

HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR LIFE, MIND AND HOME

*9 Organizing Principles To Help You Simplify Your
Life, Increase Efficiency and Maximize Productivity*



PAUL MORRISEY

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Paul Morrissey

How to Organize Your Life, Mind and Home

*9 Organizing Principles to help you simplify your
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by

Paul Morrisey

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Introduction

“Being overwhelmed is often as unproductive as doing nothing.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Tim Ferriss

There are a lot of myths and misconceptions swirling around the term organization—and it’s really necessary to set the record straight, right from the start. As you may have already surmised, this book is not about hacks, tips or quick fixes. Immediate results are nice, but they are also illusory. Instead, we’ll focus in on the real keys to long-term success: the fundamentals and mindset behind good organization practices.

Organization is too often associated with surface appearances—having a clean closet or precisely detailed Google Calendar. On some level, we all want to project an organized, “together” aura to those around us. That makes us misunderstand the true reason why almost all successful people employ organizational principles.

Organization isn’t about keeping things neat, tidy and clean. While those are certainly nice benefits and byproducts of the process, organizing is about something else—something that most books just don’t address.

No, organization is about *execution*. By becoming better organized, we can improve our actions. And through better actions, we can live far more fulfilling lives. When organizing, it’s easy to focus on productivity and efficiency. We lose sight that, really, the end goal is production.

By correctly organizing our minds, homes and schedules, we allow ourselves to produce more of whatever we want. If you’re an artist, that means art. If you’re a parent, that means quality family time. You get the

idea—organization helps facilitate production. It helps you get what you want; and, ultimately, organization helps you live a better life.

Production is so important: in a world filled with shortcuts, distractions and dubious secrets, we can easily become obsessed with becoming more efficient and organized. Perhaps having three dishes allows for a cleaner looking home; but, at this point, excessive minimalism and cleanliness have almost certainly had a negative overall impact on your life.

This is not a good result; we have become obsessed with the means, rather than the end.

On Goals, End Games & Imagination

Which means that the first step towards establishing a positive organizational mindset is simple. As Stephen Covey writes in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, you must always start with the end in mind. That means that you must have goals.

Begin with the very end of your life—where are you? Who's surrounding you? What have you accomplished? Focus on the big three: health, money (or work), and friends/family. Visualize the situation, using your full imaginative faculties. When you die—and sadly, this is inevitable—the legacy you leave will be dictated by your goals. This may make you feel uncomfortable, but the culprit is unlikely to be the morbidity of the thought. Any discomfort probably stems from the fact that what you're doing right now isn't going to lead to a great end.

Don't just establish daily or weekly goals. Life goals.

So what do you want your life to look like? While a simple question, many of us don't stop to ponder it for even a moment—we just allow the tides to toss us off course unwittingly. If we're not careful, we'll end up halfway around the world from where we actually wanted to go.

It would seem ridiculous to try to reach a faraway land without at least a plane ticket and a destination. Yet this is what many of us do when charting the course of our own lives. It is impossible to expect great things if you do not plan out how to get them. Few successful people were successful by accident or just got lucky.

They had goals, and then they planned out how to achieve them. This is the true essence of organization, and it requires that you define what success means to you. It might not mean changing the world, having millions of friends or making billions of dollars. That's okay—just define the end game, so you can steer your boat in the correct direction.

You should have goals in all important areas of your life: health, work and in your social endeavors. These are all dependent on your desires, so it's difficult to get too specific here. For example, a single man might have a social goal of increasing his ability to pick-up women. A married man, on the other hand, might want to better be able to speak and connect with his wife. It's important to mention that neither goal is inherently "right" or "wrong." It is important, however, to have the goal—as this will dictate how each man organizes his respective life.

It's best not to be morally black and white with such matters—the word "pick-up" might raise the hackles of some. But one can work towards such a goal with integrity and honesty—just as a husband can, on the surface, better the relationship with his wife while secretly manipulating her with his newfound silver-tongue. One powerful idea to keep in mind is to ensure that your actions do not bring injury to humanity; leave the world a better place for you having been in it.

Right and wrong, much of the time, are related to *how* you accomplish your goal, rather than *what* your goal happens to be. The thing to remember is that you should allow yourself to choose what's right for you—never allow the moralizing whispers of society to get in your ear and distract you from your path. One common fallacy is that money is "evil"; another myth often repeated is that you must have a "real job" working for a "real employer." Fact of the matter is, however, America rose to prominence on the backs of those who spurred this trend—entrepreneurs and artists who set off alone, with different goals. Not everyone wants to be an entrepreneur, nor should everyone (or even most) strive to be. But had Edison, Steve Jobs and Jimi Hendrix become bankers or retail clerks, I suspect the world would have been far, far worse off for it.

Each man had a clear goal—Edison to invent, Steve Jobs to revolutionize computing, Jimi Hendrix to change the guitar. And while there is little doubt that their level of organization differed from there on out, you'll see time and again that, if you desire a good life, you must plan to some degree. This varies from person to person; often those who are more spontaneous or like to "go with the flow" are resistant to any and all planning. They feel it will shackle their creative spirit and be a fruitless endeavor.

This misconception stems from overzealous organizational texts that suggest you implement wildly detailed and obsessive principles. The truth is, point-by-point planning and organization is right for only a select few individuals. There are some who thrive in hyper-organized environments; others thrive on the verge chaos.

Most will, however, fall somewhere in the middle—benefiting from some organization, but also enjoying a modicum of spontaneity in their day-to-day lives. The reason most find it difficult to maintain organization is quite simple: they are trying to apply principles that are incongruent with their personality.

