

Getting Organized with Julie Morgenstern

[Julie Morgenstern](#) demystifies the process of getting organized. Her books, workshops and television appearances have helped hundreds of thousands of people to organize their homes, offices and time. Dubbed the "queen of putting people's lives in order" by *USA Today*, she is a *New York Times* and an amazon.com best-selling author. Her five books are insightful, entertaining and jam-packed with innovative strategies. She also founded and owns Julie Morgenstern Enterprises. The Editor talks with her passion for organizing.

Editor: Were you born organized?

Morgenstern: For years I lived in chaos. When I was college, I lived in my hometown where my family always rescued me. If I did not have my apartment ready before the school year began, my family would say, "We'll come and help you."

When I went to graduate school outside my hometown, I felt, "Oh, my God. I need a Rent-a-Mom service."

My idea of a service to help people get organized was forgotten as I went on with my life. My chaos followed me as I worked in Chicago, then Philadelphia and then New York City.

When my daughter was born, I realized that, if I did not get my act together, this child would never see the light of day. Even the simplest tasks seemed to take forever. I needed to get organized for her.

That's really what inspired me. I wanted to be organized so that I could be a better mother. I wanted my daughter to have a good shot at taking advantage of all the opportunities that were available to her.

Editor: How did you get organized?

Morgenstern. I started from the inside. That became title of my flagship book -- *Organizing from the Inside Out*. Now in its second printing, it is considered around the globe as the Bible of organizing.

Organizing from the inside out is a simple three-step process. You analyze, you strategize and then you attack.

First, you spend about an hour answering a series of questions to help you analyze your situation. Then, you spend a few minutes strategizing. This is the step when you plan how you will organize your space, time or anything else that you need to get organized. And, then, you attack.

Think of a kindergarten classroom organized into zones. One zone is for arts and crafts, another for music and another for reading. Then think of what zones make sense for you and use your zones to structure your plan. Once you have your plan, you can sort through individual items,

tasks or materials and put them into their proper zones. Your system will be up and running in a way that makes sense to you.

Editor: Is getting organized simply getting rid of stuff?

Morgenstern: Simply throwing things out will never get you organized. It will just reduce a certain amount of accumulation. To help people create an organizing system that works for them, I have a formula that I call SPACE.

- “S” is for sorting similar items into groups. That way, you can see what you have in categories.
- “P” is for purging. As you go through your categories, you can get rid of duplicates, triplicates, obsolete things and things you don’t love anymore. It is much easier to purge after you have sorted.
- “A” is for assigning a home for the items that you want to keep.
- “C” is for containerizing. As you are putting things away, decide what kind of container will keep those items grouped together. Does it have a lid? Is it meshed metal, plastic or cloth? What is its size and shape?
- “E” is for equalizing, which is how you maintain your system.

Getting rid of things is what I call shedding. You do not shed to get organized. You shed to manage your way through a new job, new marriage or other life transition. Shedding is what you do when you feel that your old systems are not working any more. Finding what is obsolete and getting rid of it clears space to help you to breathe, think and find the energy to figure out where you go next.

Shedding is a completely different task than organizing.

Editor: How did your passion for organizing grow into a business?

Moregenstern: As chaotic as my life was, I was afraid that if I actually did get organized, it would squelch my creativity. When I finally decided to get organized, it fueled my creativity. Being organized enabled me to execute on more ideas than I had ever been able to before. I found that when I had an idea, I could actually find the materials that I needed to execute on it.

I expected that being organized would make me rigid and kill my spontaneity. To my surprise, I found that you can do anything if you are organized. The outcome was the opposite of what I thought was going to happen.

With my passion for organizing, I wanted to help other people to remove the clutter that blocked their way in getting where they wanted to go. That is what organizing does. It is a tool that can help you to function better.

If you are disorganized, your ability to contribute to the world can be stifled. You always will be looking for your keys, running late or otherwise wasting time. My passion is helping people

to get organized so that they can make their own unique contributions to the world and not to be blocked by the chaos around them.

Editor: Is your business the same today as it was when you started 21 years ago?

Morgenstern: My business has grown. I started in my bedroom in Carroll Gardens in Brooklyn, New York. I did everything. I was the business owner, the service provider and the person who did the invoicing. Today I have a team of 30 organizers in the field and about 8 or 9 facilitators who lead workshops, seminars and training for companies.

