



## "Counter" Act Paper Clutter in 3 Easy Steps Organizing is as Much Thinking as Doing

Guess who's staking out valuable space on your kitchen counters -- and with your permission! Mail, artwork, brochures, investment statements, homework, field trip sign-ups, church bulletins, PTA news, bills, events you want to go to, vacation catalogs ... and the list goes on. Our schedules have turned from the relaxed summer pace to the hub-bub of clubs, sports and activities.



And our "friends" have returned. Papers! They make their home on the kitchen table. Then they are moved to counters or to the dining room table in the "big swoop" when we know friends are coming over. You know, the Big Swoop: we put our arms around the paper piles, swoop them up into our arms, and swoop them into the dining room where they rest on the dining room table!

What can you do so you don't lose the papers, so you stop missing appointments and can find what you need, when you need it?

**Three Keys to Managing Paper:** Instead of managing the paper, think of it as managing the activities of the people in your life. The papers can help you! Raising your eyebrows yet? Here are the 3 concepts to remember:

1. What **process** can you use so that you spend enough time but less than you are now, dealing with the papers?
2. What **products** will you use to contain papers so they're not lost?
3. And what **people's** habits need to change, so that the system continues to work.

The three P's -- process, product, people. All three have to work for you before you can feel more organized and in control.



### Some Process Advice

Choose one time of day, at roughly the same time to go through papers. Tack this onto another habit or part of your schedule that's already engrained. One of my clients uses time while she prepares dinner. Another small business owner reviews mail at about noon, to give himself a break. Another client sits down at 9 p.m., the first quiet time of the evening, to review mail, figure out what calls need to be made, what papers need to be signed for the children -- all paperwork for the household. Remember that these papers are helping you manage the lives of everyone in the household or parents living elsewhere. So please plan on ½ hour of quiet time daily to figure out what to do with each day's papers and get schedules together for the next few days.

**Decide on the spot:** what do I need to do next with this piece of paper? Quickly skim each paper to see if there are things to do or deadlines to meet. Then you won't be surprised. No paper gets returned to the pile with "I'll look at that later." (Because we rarely do ...). If it's a magazine or newsletter, decide if you truly have time to read it. If so, toss it into a magazine rack nearby or make a folder of articles to read. If it's a form to sign, ask yourself: what else



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### Speaking



do I need to know before I can sign this? If nothing, sign it now and put it with your things near the door. Need more information? Write down what you need on the form so you don't need to rethink it later.

**Gather your tools.** Write in deadlines on your calendar or planner (paper or electronic). More and more, I see a home laptop on the kitchen counter for calendar, mail, and internet access. So if you see that it's your time to bring snacks for next month's business meeting or for your child's classroom, write this on your calendar. And add this right away to your grocery list.



## Some Product Advice

Find products that appeal to your style and most importantly, your way of thinking. Because you are writing deadlines on your calendar and you're keeping some form of "next actions" or "to do list," the papers don't have to be visible. You'll use them when you need to get to the details. Whatever style of product is fun and attractive, that's the one you want to use. Keep this product in the same place so you'll always know where to find it.



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**Product ideas:** One client uses a different colored folder for each child, parent, activity and committee. Another client set up a three ring binder with sections for each aspect of the family's life (kids, medical, parents, etc.); use a floral, fabric-covered expanding portfolio with handles for those of you on-the-go; and many clients use stackable letter trays for easy access (labeled) because they fit right into kitchen shelves. Another client loves the Longaberger baskets. And one working parent set up a bench with cubbies above it in the hallway, to catch everything on the way into the house.

## Some "People" Advice

Probably the most difficult aspect is that your habits may need to change. Yet you will be a catalyst for others in your home to follow suit. Take small bites at first. Perhaps you start with a basket for bills or a box for receipts. Make it easy on yourself. Focus on progress, not perfection. The counter or table didn't get like this overnight. Try out a new organizer and label it. Figure out what time of day you'll go through the mail. While you prepare dinner, do you have 5-10 minutes? Continue for a few weeks to work out the kinks and get into new habits. Only then get children or significant others to participate. Once everyone who brings in the mail starts using your new organizing system, then move onto another issue.

The thrill for you may be the calm that comes from knowing you have control over the paper. Or maybe for you, the thrill will be in how little time it takes to clear the counters for dinner. Or the thrill will be inviting friends over and not spending an hour (or more) clearing the kitchen. Think of the mental calm you'll feel when you enter the kitchen and see clear counters. You're the CEO of the household and doing a great job at managing it all!

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