

Why It's Tough to Part with Stuff

Whether we surround ourselves with objects or stay spare and resist clutter, by the time we are in our 60s or 70s – and ready to move to smaller quarters -- most of us have accumulated truckloads of possessions. What do we keep? What do we donate? Who do we give it to? Researchers at the Institute of Gerontology (IOG) and the University of Kansas spent three years answering these questions.

The IOG portion of the study interviewed 40 older adults (age 65 and up) in the Detroit area after they moved to smaller quarters, and 20 additional persons before and after their moves. One part of the study focused on the transfer of *cherished* possessions. Researchers asked study participants to identify which objects they valued most, what they kept and how they found a good home for the rest. While people gave mundane items to charity and held a few yard sales, the cherished items required special placement. They represented more than the object itself; they had sentimental and symbolic value revealed only by careful listening to the story of its significance. The *story* about the object holds the key to its worth.



Finding a good home for valued possessions in late life takes time, thought and even a tough skin if the person we'd like to give it to doesn't want it. Some older adults were disappointed when the person they assumed would value the item was not interested in taking it. Others were pleasantly surprised to discover that a friend or relative had a stronger-than-expected attachment to the item and was honored to receive it. One woman had friends over to dinner and "their daughter just loved a painting I had. I took it off the wall and handed it to her," she said. "It gave me a lot of pleasure." Many items were given with stories attached so the recipient would know the history and meaning behind the item.

The circumstances that prompt a move in later life vary greatly. The decision can be planned and thoughtful, or rushed and anxious as when a partner suddenly passes away. Regardless of the circumstances, most downsizers were satisfied with their decisions. One woman was asked if she'd lost a bit of herself in the move. "If I did, it's been replaced with a feeling of safety," she said. "And pride that I was able to do it all myself. I gained more by moving than I lost."

Stuck? Tips to Help Let Go

Some people feel overwhelmed when downsizing and are paralyzed with indecision. That can signal that some “emotional housecleaning” is in order to help break free of irrational attachments.

Why It Can be Hard

1. Objects are part of our history and help us tell the story of who we are. Many of us have objects that have been around longer than our friends.
2. Objects can bring us pleasure. Surrounding ourselves with beautiful things make life brighter.
3. Objects trigger memories and allow us to relive previous roles (mother, daughter, employee) that still bring satisfaction and pride in our contributions to others.
4. American culture measures status by what we have. If you have things, especially lots of expensive things, you are viewed as a success.
5. We fear that letting go of our objects means losing a part of ourselves.
6. Older adults today grew up in the Great Depression and know what it is like to “have very little” and “go without,” making it especially difficult to give or throw things away.

How to Break Free

1. Objects have a life cycle. They are unlikely to be as valuable to the present generation as they were to you.
2. We can remake ourselves through our objects, so getting rid of unnecessary things can lighten our psychological load and free us to be remade anew.
3. **The Process:** Select what major items to retain. Give away meaningful items to people who will appreciate them and do it now — don’t wait. Part of the enjoyment of gift giving is seeing the gift being used by its recipient. Sort remaining items into keep, donate, sell and discard piles. Keep an item only if it will fit in your new home and lifestyle, if it means something to you, and you know you’ll need it.
4. Use the house-fire test to determine what to keep. What would you grab first if your house were burning?
5. Remember we are more than our things. Our true legacy lies in our relationships, actions, beliefs and character. If our essence is passed along to those we care about, we will live on – no extra stuff needed. Read about meaningful ways to leave your legacy in the August issue of WaltonWords.

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