You can, to some extent, change pieces of who you are. But this change will always resemble evolution, rather than a completely new species. Just as apes and humans possess a slew of common characteristics, you too will share many things in common with your former, less advanced self. If you're easily distracted, like to take constant action, and tend to address problems as they arise, it is unrealistic and foolish to plan your day step-by-step. This neither plays to your strengths nor will result in any form of long-term success.

Do not fall prey to gurus and organizational blogs that hop up and down and tell you *this is the only way*. Those are lies and misconceptions. These people are trying to sell you something or convince themselves of their own brilliance and importance; they do not have *your* interests at heart. You should not feel guilty about being somewhat disorganized—so long as it is consistent with your character.

However, it is best to reiterate that certain principles are non-negotiable, the hallmark of almost every successful person on the planet. Unless you are extraordinarily unusual—and while most of us believe this ardently, the truth is generally otherwise—then you would be best served by applying these ideas to your own life. How granular and obsessive you get is up to you. You will find all these principles within chapter two; ignore and disregard them only after significant experimentation proves they do not apply to you.

To that end, I invite you on a two month challenge. While it is commonly misreported that a habit takes twenty-one days to cement itself, I'd suspect that most of you have discovered anecdotally that this is not the case. In fact, scientists have now discovered that all those new neural connections and pathways take around sixty to sixty-six days to "overwrite" your previous programming. After that, you'll be on autopilot; during these two months, however, you'll need to exercise a lot of conscious effort and willpower if you want to change your organizational mindset.

To start our journey, we'll begin by outlining the fundamental principles of organization. From there, we'll get into a little motivation and some down in the trenches advice, for when things become inevitably difficult. But be sure to focus most of your attention on the principles, for it is these that will never change, and are most likely to take you wherever it is you most desire.

9 Organizing Principles

“The bright road seems dark, the road forward seems retreat, the level road seems rough.”

-from Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching

Everything you want to accomplish in life is fairly simple to obtain; it’s just not easy. No doubt you’ve heard that refrain before—but the reason I repeat it now, at the start of this chapter, is because it rings true. Humans have a remarkable ability to break a problem down into its component parts. It is in executing these steps in succession where we often falter—because taking action and doing the work is hard. Our bodies and minds are primed to be lazy as an energy-saving survival mechanism. Genetics simply does not understand that the modern world affords us the luxury of refrigerators. As such, finding shortcuts, lounging about and other common human tendencies were, in fact, crucial to our survival.

It is ironic, then, that those very same traits that allowed us to survive the dusty savannah and snowy tundra put us at a significant disadvantage in the 21st century. To thrive now requires us to short-circuit much of this genetic hardwiring and force logic to triumph over biology.

To that end, organization is focused on one thing: creating new, good habits to replace those holding us back.

Let’s talk about these key principles, then.

End Goals

Set goals.

Don't let others dictate your goals. Don't let books dictate them. Don't let movies—well, you get the idea. These belong to you, and only you may determine them. It is inevitable that others will scoff, snort or belittle your goals. Some may support you. Regardless, you must choose the end game that fits your life.

Some people want a lot of money; some people live without much at all happily.

Some people want immaculate homes; others are more comfortable with a little disorder.

What's important is that your actions are aligned with your goals. If you're a person who thrives in a clean environment, don't let the dishes pile up and make sure you're not living amidst thirty bags of trash. Know yourself, know what you want, then plan and act accordingly.

Simple—but it's not easy.

Routine & Habit

If your goal is the destination, then your routine is the vehicle that gets you there. If you have a bad routine, one that breaks down and veers off course constantly, then it'll take longer to get to your goal. Or, your routine might leave you stranded out in the desert, miles away from where you wanted to go.

Extended metaphors aside, after setting a goal, the only way to reach it is to evaluate and change your routine. Simply put, if you're not getting the results you want from life, your routine is the number one culprit. A routine can best be defined as a set of good or bad habits. Just as a car requires gas, an engine, wheels and many component parts to run correctly, so too does a good routine consist of many prudent habits working in concert.

Setting a routine sounds like a big, scary process, but I have a little bit of good (or alarming) news for you: your entire life is already dictated by routine. You get up at a certain time, you eat a specific breakfast, you take the same route to work. When you get in, you probably have something you always do first—maybe talk with Bill, check your email, or spend some time at the coffee machine.

This carries on through your whole day. It's important to point out that no one, no matter how disorganized and messy their life may seem, has a completely negative routine. Likewise, it's impossible to have a life completely free of vice or bad habits. You do, however, want the scales tipped in the direction of *good* habits, as these will form a routine that will take you to your ultimate destination.

A routine, by its very nature, is subconscious. This is a biological mechanism that saves energy. Thinking is a very energy intensive activity; your brain, while comprising less than 2% of the average human's body weight, is responsible for an incredible 20% of its energy use. Using our conscious mind is such an intense activity, in fact, that it would take a computer larger than the size of a city block—with a dedicated power grid—to theoretically simulate its cognitive functionality.

In short, your brain is a power hungry computation machine, and the uncertain nature of early survival made it untenable to always have it switched on. Enter routine, and the habits that yours consists of. These are all automatic processes—you don't debate taking a shower in the morning, you just do it. This little task subsequently doesn't take a great amount of energy or willpower. Everything is taken care of by the subconscious, allowing your logical mind to attend to more urgent and compelling matters.

Given the subconscious nature of habit and routine, it's unlikely that you've taken a hard look at how you're spending your time. Thus, we must start with a self-evaluation. Take your goal, and then examine the routines and habits associated with that task.

For example, if your goal is to have a clean home, then you must consciously examine your actions that make it messy. Do you throw your keys and wallet around anywhere when you get home? Allow the mail to pile up? Toss coins on the nightstand or counter? Take stock of your habits, good or bad, and write them down in a comprehensive list.

