



How to Make Downsizing Less Stressful

The kids are gone, the house is too big, the lawn takes too much work; or maybe you want to move closer to the center of town or be part of a community of older adults. For most older adults, there comes a time when you need or want to downsize.

The easy part may be packing up your possessions. The harder aspect is saying good-bye to what may be a lifetime of memories or choosing what is essential for you. What can you give away or give up? Who or what should be the recipient? What should you keep?

For adults over 60, only a spouse's death and divorce rank as more stressful than moving to a nursing or retirement home, according to the Social Readjustment Rating [Scale—the Stress Scale](#).

Tips for Downsizing

Start slowly: It will be emotionally easier to tackle one room or part of a room at a time, giving yourself some breaks in between. (Consider distracting yourself with a movie or dinner with friends). You can start with an easier room, like a bathroom, that has less emotional impact. Once you've emptied one larger room, use it to organize the rest of the house or apartment. Be easy on yourself.

Organize: Figure out exactly how much space you will have in your new home, including storage in the kitchen, closets and cabinets. How many dishes, clothes, books and so forth will you have room for? If your new space is half of what you have now, you know how much you have to get rid of. If you have more possessions than space, you can always rent a storage locker, but it can be expensive over the long haul and may just put off the hard decisions of what to keep and what to get rid of.

To stay organized, create piles for things you want to keep, give to family and friends, sell/donate or throw away. To make letting go easier, take photos of what you're leaving behind. To help with the decision-making process, it's sometimes easier to ask, "What do I absolutely need" or "Which is my favorite piece" and then see how much room is left for anything else.

Get help: Because downsizing can be a painful process, both emotionally and physically, don't be afraid to ask for help. It's an opportunity to go down memory lane with friends and family . At the same time, you can give away possessions to your loved ones, including items you may have been planning to give them after your death. Passing them on now means you can tell the story behind the gift or reiterate your affection for the person—whether your childhood best friend, your granddaughter or your favorite walking companion.

Paperwork and pictures: Because going through old papers, personal notes, documents and photos is time-consuming, and because they often don't take up a lot of space, you can pack these items and deal with them after you move. But if you do have time, it's better to get rid of the papers and photos that no longer have any meaning. Make sure you shred any documents with personal information, account identification and especially Social Security numbers. You can digitize (on your computer) documents and photos you want to keep but don't have space for computer (see sidebar).

Selling or Giving It Away

After sorting and packing possessions, you arrive at the big task of getting rid of the stuff you chose not keep.

If you think an item is worth money, there are several approaches: auction houses, antique dealers, consignment shops, garage sales, eBay or Craigslist. Each has advantages and disadvantages, including varying costs. You can use an appraiser to determine the value, but you need to have enough items to make the appraiser's visit worthwhile. Auction houses want to sell things at the highest prices and will therefore often offer you more than antique dealers, who want to purchase items at the lowest price.

Whatever you can't sell, you can give away. The main donation outlets include Goodwill, the Salvation Army, AmVets and Purple Heart. You can also find charities that might be more in line with your values, such as the Humane Society or a hospital/hospice outlet.

Before you donate, it's a good idea to check online or over the phone to see if your chosen charity has any restrictions on what it accepts: for example, no furniture or electronics, or only clothes and housewares. Also find out if they are willing to pick up larger items.

You can target certain items for certain places; for example, take musical instruments to schools or old tools to auto repair shops. Nonprofits or local schools can use old magazines for art projects, and homeless shelters or abused women shelters can take unused toiletries. Even worn-out items, such as towels and blankets, are welcome at animal shelters.

To get rid of other items that don't seem reusable, try Freecycle; you never know; someone might be looking for a broken lawn mower to use as part of a backyard sculpture. [Freecycle Network](#) is a nonprofit group with members

dedicated to recycling. Items are posted online for anyone who wants them. If nothing else works, set items on the curb with a sign that says “Help yourself.”

Getting Professional Help

With the population of older adults growing, it's no surprise that businesses catering to all aspects of helping seniors move are increasing. The number of local companies registered with the **Preserving Documents and Photos**

If you have boxes of old photos and documents (your college paper on Darwin or the kindergarten note from your daughter) that are too bulky to keep around but are still meaningful, one option is to digitize them. Not only can you get rid of the storage boxes, but the documents and photos are instantly accessible on your computer.

You can either scan the paper products yourself or use a service that will do it for a fee. Most flatbed scanners or multifunction printers will scan photos, but if you're looking for quality and speed, you should buy a device that's only for scanning photos and/or old slides.

If you don't have time for scanning, websites such as [GoPhoto](#), [SnapFish](#) and [ScanMyPhotos](#) will digitize your photos. These services can often edit the photos, as well as provide a DVD or CD. You'll pay anywhere from 8 cents to 44 cents per photo. For preserving and turning videos and films into DVDs, online services such as [ScanDigital.com](#) or local places such as Walgreens are available to help (“5 Simple Tips to Digitize and Organize Old Photos,” [Mashable](#)).

You can store your photos online or on your computer, although an online backup for treasured pictures is a good idea. Sites such as [Shutterfly](#), [Photobucket](#), [Flickr](#), [SmugMug](#) and Google's [Picasa](#) provide storage space, which is sometimes limited. You can purchase more space for a nominal monthly fee, often as little as \$2. Facebook is another free and popular option.