

FROM DOWNSIZING TO

RIGHTSIZING

WITH

ADHD

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FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, I have been delivering the presentation *Do You Own Your Stuff or Does Your Stuff Own YOU?* to San Diego audiences.

I would always start the talk with a photo of an elderly man and his adult son standing in front of a packed storage unit with the comment, **“Someday, son, this will all be yours.”**

Though the audience always laughs, for many of us with ADHD, this cartoon is a lot closer to reality.

It is certainly MY reality. My mother and I have battled over her clutter since I graduated from college and moved in with her shortly after her second divorce. After several months, my mother was tired of my question *“Did you really need that?”* and I was becoming more overwhelmed by the piles of stuff that felt like they were closing in.

In the interest of preserving our relationship, we agreed I needed to move out. Only a few years later, my mother closed on her first townhome on a Friday. On Sunday, my grandfather died, and nine months later, my grandmother passed away unexpectedly.

At first the plan was to put everything that wasn't taken by relatives in storage and “deal with it later.” Side note: a storage unit is just a delayed decision and you're better off spending the money to pay for a professional to help rather than throwing money down the drain.

More than a year later, my uncle, who'd been paying for the storage, had had enough and all the storage boxes were moved into my mom's home—the one she had never quite finished unpacking.

So, I started avoiding my mom's home altogether, as it felt unsafe for a young child and being there caused me a great deal of distress.

When my mom could have been having her grandchildren overnight or doing all the craft projects she'd planned to do, overnights became a weekly visit to my house. The craft projects? A lot of the paint and glue dried up and most of the crafts never came to be.

When I gave those presentations, I'd refer to my mom as a hoarder; as a senior move manager, I saw a lot of homes that looked like hers. But everything changed after listening to a podcast about migraine headaches and fibromyalgia (something she'd battled for years) being linked to ADHD.

“Mom,” I said, “I don't think you have hoarding disorder. I think you have ADHD.”

Suddenly, decades of accumulation, unfinished projects, and piles everywhere had an explanation. My mother—and so many of the clients I'd met through the years—weren't lazy. My mom and likely many of the others were living with undiagnosed ADHD that had been hiding in plain sight their entire lives.

When my mother looked at her stacks of craft supplies, she didn't see clutter; she saw unrealized creative dreams. When she held onto magazines or old papers, it wasn't hoarding; it was her brain's way of preserving information she thought she'd need someday.

The high stakes of not downsizing

In my work I regularly ask audiences of seniors about their downsizing plans. Most say that while their families don't want their things, they don't want to tackle the overwhelming task themselves.

I've seen three reactions when a loved one passes or the family is assisting with a move: call the dump truck, save everything, or a family war.

When my grandmother passed away, my mother couldn't make decisions about her belongings and wanted to hold onto my grandmother through her things. When my aunt passed away, police had to be called when dividing belongings escalated to rage. I think of my aunt's four children and I know she'd have been so disappointed knowing that her children would never speak to each other again.

This is why I believe not only is it essential to downsize, but it is a gift you can give your loved ones.

One of the best things to do is an exercise called Swedish death cleaning—proactively going through your belongings as though you've passed away, taking the burden and guilt off loved ones later.

Know this: It took you a lifetime to acquire your possessions. It's going to take more than a week to let them go.

I like to remind my clients to refer to the process as “rightsizing” rather than downsizing, as downsizing emphasizes what we are losing rather than culling our possessions to what is right for the life we want to live. It's also easier to focus on what we want to keep rather than figuring out what to do with what we won't be keeping.

One of the most emotional parts of the rightsizing process is going to be those trips down memory lane. It's important to focus on opportunities that lie ahead rather than beating yourself up for unrealized dreams like *I was going to learn to play guitar*. At the same time, feel the feelings so you can move through them.



Strategies that work for ADHD brains

- **Perfect is the enemy of done.** Since one of the biggest challenges of ADHD is activation or breaking down large projects, break rightsizing down into bite-size pieces. Start by committing to ten minutes a day. Set the timer, put on some fun music, and have two distinct containers—one for trash and one for donations.
- **Gain momentum with low-hanging fruit.** Start with obvious trash, expired food, expired medications, and broken items.
- **Schedule donation pickups immediately.** Otherwise you'll have boxes sitting for months in the corner. When gathering donations, it's okay to put damaged clothing into the donation bins. Many donation companies will sell textiles for scraps or pass their discards on to another charity.
- **Think “needy family” for donations.** Our sense of justice kicks in and we're more likely to let things go. Obvious donations include duplicates, forgotten items with no sentimental or actual value, abandoned hobbies, and impractical items like high heels.
- **Take before and after photos or invite company over to see your success.** While we struggle with rejection sensitivity, we love our recognition. And nothing is quite as motivating as a deadline.
- **Use your ADHD creativity for**

solutions. To avoid family rage, my aunt's coveted belongings could have been shared back and forth, turning it into a ritual rather than a war.

- **Preserve your memories.** If your family doesn't want your belongings, realize this is normal. We live very differently now, and things aren't passed down from generation to generation. Consider what else might be passed down like recipes, traditions, family stories, and so forth.

- **Lean into technology.** Organize a family show and tell over Zoom or Google Meet where you can share and record your stories. You can also explore making fun videos with your family. Remember that just because they don't want your things, it doesn't mean you aren't loved or won't be remembered.

Why an adult child might be the worst person to help

As an expert in downsizing and decluttering, the reality is the adult child is rarely a good choice as an accountability buddy, even for neurotypicals.

An adult child can say the exact same thing a professional says, but it lands differently. Parents don't want to be “infantilized” by their children, and directing what the parent should or shouldn't hold onto will inevitably turn into a battle.

When to ask for help

If you're drowning in clutter and can't seem to start, or you want to preserve your relationship, hire a professional who deals with this regularly. The National Association of Senior and Specialty Move Managers ([NASMM.org](https://www.nasmm.org)) has certified senior move managers who are trained to assist with downsizing in a compassionate way. You can also find an ADHD specialist through the Institute for Challenging Disorganization ([challengingdisorganization.org](https://www.challengingdisorganization.org)).

My mother and I now have a relationship I never imagined possible. While I still don't “like” her clutter, I recognize we all have different clutter tolerances. Now, rather than judging her, I laugh about all of the things she's holding onto. And, if I'm being honest, it's kind of fun to find a museum of my life recalling memories of things I'd done and forgotten. **A**



Jami Shapiro, CSA, is an ADHD coach, a level 2 ADHD specialist with the Institute for Challenging Disorganization, and a certified senior advisor who discovered her own ADHD later in life—a

lightbulb moment that transformed her understanding of herself and her life's work. As founder of Silver Linings Transitions, a senior move management company in San Diego, and host of the *Grandma Has ADHD* podcast, she helps older adults recognize the neurodivergent traits they've lived with for decades without a name. As the author of *This Explains So Much: Understanding Undiagnosed ADHD for Those Who Have Too Much, Feel Too Much, or Have Been Told They Are Too Much*, Shapiro bridges the gap between aging and neurodivergent awareness, helping families understand that what looks like normal signs of aging or disorganization may actually be undiagnosed ADHD. As a certified senior move manager and a board member for the National Association of Senior and Specialty Move Managers (NASMM), she brings a unique perspective to ADHD coaching. She recently launched the Sparkler Society, a membership community for women aged 45 and over who are discovering ADHD later in life and seeking connection, support, and strategies that actually work for their brains.