Do this for about a week, and then identify the primary culprits. Maybe you're pretty good at keeping things organized, but everything breaks down because of your tendency to cook big meals. There are many solutions to this habit. If you don't enjoy cooking, the easiest might be to cook simpler things. If you do enjoy cooking, then it could be soaking the pans right after you're finished, getting new cleaning products, buying a new dishwasher or something else.

Not all habits and routines require a lot of time to rewire—some can be solved by technology or simple adjustments. Those that are more ingrained, however, will take two months or more to completely change—and the threat of relapse, so to speak, remains after that for some time. If you find yourself edging back towards a bad habit, understand that this is a normal cognitive process and simply adjust back. No one said this would be easy; change, however, is always fairly simple, should you choose to step back and analyze the situation at hand.

Once you have your list of the primary parts of your routine keeping you from your goal, choose the top one—or the easiest one, whichever you'd like—and start figuring out how to fix it. Not tomorrow. Not tonight. Right at that very moment. Start taking action immediately. Don't worry about the rest of your habits; don't try to change everything at once. Those who try to get rich, get in shape, get the girl and get it all at once often fail.

Sizable change requires a large amount of focus and discipline. Identify your primary goal at the moment, identify your worst habit keeping you from said goal, then start. Ignore everything else for now and leave it as is. In one year, you can fix six huge things, which *will* completely change your life. Or you can succumb to bursts of inspiration and instant fixes, only to remain disappointed when you take stock at the end of the year.

The decision is yours. As I've mentioned already, right and wrong are ultimately up to you.

Write it Down (or Don't Do It)

To reach your goals, you must *track* your goals. As Peter Drucker famously wrote, *what gets measure gets managed*. Writing your goals and routine down keeps you accountable. Some people go a step further and keep a journal that logs their progress, setbacks, daily actions and other information regarding their journey (note that journey and journal share the same Latin root, which means *day*—we all get organized one step at a time).

You can choose to be as granular or as broad as you wish. A lot of people suggest keeping detailed and organized lists, but research has found that these are often inefficient, promote procrastination and result in too much busy work.

Instead of creating lengthy to-do lists filled with a crushing number of annoying and useless tasks, keep your daily actions to a stringent minimum. Your true aim should be to whittle what you do down to the most important tasks that give you the greatest results. Note that these results might not be immediate; cleaning one drawer of your dresser might be important to you, but it won't make your house immaculate overnight. Go as fast or as slow as you need to be.

The rationale behind writing things down and tracking progress is simple: it keeps you honest and provides an inarguable record of your consistency (or lack thereof). Honest feedback is invaluable for self-improvement—a written record provides such a resource.

To take writing things down further, you can also pull quotes, themes and other important pieces of information from books, people and other sources that you encounter. There are plenty of note taking methods available to you, from a simple spiral notebook and pen to something more advanced like Evernote. How much and where you organize your important information is entirely up to your own preference, and each has its own benefits.

Evernote, for example, is easily searchable, but there is research—both anecdotal and scientific—that suggests the process of physically writing something down forms a firmer impression in our memory than simply copying and pasting.

We are inundated with a constant deluge of useless information and tasks. Writing down only what's important—and revising our system over time, as we better learn what is and isn't crucial—is the only way to cut through the endless flow of information.

To that end, grab a notebook or a phone app and write down your top three important tasks. In a separate notebook, write down the top three most interesting and pertinent things you learned today.

If you only have one thing to do to accomplish your goal today, list one. If you have five, list three. This will keep you focused on what's really important, those actions that will give you the greatest return on your time investment. Don't be fooled into the fallacy that more complexity or doing more stuff is better. It isn't. A few simple things done correctly will give you far greater results than a hoard of tricks implemented in haphazard and inconsistent fashion.

Do It Now

Remember those things that we didn't write down?

Maybe a couple of them really were crucial. Chances are that at least a few of them were simple. The trick, then, is to get them right out of the way fast. If something takes five minutes or less, do it right away. Don't interrupt your current task (multi-tasking, unsurprisingly, has proven to reduce productivity by almost 25%), but once it's done, address any smaller tasks. These things, by themselves, are not intimidating, but in aggregate, they will look seemingly impossible.

Remember that you need to focus on the important things—your main tasks. A daunting to-do list is often a list left undone. The culprit is generally adding too many “do it now” tasks. Together all these small tasks become a giant, unappealing mess of responsibilities. When done immediately, they don't even interrupt your day—you won't even notice them. They'll just disappear into thin air.

Of course, there's no magic—by repeatedly clearing your plate, you free up massive amounts of mental energy to focus and plan the tasks that actually matter. Things like taking out the garbage or wiping up a spill shouldn't go on a list. Answering an email shouldn't, either. Don't put things off; as the old saying goes, don't leave until tomorrow what you can do to today.

Take it a step further and don't leave for the afternoon what you can do right now, in the morning.

Delegate

For those used to doing it all, delegate can seem like a dirty or foreign word. We pride ourselves on doing everything ourselves, our own way—even if it kills us. Or, dramatic flair aside, it just leaves us ineffective and without any energy.

Get your family members and friends to chip in every once in a while. Don't always do the laundry; this is a simple task that your children or yes, even your spouse can successfully complete. Swap days of driving to school with a neighbor—this will free up two or three mornings a week to either sleep in for a few extra minutes or attack a long-term project you've been itching to start.

Make dinner a family endeavor—kids love to help out, and you can make it fun.

Those without children or significant others aren't left out to dry, either—services like TaskRabbit and Craigslist (in the United States) allow you to find maids, grocery shoppers and other people willing to do your errands for around \$15/hr. If you make vastly more than that, it's a no-brainer—delegate the task and free yourself up for more lucrative endeavors.

If some voice protests within your head, remind yourself that the world is fueled by specialization. For proof, all that you must do is look around your home. What there did you make? Almost nothing—or perhaps even nothing at all. So don't be ashamed about handing off a task to someone else with more time or energy on their hands. That's the way of the modern world—either adapt, or be exhausted all the time with an endless deluge of chores.

