you're like a lot of the families I work with, you've collected a lot of possessions over the years. Many older adults have lived in their home for many years, and there hasn't been a reason or the motivation to work on getting rid of the clutter. Just put it in the basement, attic or garage and then you don't have to see it. Out of sight, out of mind. And how much of it belongs to your children? When they moved out all those years ago did they leave a few things behind? Do they even remember the stuff is still there?

Downsizing all too often happens when crisis hits, when something changes in health and a move into assisted living becomes a necessity. And when this happens, feelings can get hurt over the decisions about what goes and what stays, what family member gets what, and who is in charge. What if you didn't wait for the crisis?

What if you took an entirely different approach to the idea of downsizing? What if you decided that instead of all that stuff being a problem, it was an opportunity? I know, you're thinking: get real! Actually, that's just what I've done; I've gotten real. I have worked with seniors and their families for almost 30 years, discussing moving, health crises, mental blocks to moving, physical blocks to change, emotional attachments to their treasures and explaining senior living services. Spending this time with families has been a gift because I've seen the

results of their actions and their procrastinations. I have also seen the results of the decisions made, some with successful outcomes, and others less so. I can share the wisdom of those who have had success and the mistakes made by others who wish they'd done things differently.

It starts with your frame of mind - feeling loss over giving away things that mean so much, or paying it forward. If we're giving our treasures to our children or those we love, it's a little easier because frankly the possessions are almost still ours. But face it. Most often our children don't have really want our things. Just like us, when we were younger, they have their own tastes and enjoy accumulating their own treasures. That means if we're ever going to clear the clutter we're going to have to find a place to go with it.

Enter the new mindset - paying it forward. Why wait to give until after you're gone? You deserve this joyful experience. You'll always have the stories behind the gifts. Remember the old adage the greatest gift is in the giving? How do you feel when you've given someone a gift? Fulfilled, joyful, happy, and content. Now match those feelings with all the treasures you have just waiting for a new home. Sounds to me like you have a whole lot of joy and happiness filling your basement and attic!!

See if this hits home. It's likely taken you many years to collect all the things you own. Each item has a special meaning, like a gift from someone you care about, a purchase made while on a meaningful vacation, or something you inherited from someone you loved dearly. Some of these things are important to you because you see their beauty or their useful-

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*For over 40 years, Laureate Group, a local, family owned business has been helping older adults and their families manage the challenges of aging. Laureate Group operates eight senior communities throughout the Greater Milwaukee area. Additional resources can be found at:
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ness. Other possessions are important because of the memory they stir in you each time you look at or think about them. How can we possibly get rid of something when it stirs up such grand memories? The fact is that whether we have the item or not, the memory remains with us forever.

I've come to understand that the real joy of our accumulations is in the collecting. It's less about the actual things and more about the moments, people, relationships and experiences we had as we gathered them. I was addressing a group of seniors on the subject of downsizing and one lovely lady asked me how she could possibly get rid of the doll collection she'd begun 50 years ago. I asked where she had these lovely dolls displayed. She grinned and said "actually they're in a box in the back bedroom." I asked what she thought would happen to them if something should happen to her or if she had to move. "They would probably be given away to someone." I asked if she thought whoever would give them away would have the same emotional attachment to them that she did. "Absolutely not." So I offered a suggestion. What if she found an organization that cared for battered women or for abused children? Take just two of her dolls to start with and give them to two children who were in the midst of dealing with trauma. How would she feel seeing a child's eyes light up when she gave them a doll —something they would surely treasure — a doll that is now just sitting in a box in the back bedroom? After a moment of silence she said, "I can't wait to get home and choose the first two dolls!"

How can we part with our things, keep our memories, and move forward in life? By remembering that instead of losing our things, we're paying them forward to someone who can use them, who will value them, and this will not take away your memory of getting it but give you another memory of gifting it. You're not losing a memory, but gaining a new one.

This article is a reprint of a blog posted by Adele Lund, Laureate Group's Director of Community and Business Relations