

AD/HD and Chronic Disorganization: “Help Me Get My Act Together!”



Presented by Debbie Stanley, M.A.
Red Letter Day Professional Organizers • www.RLDPO.com

Debbie is a chronic disorganization coach and owner of Red Letter Day Professional Organizers, founded in 1997. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's in industrial/organizational psychology. Debbie's most recent book is *Organize Your Personal Finances in No Time* (Que Publishing, 2004), available at major booksellers and Amazon.com. She is a CHADD member and a frequent speaker in Oakland and Macomb counties.

Debbie is president of the Southeast Michigan chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO) and an active member of the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization (NSGCD), from which she has earned a Chronic Disorganization Specialist Certificate and Certificate of Study in AD/HD.

Red Letter Day offers one-on-one coaching for chronically disorganized clients. Visit www.RLDPO.com for details.

When you're disorganized, life seems harder than it should be.

• Increasing your level of organization can make everything else easier. •

As you resolve to “finally get organized,” remember that it's a process, not an event: Becoming organized requires changes in habits and thought processes, and those changes take time. If you've always been disorganized, you might also need to work through any painful feelings you have about this area of your life. The first step is to recognize this:

Disorganization is just a problem to be solved; it is not a character flaw!

Contents of These Handouts:

- Am I Chronically Disorganized?
 - Ways to Get Organized and the Red Letter Day Organizing Matrix®
 - Helping Disorganized Others
 - Resources for More Organizing Information

Also Don't Miss:

- The “Ask the Organizers” panel discussion **TODAY** at 2:30!
- More information and resources in the “Ask the Organizer” handouts!
- Your chance to meet Debbie & other local organizers at the “Connections” session **TODAY** at 3:45!

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Am I Chronically Disorganized?

Ask yourself three questions:

- 1. Have I been disorganized most or all of my life?**
- 2. Have my efforts to improve my level of organization ultimately failed?**
- 3. Does my disorganization cause me negative feelings or consequences on a daily or near-daily basis?**

If you answered yes to each question, you meet the definition of chronic disorganization.

Everyone gets disorganized sometimes: when you take on too much at work, when you catch a cold and fall behind on your to-do list, when you go through a big change like getting married or having a baby. This "situational disorganization" is a normal part of life. Common times for situational disorganization are:

- Starting or graduating from high school or college.
- Entering the workforce, changing jobs, or entering retirement.
- Starting or dissolving a business.
- Moving to a new home, particularly if the move is to another state or the old and new homes are quite different in size.
- Pregnancy and the birth of a child. (Previous levels of organization often do not return until the child enters kindergarten, if ever.)
- Planning or participating in a large or significant event, such as a wedding, bar or bat mitzvah, or anniversary party.
- Health incidents such as a hospitalization, surgery, accident, or chronic illness.
- Crises such as becoming the victim of a crime.
- Coping with a parent's failing health or death and subsequent estate clearing.

Chronic disorganization is different.

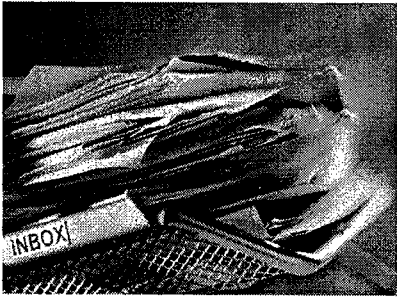
The National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization (NSGCD) defines CD as a lifelong struggle against disorganization in which self-help efforts haven't worked, leaving you with negative feelings or consequences every day.

Some examples of what CD is like:

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You're Probably Chronically Disorganized If . . .



- You're surrounded by papers in piles, boxes, or bags
- You feel like you're swimming in clutter
- You spend every day putting out fires, with no time for long-term planning

- You feel guilty about always working overtime and missing out on family time
- You're embarrassed to invite people into your home or office
- You're always running late or get there just barely in time



- You're sure you'd never be able to move all that stuff to a new home
- Everyone in your house is tripping on kids' toys or unfinished laundry
- You're positive you have one of those somewhere, but have to buy another because you can't find it

What Causes Chronic Disorganization?