Stick With It

We've discussed the myth of the three week habit, and why so many fail to rewire their brains (and subsequently change their lives for the better). The hardest part in organizing your life is not in understanding the concepts. As you've probably guessed by now, the concepts are simple. Perhaps you've even experimented with them before—only to fail.

The problem usually lies within the execution. On paper, and for the first few days, we're highly motivated to make a change. We fuel our efforts on adrenaline and optimism, sure that our lives will soon noticeably change for the better.

This is true, but our definition of “soon” is a little bit suspect. We've been conditioned by the modern world to seek immediate results; as such, when after a week our lives are still pretty messy, we despair and think that we're missing a secret. We give up and search for another book, blog or manual of tricks that will provide us with the “one true answer.”

The big secret in life is pretty much that no such Holy Grail exists. This fact is both relieving and frightening, for in its stead lies a whole big pile of unsexy work. And, unfortunately, you're going to have to grind a little bit to see real improvement.

No one particularly likes the grind—that's why we have so many “hacks” and instant fixes. I don't want to knock all of these, as some of them are pretty cool and do provide instant improvement. But the bulk of your organizational evolutionary growth will be sticking ardently to the principles within this section: write down key tasks, reshape your routine one habit at a time, strive to become a little bit better each day. The principles might seem silly, time-consuming or otherwise arbitrary, but they are here for one reason: if you have faith in them, they will work.

Sticking with something is largely a product of showing up when you don't want to. This is what separates those who succeed from those who fail. There will always be times when it is more convenient to quit, or self-

doubt encroaches upon you. Progress on a daily basis is slow, imperceptible. It is your job, then, to employ your rational mind and counteract such sirens' calls with stone cold logic.

Yes, you're tired.

Yes, you're bored.

Yes, it seems like nothing is working.

But you're going to stick with it, because the results, when they finally do arrive, will be worth it beyond whatever energy and sweat you had to put in.

Give it a Home

This principle applies to oft-used objects that have a tendency to wind up all over the house. Such chaos wastes time and brings unnecessary disorder into your life. You wouldn't put the silverware in the sock drawer, right?

Then why do so many of us not have a designated place for our keys, wallet, coins, receipts, mail and other important items that we might need to find at a moment's notice? The easiest way to put this principle into practice is to commit to creating a designated place for *everything* in your house. The dog gets a bin for his stuff. There's a magazine rack. A smartphone charging station.

You get the idea—how you implement it, obviously, is up to your preferences and needs. Just make sure that you form a habit of putting your stuff in the correct place. Then, like going to the sock drawer or the silverware tray, you'll always know where to look—and won't come up empty-handed when you have to rush out the door.

Get Rid of It

Most of us have too much stuff. Most of us, too, are guilty of carrying the weight of our past within our minds. While this isn't a philosophical principle per se, I figured that notion was worth a mention so long as we're on the topic of letting go.

Life is limited—you only have time for so much, even if you live for a hundred years. Shouldn't it be focused on things and memories that matter the most to us?

The majority of disorder and clutter scattered about our lives result from a simple refusal to let things go. We'll just start with physical stuff, since the topic of mentally letting go could take up an entire wall of books and still not give you a definitive answer.

The rule, then, is simple: if you haven't used something in a year, throw it out. Donate it. Just make sure you get rid of it. Don't worry about the cost; whatever you paid for it is known as a sunk cost. That money is long gone. If something isn't enhancing your existence, you'd do best to cut ties with it.

Embracing this principle with consumer goods acts as a bridge to other unhealthy ties that we should have long ago severed: relationships, ideas, beliefs and other things that we know are useless, but can't let go of because of the passage of too much time. Just because something is old or yours doesn't make it valuable or right.

Get rid of the things that aren't adding value to your life. Those will be easy to identify, but hard to jettison. You'll have excuses about how you'll use an item tomorrow, or how it might come in handy. Ignore these fallacious arguments and rid yourself of this dead weight. Then, when it comes to the more difficult and emotional decisions—those items and things that add some value, but not enough to be worth your energy—you'll have a good foundation of willpower upon which you can draw.

Remember, you don't want to even spend your time in life doing *decent* things. Even the okay or slightly above average is a waste of time if you can attain the spectacular. Don't be afraid to let things go and get rid of things. Worst case scenario, anything you lose—at least if it's an object—can be replaced for a nominal cost.

Control, Chaos and the Inevitability of Imperfection

Since we just touched upon the topic of letting go of stubborn belongings and beliefs, I feel it's also an appropriate time to address perfectionism. To put it bluntly, the pursuit of perfection is a fool's errand that will drive you up the wall. It will not enhance your life, nor increase the quality of your output.

People confuse perfectionism with being in control; if you strive for an immaculate home, for example, the belief goes that you will reach out and control the situation. Such a lofty goal requires discipline and great dedication. But, in the end, usually such a destination becomes an obsession, and winds up controlling *you* at the expense of your happiness.

You should, however, make a concerted effort to remain in control of your surroundings. Never allow technology and modern convenience to become your master. At the risk of sounding like an old man telling you about how he walked eighty miles to school in the snow, I'll also say that modernity, while nice, can paradoxically leave us helpless. While we believe that we have greater control over our world because of magical technologies like email, smartphones and the internet, the truth is often far more depressing. How many of your friends are helpless when their internet goes down, left without entertainment or the ability to find any knowledge? Use your things as a tool, not a crutch, and always be developing your skills—you might never know when you'll need them.

