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Unburden your life

Downsizing a home requires downsizing contents, too, experts say

By [Greg Pearson](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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The kids have moved out. Those three bedrooms are looking awfully lonely. That spacious backyard that once served as a barbecue pit/football field/volleyball court now looks like a breeding ground for weeds, not to mention back-breaking acreage during mowing season.

You want to move to something smaller, but the task seems overwhelming. There's a basement full of boxes, a garage stuffed with unused toys and rusting machinery.

Let the experts help you get moving.

Rod and Sharon DePue had to do major downsizing before they moved into their Yankee Hill apartment seven years ago.

They had to sell two condos - one in Greenfield, another in Florida.

They had prepared well for when moving day would come.

"We saw contemporaries who had to close out the house of elderly parents," Sharon said. "They had to go through 50 or 60 years of stuff. We vowed not to do that to our children."

It is the key to downsizing, they said. Sort through your stuff regularly and get rid of what you no longer use. You'll thank yourself on moving day.

In fact, the DePues wish they had done a little more sorting and tossing. They kept enough of their old belongings to furnish their 1,000-square-foot Yankee Hill apartment, but once they got into the new space, they discovered that they wanted new furniture, too.

"We now don't have any of the stuff we moved with except a lamp," Rod said.

Ray and Peggy Hendrickson didn't have a lot of time to plan for their move to Alexian Village in the fall of 2007.

"I thought we could live where we did forever," he said of the Shorewood home they had owned for more than 35 years.

But Peggy Hendrickson had medical setbacks last year, and he fell and broke his leg in the spring of 2007. They tried to continue living in their home with the help of visiting medical care but soon realized they would have to move somewhere that could provide a nursing home-type setting for her and a smaller place for him.

There was much sorting to be done.

"There's a lot of trash when you've been living in the same place for many years," said Ray Hendrickson, a retired Milwaukee Public Schools teacher and football coach at Marshall High School.

Emotional effects

Storage space in a condominium probably will be less than in your house. Space gets even tighter if you're moving to a nursing home or assisted-living site.

Bruce Nemovitz, a broker with Realty Executives Integrity in Whitefish Bay, said people also have to think about the emotional impact of winnowing their belongings. There are a lot of memories packed into those boxes in the attic.

"People have a sense of feeling overwhelmed. Then they tend to procrastinate and then they become frozen," said Nemovitz, who specializes in helping seniors relocate and has written a book on the topic, "Moving in the Right Direction." (Book Publishers Network, \$13.95)

To help get started, Nemovitz suggested having a family get-together. Make it a party, where each of the children puts Post-its on what he or she wants.

There are companies that specialize in helping with downsizing. They help organize estate sales or auctions, line up items for donations and assist with the packing.

Smart Moves in Hales Corners is one such company.

Older residents making a move often "don't even want to think about how they're going to get from point A to point B," said Sue Wiske of Smart Moves. "Having someone to walk them through it can really help."

While there's less room for boxes of old belongings in a smaller home, there's also going to be less room for the couple moving in.

"You have to learn to live together in a smaller space," Sharon DePue said. She and her husband have set up the second bedroom in their apartment as a computer room. He often will work there while she's reading or working in the kitchen.

Space constraints are an issue for many downsizing couples, said Jack H. Smith of Shorewest Realtors.

"They're used to Harvey going into the other room to watch TV. Now they're in the same room, and she's thinking, 'Does the football game have to be that loud?'"

Before moving, people also have to think about the practical aspects of everyday life, Smith said. How much will you miss a yard, or having a garden? Can you get by with a one-car garage - or no garage - instead of the two-car space you've always had?

Some people come to him excited about the prospect of moving into a downtown condo. After analyzing all the factors, they sometimes end up moving into a smaller home with a smaller yard closer to downtown.

"They use that as a happy medium. Instead of being 25 minutes away, they're eight minutes from downtown," Smith said.

Routine tasks like hauling groceries can be more of a chore in a condominium. It may be a longer walk from the car to the kitchen. There may be elevators or stairs to navigate while juggling your grocery bags.

The same goes for walking the dog. There likely will be no more just opening the back door and stepping out quickly with your pooch, Smith said.

"If the dog has to go out at 2 in the morning, you can't just hold it over the balcony."

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