



The Ups and Downs of Downsizing

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Are the years of your life inversely proportional to the square footage of your lodgings? Most people find that one part of being a senior involves downsizing their home. Downsizing can be stressful, not only because of the myriad of details involved, but also because it's an emotional process. "Your to-do list is usually longer than simply packing and hiring a moving company," says Itzy Neustadt of Silver-Link Solutions, a New Jersey based company which specializes in smoothing this transition process. "In addition to the technical aspects of the move, you need to allow yourself or the person moving time to remember. Belongings all contain memories, and it's natural to want to reflect on those memories," he says.

Why Move?

A variety of reasons come into play when seniors consider downsizing. Some need to move to an assisted living community. Others want to be closer to people and things that they love and need — think family and healthcare services. "We emigrated to Canada because our children were living there," says Leah Lewis. "I knew that if we would ever need medical help, it would be impractical to expect our friends to help out. They weren't getting any younger themselves!"

Some seniors want to end the cleaning, gardening and maintenance that comes with a large house. They're also looking for a home that doesn't have

stairs, steep driveways or other accessibility challenges. "Taking care of our single-family detached house with two floors was becoming challenging," says Sara Leah Kovacs, who lives in Baltimore and works in IT (computer software development) for one of the U.S. federal agencies. "I have a serious vision impairment. Timely snow and ice removal was an issue. There were too many dark 'hiding spaces' in the house, and even if we updated it to make it safe for me, I really did not want to be in a house at this stage of life. I wanted a one-floor condominium apartment, with good building and ground services, good security and a central location. The house had been good for a family of young children. Now the children were all adults and on their own. I needed more space to safely move and fewer things in that space," she says. For Sara Leah, that meant relocating one-and-a-half miles away to a condominium.

For Ben and Felicia Krengel living in Johannesburg, South Africa, the move from a house with a large garden in Rosettenville to an apartment in Norwood near their son was precipitated by several other less-common reasons. "My husband closed his practice as a physician, so we no longer needed the extra office space. In addition, the demographics of the neighborhood had changed, and although we I didn't feel threatened, we were certainly the minori-

ty," says Felicia. To top things off, the shul that the Krengels supported was closing down, as membership waned, and they could no longer easily manage the two-mile walk there and back. It was time to downsize.

Time to Reflect

Once you've made the decision to downsize, you'll need to sort out a lifetime's possessions. Researchers says that there are 300,000 items in the average American home, and that the average American woman owns 30 outfits—one for every day of the month. So if you aren't calling in a professional and are doing the decluttering yourself, do it in bite-sized chunks, and don't over exert yourself. And be prepared for a job that can take several months.

"Our move wasn't typical, because we moved over the space of a year," says Felicia. "Although it was both tiring and expensive to keep two homes, we had plenty of time to think about what we wanted to leave behind and what we wanted to take." With large collections of records, CDs and books, Dr. Krengel needed the time to sort through them all and reflect on what they meant to him.

"When you're moving, you need to make sure that your spouse is on the same page," says their son





Charles. “Although my mother doesn’t hold much by material things and was ready even to give away many items, she was sensitive enough to have the patience to let my father do things at his own pace.”

SilverLink Solutions agrees that the best way to reduce the stress out of downsizing is to take the time to reflect. “People need to talk about their possessions,” says Itzy. “Sometimes they find an item that they haven’t seen in years. They need a listening ear who can play Jewish geography, but still take charge and get the job done. It’s a tricky paradox.”

“After having spent 20 to 40 years of your life in one house, there are a lot of memories,” says Sara Leah. “It’s important to be gentle with yourself. If you’re attached to something that is ‘irrational,’ but won’t cost a large amount of time, money or space to keep, hold on to it. It’s okay to keep odd things. When we cleared out my late parents’ home, we discovered that my father (who had downsized to a small condo after my mother’s passing) had kept the arm cast from my then-two-year-old baby sister. If you’ve been in house a long time, unless you’re well-organized and you declutter regularly, you’ll probably find tax returns from 1979!”

Time to Sort

One of the first decisions that you’ll have to make is about furniture. Study the floor plan of your new home and do a walk-through with a tape measure to get a feel for where you’ll put your tables, chairs and sofas. You won’t need high risers and dressers for five bedrooms if you’re moving into a three-bedroom condo. But when it comes to

your own beds, try to move that across. “People are most attached to their beds,” says Itzy.

After you’ve dealt with the big items, it’s time to sweat the small stuff. Experts recommend starting with the areas of your home that you don’t use much, such as the attic, the basement, the laundry room or spare room. It’s easier to get rid of belongings from rooms that are mostly used for storage.

At SilverLink, the team leader, sometimes with assistants, will divide the items in each room into three categories. (This part of the process runs most smoothly when the house owner isn’t present.) Betsy Van Loon, a member of the National Association of Professional Organizers, names these three categories according to the “T” rule: “Treasures” are the things that you use regularly or are very important to you; “trash” includes things that really need to be thrown out; “transition” is for items that you no longer need and can give away to a family member, donate to a charity or sell.