Control can quickly become obsessive, however, and lead to the pursuit of organizational perfection. Instead of being beneficial, an overemphasis on perfection—the perfectly organized closet, the perfect schedule, master efficiency in all tasks—leads to paralysis and a split between the logical and emotional mind. Our emotions, seeing beautiful homes within the pages of glossy magazines, clamor for such an impossibility. Our logical functions, however, know that such photographs are an illusion.

As such, this dichotomy leads to inaction and anguish, as our brain pulls us in two conflicting directions simultaneously.

Things will be messy. Chaos and disorder are facts of life that you will never overcome. There will always be misplaced toys, scheduling conflicts, emergencies and other surprises that throw us for a loop. The key, then, is to expect for such things to go wrong, rather than planning for a world that can never be.

It is naturally frustrating to sit down to a task and then be interrupted. If we have something penciled in for a specific time and it does not get done, we have seemingly failed. But this is an incorrect assumption and unnecessary emotional judgment on ourselves. All we must do to avoid such self-criticism is to acknowledge the inherent randomness and unpredictability of the universe.

To be less metaphysical: rather than getting upset when your child spills an entire bowl of pasta on the new white carpet, plan for such contingencies. Don't get a white carpet. Eat in the kitchen. Invest in a steam cleaner and stain removers. These solutions are perhaps not as ideal as no spill at all—but children are messy, and you must accept reality, not live in a fantasy world.

Ultimately, when battling against the endless tide of dirty dishes, unorganized drawers and other things that threaten our lives with disorder, you must simply commit to doing your best. This is basic advice, perhaps outworn by this point, but it is nevertheless sound. Take action, adhere to the principles, and organize your life as best you can. It will never be perfect, but with luck, it will improve greatly.

And besides, perfectionism is boring anyway—right?

Wrapping Your Mind Around Everything

“What you HABITUALLY THINK largely determines what you will ultimately become.”

—Bruce Lee

Now that we’ve discussed some basic organizing principles, it’s time to discuss the “inner game” of organization. While we’ve touched on some of the mental aspects in the previous sections, this chapter is all about adopting a mindset that allows you to succeed. Remember from the introduction: organization is not the end goal. Rather, it is a means to an end—that end being a fulfilling and satisfying existence.

The origin of this satisfaction, unsurprisingly, comes from within our own minds. If this is all getting a little too philosophical, let’s break down what I mean—starting with how to get in the zone.

Getting Into the Zone

Everyone who's watched a few minutes of sports has no doubt heard the term "in the zone." It usually comes up when a player has made a number of awesome plays in rapid succession, torching the other team and seemingly transcending his own talent. This concept might seem far from the comparatively mundane and uncompetitive world of organizing—but you'd be wrong. Good organization facilitates your own ability to enter the zone in the endeavors that matter most to you.

Being in the zone is also known as being in flow—a state of intense concentration where time almost ceases to exist, leaving only you and the task at hand. You've no doubt experienced this within your own life at some point; perhaps at work, where you were particularly engaged in a project, only to find that four hours had passed since you last glanced at the clock. The feeling is commonly triggered by playing video games, wherein the player allows his subconscious to take over to achieve spectacular scores and results.

This is also where the term "go with the flow" comes from. Like traveling down a river with a firm but gentle current, you are carried to your destination without effort, hardship or perceived difficulty.

The subconscious mind is responsible for powering flow, which has made the state somewhat tricky to nail down and even harder to summon at will. This section, alas, offers few tips for instantly flipping a switch to feel this awesome sense of control and mastery. Instead, it offers some suggestions for cultivating a mental environment conducive to getting in the zone. Naturally, this doesn't mean you'll enjoy the state constantly—even for the highest of performers, the zone is a rare thing indeed.

But even adopting these ideas will pay huge dividends for your conscious waking mind.

In essence, the goal of organization is simple: strip away the extraneous and leave only the essential. Focusing on the essential allows our mental

capacities to ramp up and fully devote themselves to the most pressing problems at hand.

Imagine, if you will, a battery split between twenty different light bulbs. For those who have seen such a phenomenon, the light bulbs will be dim, flicker, thirsty for power but unable to get it. Begin to remove light bulbs from the equation, and the light in the remaining ones gets brighter. Pare it down to one or two, and you are left with a brilliantly lit bulb that illuminates the entire room—where before twenty semi-lit bulbs could barely cut through a few feet of shadow.

If your brain is the battery in this metaphor, then the bulbs are all the tasks you are powering with its mental energy. The metaphor is clear: your energy store powers are limited, and best used to do one thing well, rather than twenty tasks poorly. By better organizing the light bulbs in the metaphor, we massively increased the effectiveness of the power source.

An organized life produces an efficient, well-kept mind. If you are surrounded by constant and overwhelming disorder, this is often a reflection of your mental state and level of focus. The outside is a physical manifestation of our own lack of internal organization and discipline. Our thoughts are jumbled, our goals undefined.

Physical clutter gets most of the focus in books, but it is truly mental clutter that has a debilitating effect on our lives. The reason, then, to organize our homes—the physical—as well as our tasks—the mental—is simple.

The two facets have a reciprocal effect on each other, engendering a situation that allows us to more easily experience this fabled feeling of flow. Our brains take in stimuli from the outside environment; even a well-maintained and organized mind will find it difficult to run at full capacity in a chaotic environment. Think of times when you've attempted to read on an airplane full of crying babies, smooching couples, blaring tablets and occasional turbulence. Despite your best intentions and greatest efforts, this disorganized environment will greatly reduce your own cognitive capacity.

Likewise, a messy mind will produce a messy environment. Without a clear focus, it is inevitable that relatively easy to address tasks like junk mail, dishes and stray clothing will be left ignored. If you are unsure what you want, and have less than pinpoint control of your mind, the physical state of your home is the first place it will show up.

