



## HOME

# 10 Tips for Organizing Your Empty Nest

by *Thalia Poulos*

### The Newly Emptied Nest

The term *empty nester* generally refers to parents whose children have gone off to feather their own nests. As many of us know, they don't always take their stuff with them.

Whether it's your stuff or theirs, here are some ways to organize your empty nest:

- Ask the questions: What motivates you? What is it you want to accomplish?
- Have a goal, envision it, and write it down.
- Decide what your organized space will look like.

Empty nesters Richard and Cassandra, from the suburbs of Chicago, said it like this: "To reorganize and revamp the basement and storage lockers that currently hold a variety of our family's stuff. To get rid of anything of anyone's that doesn't positively support our current lifestyle. To group/organize our stuff so we know what we have and can get our hands on it easily."



LuAnn, an empty nester from Vista, CA, has two grown children who both left at the same time. She turned that third bedroom into the art studio she's always wanted. She now takes art classes—a lifelong dream.

Empty nesters Abra and James from Temecula, CA, turned their reclaimed extra bedroom into a yoga room and now practice yoga together every morning. Their goal was good health and finding something they both enjoyed

doing together.

### Stopping that Empty Nest Spread

Now that I have these empty bedrooms, I can fill them up, right?

Frances, a professor from Chicago, IL, was widowed at a young age. Her four-bedroom house fell victim to "empty nest spread," in which she used her children's former bedrooms for the excess stuff (18 pairs of black pants . . .) she acquired by extreme buying. Her children were long gone; their bedrooms were turned into storage. Then, she made the decision that "it's time to stop shopping and start living."

Here are 10 ways to combat empty nest spread:

#### 1. Begin with the end result in mind.

I/we want to have a home that:

- Feels beautiful, organized, inviting, serene, and open.
- Is our personal sanctuary and in which every room supports our elegant taste and lifestyle.
- Is clutter-free and surrounds us only with things we love, use, and enjoy.



Dolores, an empty nester from San Juan Capistrano, CA, had a goal to turn her empty bedroom into a glamorous dressing room: "I'm excited about having a fabulous closet for the first time—organized—and showing off my pretty things [on] display—shoes, purses, jewelry—a *woman cave* where I'll be wowed!"

**2. Lighten your load.** You'll need to do *some* of the following Action Steps to eliminate some of your stuff. If anything on this bulleted list scares you, skip it and try another.

#### Action Steps:

- Create one Keepsake Trunk per child. Invite your child to help if he or she is around; if not, email photos. Have each grown child select only the most special art projects, papers, and awards, and maybe a toy or two. The trunk now belongs to your child.
- Contact your children to come and get their stuff. Email makes a statement, and be sure to add a timeline.
- Use your digital camera or smart phone as a handy tool for emailing photos throughout this process.
- Donate to family (who's setting up that first apartment and needs a twin bed?).
- Donate to friends or to your favorite charity. Take photos if you'd like a visual list to accompany the written list for your income taxes.
- Categorize and appraise certain items/collections before donating or selling them.
- Sell on Craigslist. Post "cash only," and pre-qualify prospects on the telephone, reiterating the price and terms. Ask people you know to accompany you, especially if prospects are coming to your home or storage locker. Otherwise, make sure you meet in a safe, public place.
- Sell on eBay (also a great place to check values).
- Sell at a garage sale. You may need to have more than one.
- Donate through Freecycle.org, which keeps physical items out of landfills via no-strings-attached gifts.
- Scan their artwork if you can't possibly part with it. I like ScanSnap by Fujitsu.
- Throw things away.



**3. How do I start?** Look at the possible action steps above. Which ones appeal to your personality style? Commit to doing one or more of the steps for an hour at a time. You can even set a timer.

**4. Get a Sturdy Notebook or "List App" on your Computer or Smart Phone.** Keep notes/lists in one place. For tagging the items themselves, use color-coding to help identify each piece or group—different colored paper cut in quarters, taped onto items (e.g. "Craigslist").



**5. Where do I start?** Pick an easy room or area. Your success will give you the drive to continue. Group like-kind items into bins; label with very large labels in heavy black marker. For donations, use see-through bags.

**6. Where do I work?** You cannot have too many shelves in the garage or empty plastic tubs/bins to help you get organized. In good weather, pull stuff onto your driveway. No driveway? Use a large rectangular folding table.

**7. Sentimental value.** You've already decided that you cannot keep everything. Keep the end goal in mind: "I want that yoga room!" Remember that there is always a cost to keeping things—space, disorganization, clutter, frustration—so *weigh the cost of keeping it versus the value of getting rid of it.*

Take photos of sentimental items. Use an on-line photo storage system, and store the photos on a high-capacity thumb drive.

**8. Tell your story to a caring listener.** As I've said to my clients for years, "Keep it in the heart, not in the desk."

**9. Take small steps.** Do this over several weeks so you don't get burnt out. If it's in your budget, hire a helper or professional organizer. Some things are too emotionally difficult to do alone.

**10. Feel the lightness!** Remove items from your life that drain your energy.



As Dolores from San Juan Capistrano said, "I don't miss anything I gave away, and it's comforting to know that those 20 crystal vases are going to be enjoyed by someone else. Now, if we decide to do it, my husband and I can even move to the desert! I think when you have too many things, [there are] 'too many things to love.'"

### Dream Big

Organizing is a means to an end. Organizing your empty nest has many practical benefits:

- It's easier to keep your home clean.
- It's easier to find things.
- It saves time and energy.
- If you decide to move, you already have a good foundation.

However, the deeper benefit is this: When you clear the space, you're more open to Dream Big. What will *you* do with that beautifully empty room?



*Thalia Poulos is a professional organizer who lives in Encinitas, CA. She is a member of **NAPO** (National Association of Professional Organizers) and has been organizing homes and offices for 20 years. When working with clients, she uses a unique method based on her "Six Organizing Personality Styles" and is writing a book on the topic. Please visit Thalia's website/blog: [www.organizedbeautifully.com](http://www.organizedbeautifully.com).*