Allocating the items to the right category isn’t always difficult. “If it’s in a garment bag covered with dust at the back of the closet, it probably hasn’t been used in a while and it should be discarded,” says Itzy.

For Leah, sorting was made easier by the knowledge that they simply wouldn’t have the space for much in their new home. “We left everything behind except for the essential things. I took two of everything and bought whatever else I needed. I did keep the display cabinet that my husband had

crafted and the cut-glass that I inherited from my mother, but today I feel that I should have kept more.”

“Initially, I was immobilized with indecision,” says Sara Leah. “Then I decided to move the essential items to the condo and go through the remaining items more slowly. If I wasn’t sure, I put the item to the side. As space cleared up and items were either given away, moved to the new condo or discarded as a last resort, sorting became less daunting. But it took a long time,” she says.

You can give yourself more peace of mind when you are standing opposite the “transition” pile by finding ways to re-home the items you no longer need. “It’s important that there’s no waste,” says Itzy. “There are memories attached to every item, and people don’t want to lose the memories. When you give away or donate something, you ease the stress because you know that someone is going to use it. The legacy lives on.”

For the Kregels, living in Johannesburg made re-homing items much easier. “In New York, most of what you put out is picked up and crushed by the garbage collectors, but in Johannesburg anything you put by the garbage is immediately picked up by someone needy,” says Charles. “The same goes for donations: What we didn’t put next to the garbage, we took to a hospice and it was accepted immediately. In contrast, when I left New York after living there for several years, the local charity did me a favor by accepting a few pieces of furniture.” There were some books though, that

couldn’t be re-homed so easily. “My father had a lot of Holocaust memoirs written in Yiddish. Although it’s unlikely that we’ll read them, we couldn’t simply get rid of them. It would have been a desecration to the memory of the writers. So these books found a new home in my home,” says Charles.

Downsizing often means saying goodbye to the graves of your loved ones, and this carries an aching finality. This is particularly true when emigrating. “My parents, in-laws and two sisters are buried in South Africa. When we left 15 years ago, it was very painful to think that no one would be on hand to take care of the upkeep of the graves. Since then, we’ve traveled back to make sure that all is in order. It was an extremely emotional experience,” says Leah.

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Time to Relocate

You can take the edge off your relocation by making sure your new home is welcoming. “Our son and his family eased our move by making the new apartment very cozy and welcoming,” says Felicia. “They buffed the wood floors, installed a new bath and shower, chose the lights. And my grandson loaned us the couch from his room until we moved in fully.”

Sara Leah invested similarly to give everyone a positive experience. “It seemed foolish to spend money on some cosmetic things in the move before the house was sold, but certain improvements made the family feel much better about the change. For example, our house did not have room for large couch. But the new condo has a larger living room, so we were able to put in

larger couch. The children were thrilled that they could all sit comfortably, instead of most of them have to sit on dining room chairs!"

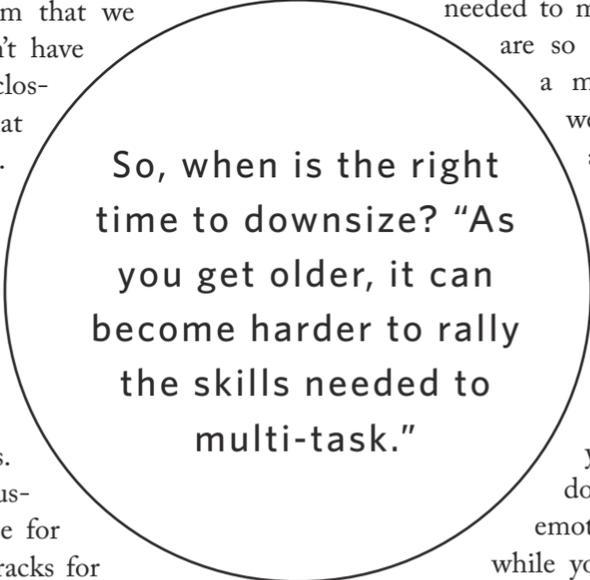
An important part of downsizing is ensuring that your new home has effective storage solutions that meet your requirements. "It wasn't easy to adapt to our new apartment," says Leah. "We had bought on paper and the new apartment was so small that it could have fit into the lounge and dining room that we had left behind. I didn't have anywhere near enough closet space for the little that I had brought with me. Fortunately, I'd packed a good attitude!"

The Kregels, who moved neighborhoods and not continents, had an easier time with storage solutions. "We had a carpenter custom-build a display case for my father's violin, and racks for the CDs. We also installed metal racks along the sides of the garage so that he had room

to store his collections. Since we've had flooding from the nearby river, we made sure to place the racks above the waterline of the last flood," says Charles.

If Not Now...When?

So, when is the right time to downsize? "As you get older, it can become harder to rally the skills needed to multi-task," says Itzy. "There are so many logistics involved in a move. Physical abilities are weaker and mental capacities are also sometimes weaker," says Itzy. In other words, downsizing early, while you're still fit and healthy, ensures that you can still make decisions on your own terms. "Downsize when you're younger than you think you need to be to downsize. It's a physically and emotionally daunting job. Move while you have something to look forward to from the downsizing," says Leah.



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