Thus, the best way to get in the zone is to take rapid action and address underlying causes of chaos within your own life. If that means your home, then tackle it with abandon. If there have been ten things hanging over your head for weeks, knock them all out in one day. The latter is a cool trick and fun game to play with yourself—take what you think will cost you days or weeks, and try to cram it all into a single day.

This game is based on Parkinson's Law, a tongue-in-cheek theorem that suggests a task grows or shrinks to fill its allotted time. In other words, if you give yourself two weeks to address these “clutter” tasks, it'll take that long—if they get done at all. Give yourself two hours, and you'll be sure it's pretty much impossible.

And then you'll be amazed when everything gets done in 90 minutes.

Again, the faster you take action, the faster you can clear your mental and physical clutter away, leaving you with a well-oiled mind and supportive environment. Before the next section begins, however, it's important to remember, as the great basketball coach John Wooden often said, to “be quick, but don't hurry.”

Keep Stress to a Minimum

Suggesting that you keep stress to a minimum probably might sound like I'm telling you not to get scared when the villain pops out of a dark corner in a horror movie. Both events, by their very nature, are surprising and controlled by emotion, rather than logic. Stress is a reaction, and not a consciously controlled one.

It can, however, be planned for—and since this is a book about organization, we'll talk a little about just how to do that. Like most everything else, it's pretty darn simple, but it isn't too easy—if it was, there would be a lot more happy people in the world.

Stress is often a production of two things: expectation and procrastination. Addressing the first issue, we often have big goals that we fail to reach. This is a source of stress. I'm not saying don't have big goals—you should, because they're motivating. Instead, as you fail and make mistakes, you must recalibrate your future goals, factoring in imperfections, chaos and your own personal quirks. In the beginning, we tend to make absolute best case scenario goals—if a tiny thing goes wrong, like the cat tips over her water dish, it throws off our minute-by-minute precision.

Thus the first part in reducing stress is easy: reduce unrealistic expectations in your life. Understand that instant results are a marketing gimmick reserved for use by charlatans; the airbrushed photos in magazines are film sets; the seemingly perfect lives of others are often just a façade put on for the world.

This is not meant to seem cynical or disgruntled; far from it. In fact, acknowledging the world's tendency to exaggerate the truth will stave off severe disappointment, stress and other sources of mental woe. If you understand how the world really works, you will not be seduced by enticing surface appearances. Knowing the truth will, of course, not make you immune; it will merely give you the correct tools with which to defend yourself.

The second part of the equation is to address procrastination. I've already made the suggestion to take immediate action as much as possible, but this can be a difficult endeavor for some. Thus, it would be wise to analyze the underlying cause of the procrastination. Most assume that a procrastinating individual is merely lazy. While this may sometimes be the case, often the culprit is far different—fear being the most likely suspect.

We are often afraid that our best efforts at organizing and rebooting our lives will fail, leaving us right back where we started. Energy, as mentioned before, is a precious resource, and expending much of it on a potentially fruitless endeavor makes our heart pound and teeth grind. The only problem, of course, is that the fear isn't real—there is no real consequence of failure, given the amenities and technology featured in the modern world. Should one method of organization fail, we can simply try a new system in a few months that is better suited to our makeup.

Using such logical arguments can defuse your fear enough to take initial action. Once you've obtained a little bit of inertia, progress tends to snowball. This works both ways, however—always bear in mind Newton's first law: an object in motion remains in motion unless acted upon by an outside force; the same is true of an object at rest.

Momentum, either negative or positive, is difficult to halt once it gets rolling. Short-circuit fear with logic for just a moment, and you will stop procrastinating and be able to push yourself towards a positive string of actions.

A final essential stress-managing tool is to break large tasks into small, easily winnable ones. The goal is not to browbeat or punish yourself into submission for your previous lack of organization. This isn't meant to be penance, but too often we seem to treat it that way, demanding impossible standards from ourselves as a way of making up for our past laxness. There's nothing you can do about the past; just be consistent in the present and try to win each hour and each day.

Avoiding Problems (Give it a Home)

I suppose this could've been discussed during the stress section, as unnecessary problems often trigger unwanted spikes in cortisol. However, this area of stress management is important enough that I think it deserves its own special consideration.

In healthcare, it's far easier to prevent a disease than to treat one after years of ill-fated decisions. The same is true in life; it is imperative that an engineer performs the correct structural analysis before a building is erected. This preventative measure allows catastrophe to be avoided; if the building falls down, it is going to be impossible to reassemble the pieces.

The lesson here, unsurprisingly, is to plan for potential problems and then figure out solutions that nullify them completely before they ever even manifest themselves. While our brains are built to solve puzzles, too many immediate problems will overwhelm our energy stores and create massive stress and fatigue. Remember the light bulb and the battery: we must save our mental power for those things that really matter.

One such way of saving power and short-circuiting problems is the implementation of a routine. A solid routine gives us fewer decisions to make and keeps us on the correct path with little thought. An extension of this idea is the concept of giving all your important, oft-used belongings "a home." If you know where your objects live, then you won't waste valuable time trying to find them. This simple practice eliminates a significant number of problems we encounter around the household.

A more general mindset for avoiding trouble is to simply imagine hardship. What's the worst case scenario that will happen if all your plans and organization efforts fail? Don't worry about tempting fate—this is a silly, antiquated notion that has no welcome place in a logical person's mind. Not planning for hardship is incredibly foolish and stupid, since difficulties will befall us all. It is only those problems which surprise us that give us significant grief—those that have planned for challenges will

invariably equip themselves with the numerous tools and skills necessary to vanquish them.

The key advantage of our brains over other living creatures is our far superior simulation abilities. We can predict that, should we eat too many massive sandwiches long-term, we will gain weight and hurt our health. A dog, on the other hand, will eat these sandwiches until he becomes sick and vomits on our rug. That is why you're his master, instead of the other way around.

