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Helping Clients Overcome Information Overload

By Emily Wilska, CPO®

Editor's Note: Recently, I posted a question to the ICD group on LinkedIn asking our fellow subscribers for their tips, techniques, and practices on helping clients overcome information overload. They offered an awesome range of suggestions, from helping clients get at the heart of why they gather and keep information to getting over the “fear of missing out” that keeps many people glued to social media. Here’s what they had to say.



Donna Smallin Kuper, Author and Organizing Expert

I believe without a doubt that the only way to help people to declutter any area of their lives is to first help them to “find their why.” Oprah just sold \$600,000 of her belongings because she wanted to fund her school in

South Africa. Was it easy for her? No. The whole process from start to finish was anxiety-ridden. But she did it because she had such a powerful “why.”

Last summer, my husband and

I sold our home and a lifetime of accumulated possessions so that we could hit the road as full-time RVers. We knew what we wanted and our choice was simple: Keep the stuff or enjoy our new “freedom” lifestyle.

Interestingly, in the process, I created a virtually paperless home — something I had been wanting to do for ages, but just didn’t have a powerful enough “why.” I scanned all of my receipts to Shoeboxed.com and now just submit new receipts with my smartphone or via e-mail, all of which are searchable, downloadable and printable if needed.

I love the fact that, in essence, I am just “tossing” them all in this big file cabinet in the sky, and they are

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automatically organized for me. My receipts were organized before; they just took up a lot of room. If a client's receipts are not organized, what a relief it would be not to have to organize them!

Carol Sealaus, Professional Organizer/Decluttering 'Demolition' Expert

I remind my clients that it takes about 28 days to establish a habit, then I ask each one to establish a new one and give it priority for a month.

I have one client who lets the mail pile up so it's a huge task to plow through it. While we are dealing with the "old" stuff, we set up a routine for handling the new stuff. She is to spend 15 minutes a day dealing with the new mail, every day, for a month. After a month, it's a routine. Then we pick another "issue" and turn that into a 28-day exercise ... and so on. I stress the necessity of the 28-day commitment in order to get on top of things.

Vicky Sim, Simplicity Services

One of the biggest areas of information overload is e-mail, especially if you are subscribed to a number of blogs, newsletters, etc. I am a bit of an information junkie, but at the end of the day there is only so much information that you can take in or actually need!

They can be such time-wasters, too. So I advise clients to unsubscribe from e-mail newsletters and blogs that they don't really need or that are distracting them from their core focus area (especially when at work), and to subscribe only to those that are really helpful.

Switching off your e-mail alerts and only checking e-mails at periodic intervals is another way to

curb information overload. This is especially important if you need to concentrate on a task.

Social media (like Facebook and Twitter) can be addictive, but it also results in information overload. Again, decide how much time you want to devote to it, and stick to your boundaries.

FOMO (fear of missing out) is a major challenge these days with social media. Ask your client, "What is the worst that could happen if you didn't go onto your Facebook page for a week?" It can be really liberating to step back from all the information that we fill our heads with.

Kim Tremblay, Case Manager at WOTCH Community Mental Health Services

Looking at how you are spending your time can be helpful. Sometimes we think we have no time, but if we look at what we are really doing, then maybe we can eliminate some things that are not necessary or are not serving us.

There is such a thing as "time clutter," where people just keep themselves so busy that they don't spend any time at home or never have time for basic tasks.

DaLona Niland, Organized by Design

I have my clients ask themselves a series of seven quick questions (in the beginning they tape them to their computer or desk) to determine if they have to keep the paper they have in their hand.

If it needs to be kept, I suggest the desktop file system I developed that prioritizes what they keep. It is very simple and very effective, and I've been using it for years with my clients, both residential and corporate. This is a very nutshell explanation, and there's more to it, but overall, these are the bones to the process. I flesh it out differently for each individual.

Suzy Wilkoff, Tasks Unlimited

I find that many of my residential clients save magazines and newspapers with articles where they may have been mentioned or that have information they want to refer back to (for example, a travel article for a place they would like to visit).

Because the magazines and newspapers are bulky and take up unneeded space, I often recommend that they cut out the specific article they want to save. We file the articles based on categories (like travel, mementos, etc.). It's so much easier later on to find them, rather than rooting through an entire newspaper or magazine.

Linda Arena, Organizing Made Easy

One thing to look at is what is driving the collection of information in the first place.

With many clients, the primary cause is an imbalance: the influx of information is greater than the time spent sorting through and dealing with the papers/information. The amount in is greater than amount out ("out" meaning dealt with in some way). This imbalance can be addressed by either decreasing the amount in or increasing time spent on "out" activities.

However, there are often larger underlying causes. Why does someone want the information in the first place? What is the benefit they are receiving from the information? Kim [Tremblay, quoted above] mentioned "time clutter" where the benefit would be avoiding undesirable tasks or situations.

Another underlying cause is perfectionism. If someone is searching for the perfect solution, they may keep searching — the benefit here is to avoid making the imperfect or wrong decision.

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How about when the information is geared toward “things that I’d like to do when ...” (... I have more money, ... I get caught up with my papers, ... my kids get into college, ... I’m not caring for my Mom any more!)? Here, the benefit may be the hope for a better life. When this is the case, giving up the information can feel the same as giving up the hope for a better life.

Then there is the relationship resentment factor. Perhaps the task is something the client resents doing because they really think that someone else should be dealing with it instead. Someone like their spouse, or their child, or the imaginary maid that they really deserve to have but don’t because somebody else bought a fishing boat with double outboard motors!

Maybe it goes back to a bad math teacher in 8th grade. The client believes they are bad at math, and they believe that because of that, they cannot do bills, and bills come in the mail, and mail is paper, and paper is information, and so therefore the client has no idea how to handle any information. There are lots of connections and jumps of reasoning here, but many of these connections may be unconscious to the client.

Maybe it is just difficulty making a decision. Any decision. The benefit to believing you can’t make a decision is that you have an excuse for not making a decision!

If the underlying problem can be identified, then it can be addressed. Becoming aware of an underlying issue can give power to a client to release a blockage that is holding them back in a big way. There is power in awareness. Now, instead of trying to deal with all of the information in front of them, the client is instead practicing what to do about that one underlying issue.

It is the same problem manifesting over and over again. Solve that one problem, and then leverage the skill. It can be a relief to focus on practicing just one skill, to see success in that one area, and to glimpse what is possible using the new skill.

For example, if the difficulty is in making a decision, practice making decisions. Any decision. Decide to decide. Encourage the client to start to become aware of decisions they’re making but aren’t recognizing. It’s easy to be attached to the idea that they don’t know how to make a decision. It can be trickier to recognize that they actually can make a decision, because that recognition means the excuse for not deciding goes away.

For perfectionists, the practice of decision-making needs to go hand-in-hand with the foreknowledge that some decisions might be “bad” or “wrong” and that is OK. Invite self-compassion. Recognize that the cost of becoming unstuck from protectionism is giving up the benefit of not making

the wrong choice.

For people who make lots of connections and jumps in reasoning, disentangling one thought or belief from another can be quite helpful. Inviting awareness is not always easy, but it is powerful! It is definitely worth the effort! As always, be sure to recognize when support from behavioral health professionals is required.

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