There are many conditions and situations that can lead to chronic disorganization. In our experience, the most common cause is **attention deficit disorder (ADD or AD/HD)**. AD/HD is characterized by distractibility and difficulty in planning or completing activities, which makes it really tough to sustain a system of organization . . . but it can be done.

Chronic pain is another common cause of chronic disorganization. If you hurt all the time, you rarely feel like reorganizing a closet or filing paperwork. Many of our clients are battling **fibromyalgia, arthritis, or chronic fatigue syndrome** as they work toward improving their organization.

Chronic disorganization can result from a **brain injury**, even something as seemingly minor as a mild concussion. It can also develop along with **Alzheimer's disease**.

The most extreme form of chronic disorganization leads to the hoarding of possessions to the point that the home is unsafe. This situation is usually the result of a psychological condition such as **obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), hoarding disorder (a form of OCD), or depression** and requires the intervention of a mental health professional. In such cases, a professional organizer experienced in chronic disorganization can work together with the therapist to help the client carry out his or her organizational goals.

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Ways to Get Organized

Self-Help

For many people, organizing tips, suggestions, and new systems and products are all they need to see an improvement in their level of organization.

Unfortunately though, chronic disorganization often does not respond well to self-help efforts, but this does not mean that the situation is hopeless. If budgetary constraints prevent you from working with a professional organizer, or if you would like to try some new ideas on your own, there are many resources available. Check out the **Resources for More Organizing Information** later in this section, or contact a professional organizer near you and ask if s/he knows of any support groups in your area.

Working with a Professional Organizer

A professional organizer can help you to make speedier progress toward your organizing goals.

A professional organizer is a consultant who helps clients get their lives and businesses organized and operating at peak efficiency with minimal stress. Some professional organizers perform hands-on organizing, some serve as coaches, and some do both. Some prefer to work solely in residential, home office, or corporate settings, and some do it all.

Many professional organizers specialize in one or more areas of organizing, such as closets and storage, files and paperwork, time management, or event planning. If you suspect you are chronically disorganized, seek out an organizer who specializes in helping CD clients.

The role a professional organizer plays in your life is similar to that of your attorney, accountant, real estate agent, insurance agent, or interior decorator. Just as each of these consultants' jobs is to advise clients in his or her area of expertise, a professional organizer answers clients' questions and guides their decision-making in all areas pertaining to getting organized. In fact, many clients ask their professional organizer to work in conjunction with their other advisors to provide comprehensive management of projects such as settling an estate, moving or relocating, gathering paperwork in preparation for a legal action, creating a budget, or hiring new employees.

Referrals to professional organizers near you are available through the **National Association of Professional Organizers** (www.napo.net), the **Southeast Michigan chapter of NAPO** (www.napomichigan.com), and the **National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization** (www.nsgcd.org).

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The Red Letter Day Organizing Matrix

The ORGANIZED Way to Get Organized!

The Red Letter Day Organizing Matrix is a handy tool for assessing your own trouble areas. Think about the ways in which you are disorganized: Are they related to 1) paper, 2) time, or 3) "stuff" (belongings, things, clutter)?

Do you encounter these problems 1) as they enter your life, 2) when they are items that will be staying, or 3) in getting them out of your life in a timely manner?

Becoming aware of when and how disorganization is most problematic for you is an excellent first step toward solving the problem! You might find, for example, that paper coming in is a major problem, and time commitments going out never seems to happen at all—meaning it's a REALLY big problem! Below are more examples:

Common Organizing Problems

	Coming In	Staying	Going Out
Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily mail • Newspapers • Memos left on desk • Inbox, memos left on desk • Papers sent home from kids' schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent storage for vital records • Archiving taxes • Maintaining research files • Household files for finances, manuals, receipts • Project files 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shredding/recycling • Outdated publications • Expired coupons • Earlier drafts of revised documents • Printouts which duplicate electronic files
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overtime hours • Changes in school schedules • Volunteering • Clubs or sports activities • Requests from others • Occasional events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special schedules at holiday times • Commuting • Coordinating family members' schedules • Handling unexpected delays 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saying "no" • Delegating work to others • Asking for help • Weeding out time-consumers • Streamlining tasks
Stuff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gifts received • Shopping acquisitions • Mail orders • Supplies related to starting a new project • Stuff associated with a new baby or pet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toys • Stockpiles of household products • Clothing and linens • Kitchen supplies • Home repair tools and supplies • Hobby supplies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trash/recycling • Donations to charity • Others' things to be returned • Old/broken/unused clothing, toys, furniture

• In the blank worksheet on the next page, fill in your own organizing trouble spots. •

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The Red Letter Day Organizing Matrix

The ORGANIZED Way to Get Organized!

My Problem Areas

	Coming In	Staying	Going Out
Paper			
Time			
Stuff			

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The ORGANIZED Way to Get Organized!

Awareness is half the battle. Now you have a better understanding of your particular organizing challenges, so you can take a more targeted approach to solving them! Below are some suggestions for common problems in each of the nine Organizing Matrix areas:

- **Paper Coming In:** Systems, systems, systems! Everyone needs a system for processing incoming mail, receipts, school papers, etc. Create a system—ANY system, as long as it's realistic, meets your needs, and can be followed consistently.
- **Paper Staying:** Find the right filing system for you! It can be traditional (out of sight in drawers) or in sight horizontal (piling) or vertical (files upright on shelves).
- **Paper Going Out:** Keep a trash can by the door that the mail comes in and toss as much as possible each day before it hits the kitchen counter! Bonus: Keep a shredder near that trash can and get rid of even more, even more quickly.

- **Time Coming In:** Stop saying “yes” automatically; learn and practice the many great ways to say “no” or to not quite say “yes.”
- **Time Staying:** Use some sort of planner—anything from a simple pocket calendar to an elaborate binder or PDA, whatever works best for YOU. Then commit to scheduling the “big rocks” (your true life priorities) FIRST, before the little rocks take over your time!
- **Time Going Out:** Eliminate things that don't contribute to your priorities. As you get better at avoiding the “auto-yes,” this section will begin to clear out.

- **Stuff Coming In:** Recognize if you have a tendency toward “acquisitiveness” and work on ways to curb that habit of acquiring more and more stuff.
- **Stuff Staying:** Everything you own should have a “home”—a place it belongs when not in use. It doesn't always have to be in its home, but it must have a home reserved for it.
- **Stuff Going Out:** Learn to avoid “kinesthetic sympathy”—the phenomenon that makes it much more likely you'll keep something if you touch it before deciding to get rid of it. To weed out clothes ruthlessly, look but don't touch!

• *Remember, if self-help isn't working, consider enlisting assistance from a professional organizer.* •

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Helping Disorganized Others

If you're reading these materials and thinking, "I know / live with / am married to / gave birth to someone who is really disorganized!," don't rush off to help them before you've absorbed these points:

- Chronic disorganization causes profound feelings of embarrassment, shame, and even self-loathing. The person might not show it, but this situation makes them feel helpless and inferior, so s/he will be highly sensitive to anything that even remotely resembles criticism, blame, or judgment.
- Practice how you could bring up the subject in a nonjudgmental, empathic way. Think about the words you will use, and avoid words like "dirty," "pigsty," "disaster area" or phrases like "you always," "you never," "I always have to," or "why can't you."
- Even if your approach is perfect, remember that it might be difficult or impossible for the other person to "hear" you neutrally. This is especially likely if you have a close personal relationship, and even more likely if the disorganization has been the source of arguments or bad feelings between you in the past, because the person's desire to please you will get in the way of his or her own ability to devise creative solutions and risk failing (and disappointing you) again.
- Chronically disorganized people do not choose to "live like this" and they can't "just put it away" or "just leave a little earlier" or "just pay attention." They're not simply lazy, unmotivated, ignorant, or slovenly. Living a disorganized life does not feel good; no one aspires to be perpetually late, often in trouble, and usually on the verge of disappointing someone (or everyone). If you don't believe this, you won't have the empathy needed to help a chronically disorganized person.