Be your own master, then, and improve your imagination and ability to model the future. It will be imperfect—and it's best to examine a range of predictions, instead of some specific scenario—but the idea is to plan for contingencies and make them a part of your daily organizational process.

One final idea to leave you with: make organizing convenient. In other words, don't make organization *the problem*. As I said earlier, too often we seem to use it as penance or a way to discipline ourselves for past failures. This will only result in more disorder. Make organizing as easy and fluid a process as possible—remember that organization is simply a tool, and *you* must always remain in control of your tools.

Celebrate Your Small Victories

We've talked about the importance of momentum; this idea plays right into that and helps us build up speed in the early stages of our efforts. After set intervals—organizing a room, crafting a list of goals, actually accomplishing a goal and so forth—allow yourself a break. Take a few moments to examine the fruits of your labor and feel the satisfaction wash over you.

This is greatly beneficial, so long as you don't go overboard and allow yourself to rest on your laurels. But a little break and reward can be a great incentive to getting something done. Don't feel the need to do everything at once; while the burst method of consolidating week or month-long tasks into a span of days was discussed earlier, don't feel bound by such ideas. Chipping away consistently will work wonderfully, and prevent the burnout often associated with other methods.

Little victories give you a psychological boost—winning is always much more fun than losing. To that end, if you're staring a large series of tasks in the face, you might want to begin with the easiest. Knock it out, and you'll get on a little bit of a roll. The next biggest won't look so daunting. Repeat until everything's taken care of. And make sure you give yourself credit for fixing things along the way, even if you created the mess first. No use dwelling in the past or lamenting old mistakes. Live in the present and congratulate yourself for having the fortitude to work through a sizable challenge.

Starting small also gives you the benefit of building experience through time. There is no way you'll know everything about living an organized life—particularly the framework that's best suited to *you*—from day one. Relax a little, understand that this is an iterative process with many phases and slow patches, and you'll be more willing to tackle things when progress seems almost minimal. Use the slow pace and victories as a way to experiment and tweak your process until you have an efficient

organizational mindset that allows you to eliminate the biggest of issues with relative simplicity.

The Task Ahead – Practical Advice for Common Situations

“To be wronged or robbed is nothing unless you continue to remember it.”

—Confucius

Roadblocks and traffic jams, it seems, are inextricable parts of modern life. It comes as no surprise, then, that there are some common stumbling points that almost all organizers encounter at some point or another. Should you believe that you are the first to ever encounter such difficulties, your motivation might give way. Don't allow this to happen—understand that any challenges or obstacles in your way have been surmounted by hundreds of others.

Problems are inevitable. It is best to accept that, rather than wallow in our misfortune.

In the interest of practicing preventive care, the most practical advice I can give is this: identify the areas of your life that are most painful, causing you the most grief. Write them down. This will differ for everyone; don't allow someone else to tell you that your problems aren't “real” or don't matter. Everything is obviously a matter of degree; depression is terrible, but it's far less horrible than starving to death in a dirty alley. This, however, doesn't offer the depression sufferer any practical guidance or way out of their problem—it only makes a bad situation worse.

While this book isn't about treating mental illness, disorganization and a lack of goals often contribute to anxiety, stress and other forms of mental fatigue that detract greatly from your well-being and enjoyment of life. See what areas of your life could benefit from organizing. Maybe your early morning routine is a major source of stress and unhappiness—you constantly hurry to work, curse traffic and worry about being fired for tardiness. This makes you irritable, snappy at your wife, not present with friends and generally miserable.

There are a number of ways to reorganize your life to fix this problem, ranging from the drastic to the miniscule. On the larger end, you could get a new job—or learn to work from home, thus completely reorganizing your workplace.

Or you could just place your keys, wallet, parking pass and other necessities on a table next to the door. Lay out a fresh pressed shirt and blazer the night before. Take a look at traffic patterns in the area for the past few months to get an idea of when the best time to leave might be.

Whatever you choose, organization is the thread that will stitch your life together and make it hold. Without it, you'll unravel and be set adrift.

Let's talk about some common situations, then, so that doesn't happen.

The Home and the Art of Decluttering

Decluttering your home is often the most liberating and frustrating place to start. Much of our identity is tied up within our residence, particularly if we earned it through years of prudent saving, hard work and diligent attention. To many, the home is an extension of our own being—the old cliché *home is where the heart is* didn't come out of nowhere, after all.

What I advocate is daily decluttering. Spring clinging is a nice concept, and I'm sure it creates a bump in retail sales for mops, bins and other cleaning supplies. But wouldn't it be nicer to enjoy a clean home year round, with less of a Herculean effort?

The simplest way to begin decluttering is to jettison all the items you haven't used in a year. Once that's done, start examining your spending practices. Not only will this save you money, but it will also save you space and mental energy. If you have an object that already performs a task, getting the newest whiz-bang model is often superfluous and a negative addition. Choose upgrades and new items based on your strongest passions and largest needs—those products that only seem “kind of cool” need to be left on the store shelf.

Only keep and purchase items that give you significant value.

Instead of having boxes of unlabeled miscellaneous stuff, get rid of the random (does anyone need fifteen HDMI cables?) and then create a home for the rest. If finding specific places for everything is too tricky and makes your brain want to shut down, designate a spot for the essentials. Have a tray or dish by the door for your keys, change and wallet; set aside a chair or hanger in the bedroom for your work clothes. Place these items in the same location every day without fail.

Meal plans are tricky to organize, particularly if you work long hours. Map out your meals before you go grocery shopping, then buy what you need and tack the daily plan to your wall. That way, on Monday, you know

you have the ingredients to make chicken parm, and you know exactly what you're eating—no big decision required.

