

The Stuff of Grief: Going through a Deceased Person's Possessions

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Going through the personal belongings of a loved one after they die can be an opportunity to reflect on their lives, reminisce, and learn more about who they were.

In the depths of grief, however, the task can be a painful reminder of the loss and add to the complexities of the mourning process.

Many of us will be tasked with going through the possessions of another person at some point. So how can we make the process easier? Planning, recruiting help, and the use of a sorting scheme are key.

Make a plan. Before you start, think about how you will approach the task, who will be involved, and the timeline.

Will you start with a family meeting? What method will you use to distribute items of sentimental or financial value in a fair and equitable way? Will you quickly discard items of little value and move onto those of greater significance? Or will you focus on the items of value and leave the rest to a junk removal company?

Whatever you decide, communicate openly with family members and beneficiaries. A clear understanding of the intended process can help manage expectations and prevent confusion and disputes later.

If you have the luxury of time, try not to rush through the process. Haste can lead to bad decisions. Be cognizant, however, of hard-and-fast deadlines, like rental agreements, that require you to complete the work by a specific date.

Proceed with caution. Be aware that your loved one might have bequeathed certain possessions in their will or designated a recipient in a personal property memorandum (i.e., a document that lists who will receive specific personal items after you die).

Furthermore, ongoing estate expenses or creditors' claims against the deceased person's estate may require the sale of more valuable pieces of personal property.

You will need to work with the executor of the estate – if that is not you – to make decisions about the timing, process, and distribution of items.

Recruit help. At the get-go, consider asking family and friends to help. It is a big job that is likely to take days, weeks, or even months. The extra hands will be welcome.

Friends and family can offer emotional support at a difficult time. The opportunity to reminisce and share stories – spurred by the discovery of certain possessions – can honor your loved one and help in the grieving process.

Those with less sentimental attachment to the belongings can also provide a clearer perspective about the worth of items you cannot seem to let go.

Use a sorting scheme. Categorizing items into different groups can help you quickly dispense with some possessions, allowing you to focus your energies on those with more sentimental, practical, or financial value. Sorting schemes usually include the categories keep, sell, donate, recycle, or discard.

Keep. Select a few items that have the greatest sentimental value to you or remind you of your loved one – their passions, personality, and style. Keeping some of your loved one's belongings can help you maintain a bond with them, but holding onto everything will be a burden.

Repurposing items that you cannot use – instead of storing them away in a box in the attic – is a meaningful way to find comfort in the belongings. For instance, make a quilt out of pieces of their clothing; frame a special note in your loved one's handwriting; or create a memory box that holds pictures, jewelry, letters, or other small mementos.

Some take photos of or videotape the items instead of keeping them. It takes up less storage space, can be shared with others, and still be a reminder of your loved one.

Sell. Sell items that you don't want to keep but might have value to others such as furniture, electronic equipment, jewelry, collectibles, and tools.

You can sell individual items online (e.g., Craig's list, Facebook Marketplace, or eBay) or organize a yard or estate sale. The latter, however, can be overwhelming and emotionally taxing. Consider enlisting the expertise of professionals who can handle the entire process. They usually take a substantial portion of the proceeds, but the convenience and peace of mind they provide often outweigh the loss of revenue.

Donate. Donate usable items to non-profit organizations and charity shops. If you donate to an organization your loved one cared about, the act can provide a sense of purpose and honor the memory of your loved one.

Make sure that the items you want to donate are clean and in good condition. Always check with the intended recipient to confirm they accept the items.

Discard/recycle. Discard anything that is broken, damaged, obsolete, or no longer usable. This includes old clothes, outdated electronics, and expired food. Dispose of used toiletries and perishables. Find responsible ways to recycle or otherwise dispose of old appliances, magazines, and paperwork.

Throughout the process, keep an eye out for important documents. Depending on the organizational skills of the deceased, you may find bank statements, insurance policies, unpaid bills, and important correspondence mixed with the daily mail or scattered about the house. Since these documents might impact settlement of the estate, forward them to the executor in a timely manner.

Letting go of material possessions doesn't diminish your love for or memories of your loved one. Take time to mourn them and celebrate their life while sticking to a practical process of distributing their belongings to those who want them.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite, spiritual care, grief support, and access to free medical equipment.