If you suspect someone is chronically disorganized, it is very important to understand that he or she is probably deeply ashamed of the problem. It is imperative that you broach the subject with kindness and compassion.

If you can't be completely nonjudgmental, open-minded, and empathetic, don't try to "help": You will only make it worse.

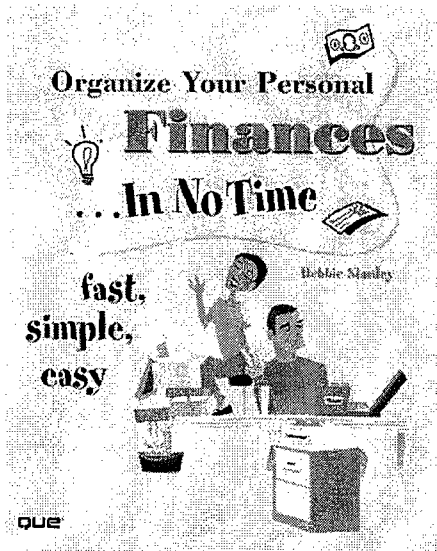
Remember this!
Disorganization is just
a problem to be solved.
• It is NOT A CHARACTER FLAW! •

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Resources for More Organizing Information

NEED TO ORGANIZE YOUR FINANCES? THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU!



New from Debbie Stanley:

Organize Your Personal Finances in No Time, the first in the In No Time series from Que Publishing.

- Everything you need to know to get a grip on your financial paperwork and money-management system!
- Available at Barnes & Noble, Borders, and Amazon.com!

FIND A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZER

National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO): www.napo.net

NAPO, The Organizing Authority, is the premier member association for professional organizers. The site features an automated referral request system for those seeking an organizer.

NAPO-Southeast Michigan Chapter (NAPO-SE-MI): www.napomichigan.com

The Michigan chapter of NAPO. This website lists all chapter members in Michigan.

Professional Organizers in Canada (POC): www.organizersincanada.com

The Canadian equivalent of NAPO.

National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization (NSGCD): www.nsgcd.org

An association for organizers specializing in CD. The website includes resources for those seeking an organizer.

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SITUATIONAL DISORGANIZATION

***The 10 Natural Laws of Successful Time and Life Management*, by Hyrum W. Smith, Warner Books, 1994.**

The popular Franklin Planner is based on the principles of this book by the Franklin Quest company's CEO. We agree with Smith's assertion that in order for time management efforts to be effective and create happiness, they must include attention to your personal priorities, not just the work-related ones.

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***The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen R. Covey, Simon and Schuster, 1989.**

This book was a big best-seller, and its principles are still valid today. Like Hyrum Smith, Covey emphasizes the importance of "balanced self-renewal." Covey partnered with Smith to form the Franklin Covey company several years after this book was published.



CHRONIC DISORGANIZATION

***Conquering Chronic Disorganization*, by Judith Kolberg, Squall Press, 1999.**

This is the best book there is for chronically disorganized people, written by the founder of the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization. Kolberg's style is motivating and witty, and the book is easy to digest.

***Making Peace with the Things in Your Life: Why Your Papers, Books, Clothes, and Other Possessions Keep Overwhelming You—and What to Do about It*, by Cindy Glovinsky, St. Martin's Press, 2002.**

This is the first book to consider the problem of disorganization from a psychological perspective. The author's unique vantage point as a therapist who is also an organizer provides valuable insights for other organizers, yet is presented in a way that is accessible to anyone wishing to get a grip on clutter. Some people have success molding their lives around a generic how-to system, but many need to know why they are the way they are before they can embrace the change required to get organized. If you need a deeper explanation combined with an empathetic, humorous approach to clearing out your clutter, or if you are an organizer looking for new ways to help clients understand disorganization, we strongly recommend this book.



ATTENTION DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (AD/HD OR ADD)

National Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA): www.add.org

ADDA is the most comprehensive source for information on AD/HD in adults.