For paperwork, consider a colored folder system that corresponds to different important areas. Have one for finances, one for correspondence with family/friends and so forth. This same folder system can be applied to the virtual realm too, in organizing your computer's hard drive as well as your email. Simply make folders for the most important areas in your life, then only keep the most important, crucial messages/files from those respective areas.

Cleaning can be greatly reduced by either delegation—hiring a maid—or daily maintenance. A daily wipe down of the counter tops and fridge, a weekly vacuum session in areas that don't need it and so forth can help keep disorder at bay.

Disorder in your house is usually just a bunch of little gremlins—there is rarely some *massive* problem that is ruining the *feng shui* of the premises. Applying a combination of the “do it now” principle (e.g. tossing out junk mail instead of letting it fester on the table) and “give it a home” tip will be key to your organizing success. Beat back the tides of chaos each day by organizing keeping these ideas in mind and you'll soon find your house whipped into quite respectable shape.

Work

Effective work organization have already been discussed at length in previous sections. The same ideas that apply to your personal goal-setting endeavors will help you become a more efficient and productive worker. By maintaining a schedule, diary and clear daily plan, you can drastically cut down on work-related stress and increase the quality of your work. A diary of your actions—both effective and ineffective—can be a valuable source of feedback that can in turn be used to improve your future decision making.

Social

We are, at our cores, all social beings to some extent; as such, the benefits of organization often manifest themselves the most during our interactions with friends, family and other human beings. Having a clear purpose in life and reducing our stress allows us to devote more of our attention to important people, rather than clutter and BS tasks that will yield no foreseeable dividends.

Plan ahead so that you can actually enjoy these moments. During such interactions, don't be obsessed with organizational principles and your goals—allow these to take a back seat, and simply enjoy the company of others on a different and perhaps even more interesting path than your own.

In addition to being more present with your friends, being organized will have the simple benefit of actually allowing you to hang out with them in the first place. If you're always scrambling from one thing to another, on the verge of being buried by an avalanche of disorder, then you're not going to have any time or energy to devote to social endeavors.

This has a cyclical effect that results in a downward spiral. No matter how introverted you happen to be, you still require some amount of interaction with others. There's no way around this; it's part of our genetic code. Don't allow negative momentum to take over. Organize your work and home lives so that you can enjoy a little recreation time now and again.

Remember the key words: organization is a means to the life you want, not the end itself.

And we all want friends.

In Conclusion

“You must learn early on to endure the hours of practice and drudgery, knowing that in the end all that time will translate into a higher pleasure—mastery of a craft and of yourself.”

—from *The 50th Law* by 50 Cent & Robert Greene

Before we bid adieu, a brief review of everything covered is probably in order. This is keeping with the tenets of this book—organization should work for you, rather than against you. And what better way of showcasing its powers than to give you a handy list of key concepts covered over the past swath of pages? Maybe a few of you like to reread books over and over again—most of us, however, prefer to move on to new experiences. As such, to save you time, the list below serves as an effective summary of the text.

If you’re game, I’d like to reissue the challenge from the introduction: take a two month organizational challenge. Set a goal, change a habit and start taking action in accordance to some of the principles outlined in this book. You won’t fix everything in your life, but you will see a marked improvement. And momentum, once started, is a difficult beast to stop.

Make sure it’s a friendly beast that has your back, instead of one that threatens to flay you alive every time you wake up.

On goals: have them; write them down; begin with the end in mind and then work your way back to the present. How much you organize your life

to achieve your greatest dreams? Begin to structure your life in the way that is required.

On habit and routine: we are our habits. Our habits are the source of our success and failure. And we are the source of our habits. Good habits will continue just as long as bad ones will. Find which ones are ruining your chances of success, then reorganize your life one habit at a time. Bear in mind that it takes over two months—sixty-six days, scientists say—to reform your neural pathways and truly ingrain a new habit into your mind.

On saving time: if a task is small, do it now. Rapid action leads to rapid results—the faster you can tackle your to do list, the faster you can start living a better life. But don't go too fast; this can lead to burnout, and sloppiness doesn't help you achieve much of anything. Keep lists to a maximum of three key tasks—stick with the essentials. Delegate necessary but simple tasks to others who can help out. Stick with everything and be consistent; if you constantly start and stop, results won't come and you'll give up. You need to work long enough to create inertia—this is when real results begin to occur.

On avoiding problems: preventative care will always require far less time and energy (and be less painful) than fixing a problem in the rhythm of life. Daily clutter maintenance can serve to keep many problems at bay—giving your objects a permanent home, for example, is a great way to get things started. Don't pursue perfection; this can quickly become a paralyzing problem that is more harmful than helpful. Imagine a wide range of scenarios, including the worst case one and create a plan that will insulate you from it—this organization technique will make sure you're not caught off guard by sudden challenges.

On the mythical zone: your environment influences your mind and your mind influences your environment. In many ways, the two entities resemble the classic Chinese concept of yin and yang. A disorganized environment will play tricks and wreak havoc on even the most focused of minds; the reverse is also true. Understand this relationship and make sure that both aspects are cared for, so that your mental faculties can focus on crucial tasks.

When all of your energy is devoted to a singular goal, your subconscious mind takes over and your body slips into a state of blissful flow.

On perspective: celebrate small victories, make sure you're always winning instead of losing, and make sure that you always remember that organization is a tool in your mental toolbox—nothing more and nothing less. The end goal of life is production: the production of good relationships, work that we're proud of, and a home that is uniquely our own. Your goals may differ from those just listed—they are merely potential examples, and are not meant to serve as suggestions. Just ensure that your organizational principles remain within your control, and work for you, rather than become a cruel master.

Thank you for reading!

Don't forget the other books in the series:

The Good Living Collection

[Book 1: Beneath the Clutter](#)

[Book 2: The Minimalist Lifestyle](#)

[Book 3: How to Organize Your Life, Mind and Home](#)

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