Like the growth in staff, the type of business has expanded. We do hands-on organizing for companies as well as individuals, speaking engagements, workshops, corporate seminars and organizational consulting. We train professional organizers from around the world at our institute.

Editor: How did you grow your business?

Morgenstern: It was an organic path. I started by working one-on-one with individuals, first in their homes. Some said, “Wow. This is great. Come help me organize my office.” When I went to their office, they asked me, “Can you work with my whole team?”

Helping work teams to get more organized led to time management, which then led to productivity training and coaching. Development of corporate training programs led to bigger corporate assignments to assess companies’ time management cultures.

My clients pull me forward. When they see a connection between the work that I’m doing and other areas where they need me, I am happy to follow them into new arenas.

Editor: Of your many achievements, which makes you most proud?

Morgenstern: I changed the terrain in my industry by articulating what we do as a profession. I clarified the conversation about what is organizing and what is not. Organizing is not about someone screaming at you to throw things out. An organizing professional is someone who can tune into a client’s goals and then help the client to design a customized system that will help achieve those goals.

I shudder when I see the media going back to where the industry was years ago. They focus on the sensational. “Let’s watch people scream at people and shame them into throwing things out.”

The profession has more dignity, complexity and substance than the media’s short-range focus. I think I made a big contribution in raising awareness of the benefits of analyzing and strategizing before attacking the clutter in your life.

My greatest achievement is having gained the trust of my clients. I am continually surprised and honored by where my clients' trust has taken me. I have advised clients in Moscow, Dubai, China and other parts of the world.

My clients trust me with their chaos, and that takes a lot of trust. To have earned their trust and then to be able to help them continues to be my greatest achievement.

Editor: How do you stay energized and keep you business fresh?

Morgenstern: Because every person and every company are individuals, each project is unique. Their uniqueness energizes me. I am always learning.

I am a creative person, and my client work stimulates my creativity. By staying connected with the hands-on work, I can find solutions that help people. Even though I write, design products and manage my company, the stimulus comes from working closely with my clients.

Editor: How do you balance your home life and career?

Morgenstern: Over the years, I have gotten better and better at achieving a good balance. I dedicate my evenings and weekends to friends and fun. I go to plays and ride my bike in Central Park. I do things that ensure that I have the energy, enthusiasm and perspective that I need to be great at my job.

If I work all the time and don't take breaks, I feel mentally dehydrated. The right balance of work and home life quenches my thirst. I feel rested, recharged and innovative.

Editor: What helps you to figure out what is working for you and what is not?

Morgenstern: Taking the breaks that we just discussed enables me to step away and enjoy "ah, ha" moments. For example, a brilliant idea might come to me as I am walking through a museum or doing something else that is completely different from my work routine.

In addition, I have wise advisors in a variety of fields. They serve as sounding boards as I talk through business strategies, challenges and opportunities. Our conversations help me to clarify my thinking. I get out of my own head and into someone else's.

Editor: Many people start organizing with great enthusiasm only to fall quickly back into their cluttered habits. What can help them to stay organized?

Morgenstern: Whether you can stay organized depends on how well your system is designed. If it is designed by you around your natural habits, it will be easy to maintain. If you are trying to impose something that is not unique to you, you will find it harder to stay organized.

To stay organized for the long run takes a little bit of mindfulness when setting up your system. Some people say that it takes 21 days to make a habit. Others say 30 days. I feel that it will take 7 days if you mindfully maintain your new system.

Whether you put things back where they belong or you file things in the right place, if you do what you planned for 7 days, you will experience the benefits of following your system. That is, you will have access to what you need when you need it because everything is where it belongs and you are not wasting time looking for things.

Having an effective organizing system will sustain you. You will be motivated by having what you need at your fingertips. When you experience the benefit, your organizing system will be self sustaining.

Editor: You talk about organizing with a sense of joy.

Morgenstern: The most important thing is to realize that organizing is a vehicle and not the destination. Organizing is the process of mobilizing your resources to help you achieve your goals.

Organizing can seem tedious. Sometimes highly accomplished executives feel that the granular details – like where you store your pencils or how you organize your email files – are not worthy of their time. The opposite is true.

When you get the details down, you are connected with your resources and fueled to accomplish everything that you set out to achieve. With an effective organizing system, everything runs more smoothly and easily, which helps you to get you where you want to go.

If you think about organizing as being vital to what you want to achieve, you can find joy in doing it. Organizing gives you a tangible process to get you to your destination. That is why I am joyful about organizing.