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD): www.chadd.org

CHADD offers support groups around the country for AD/HD adults as well as AD/HD kids and their parents.

***Driven to Distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood through Adulthood*, by Edward Hallowell and John J. Ratey, Pantheon Books, 1993.**

This book is an excellent study of attention deficit disorder, written by two doctors who have ADD themselves. It offers insight into the struggles that ADDers go through, as well as the clinical causes of the disorder and treatments for it. A companion title, *Answers to Distraction*, is also available.

***Women with Attention Deficit Disorder*, by Sari Solden, Underwood Books, 1995.**

For a refreshing perspective on how ADD affects girls and women throughout their lives, this book is excellent. Many clients report that reading it was an incredible relief--for the first time in their lives, they realized that what is "wrong" with them is not their fault. Solden emphasizes accepting ADD's place in your life and learning to work with it. A follow-up title, *Journeys through ADDulthood*, was published in 2002.

***You Mean I'm Not Lazy, Stupid or Crazy?!: A Self-Help Book for Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder*, by Kate Kelly and Peggy Ramundo, Fireside Press, 1996.**

This big, thick, comprehensive book on ADD is very popular among our clients. The title says it all: You're not lazy, stupid, or crazy, so stop beating yourself up and begin learning to work with your ADD!

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***A.D.D. and Creativity: Tapping Your Inner Muse*, by Lynn Weiss, Taylor Publishing, 1997.**

ADDers are often more intelligent and creative than "normal" people. In *A.D.D. and Creativity*, Weiss emphasizes the unique abilities that people with ADD often have but do not know how to maximize.

***ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life*, by Judith Kolberg and Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D., Brunner-Routledge, 2002.**

Two pioneers—the founder of the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization and a ground-breaking ADD researcher—teamed up to produce this innovative guide to organizing for ADDers.



OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD)

Madison Institute of Medicine: www.miminc.org

OCD can be a cause of chronic disorganization. The Madison Institute of Medicine offers an extremely comprehensive packet of information on OCD at a nominal charge (generally the cost of copying and postage). Other packets are also available, including one specifically on hoarding.



TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY (TBI)

***Over My Head: A Doctor's Own Story of Head Injury from the Inside Looking Out*, by Dr. Claudia L. Osborn, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1998.**

Brain injuries, from a simple bump on the head to a catastrophic accident, often result in chronic disorganization. In this autobiographical account, the author relates her experiences since sustaining a serious brain injury and the ways in which she learned to apply new systems and regain much of her independence. More information is available at www.claudiaosborn.com.



OTHER INTERESTS

Some subjects that are often of interest to our clients.

Feng Shui

Feng shui, the Chinese art of placement, is important to organizing because it points out the negative effects of excess clutter and inefficient furniture placement.

Catherine Hilker, Feng Shui & Space Clearing Practitioner: www.catherinehilker.com

Catherine brings serenity and harmony to her clients through the application of feng shui techniques. She exudes a calming presence and offers insightful observations that help clients to work through the areas of their lives that have become stagnant and unrewarding.

***Clear Your Clutter with Feng Shui*, by Karen Kingston, Broadway Books, 1999.**

Many of our clients have trouble letting go of things. This title offers a unique perspective on the causes of cluttering and ways to reduce it.

Money Management

***The Millionaire Next Door*, by Thomas J. Stanley and William D. Danko, Pocket Books, 1996.**

Money management is a form of organizing, and our clients often ask for a good book on the subject. If you're like most readers, this book will forever change how you look at money. It offers a completely new perspective on wealth, money management, and budgeting, and it will give you insight into your attitude toward money as well as that of your parents, your siblings, your spouse, and your friends.

Decorating

***Christopher Lowell's Seven Layers of Design*, by Christopher Lowell, Discovery Books, 2000.**

Once we get our clients organized, they often want to celebrate by redecorating. If you're not confident in your ability to choose and coordinate paint, floor coverings, furniture, and window treatments, this is the book for you. Lowell makes it easy to predict what will work and what won't, while still allowing you to express your own style. Some of the examples in the book are quite bold, but the concepts can be applied more conservatively as well.



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