

and raised three children. They relocated to a single-story 2,000-square-foot condo less than half that size.

Her husband, Don, age seventy-eight and a semiretired physician, “keeps everything,” she said. “I had tried to help him organize his study over the years, and that always led to a conflict. Finally, it got to the point where the space was so cluttered with forty years of his career that he didn’t want to work there anymore, and he moved his office to the kitchen.”

You can imagine how well that worked out.

Their different approach to stuff was only one reason the Switzes decided that their downsizing would require a mediator.

Enter the move manager. This growing group of professionals steps in when older adults can’t downsize alone or would rather not, when the sorting and moving process gets too contentious, or when adult children live hundreds or thousands of miles away or are otherwise unavailable, according to Mary Kay Buysse, executive director for the National Association of Senior Move Managers.

Yes, there’s an association.

Not only that. It’s growing like cornstalks in the night.

In 2006, when Mary Kay Buysse became executive director for NASMM—which tests, screens, trains, and stamps with approval professionals who help older adults downsize in place or move to a new place—the association had sixty-six move manager members.

By 2015, the association, based in Hinsdale, Illinois,

had nearly a thousand members in forty-six states and Canada. Mary Kay, who has a master's degree in gerontology, attributed that growth not so much to her skill as to changing demographics.

She points to the age wave, which is actually an age tsunami. Between 2010 and 2030, the U.S. population age sixty-five and older will jump by 80 percent. By 2030, one in five Americans will be eighty-five or older. Add to that the fact that families are more spread out than ever and you see why there's a need for her services.

I am actually comforted by the aging of America. Think of all the collective wisdom we'll have.

People like the Switzes are a perfect example of that wisdom.

Their large home was holding them back from what they really wanted to spend their time doing: traveling, going to the theater, reading, listening to music, seeing friends, and visiting their children, Lee Switz told me.

"We were spending so much time and energy cutting the grass and maintaining the garden and the house that we didn't have time to do what we loved," she said.

"We didn't need all that space," she continued. "We spent all our time in the kitchen, the bedroom, and the TV room. We never went into the rest of the house. Every time I paid the electric bill, I would ask myself, 'Why am I heating a house three times larger than we need?'"

Switz researched options for services that help retirees unpack a lifetime's worth of memories and chose Door to

Door Solutions, downsizing relocation specialists in the Richmond, Virginia, area and members of NASMM.

“It was very, very helpful to have an organization come in and help us figure out what to get rid of and then get rid of it for us.”

The process—from first meeting with the movers, to moving into their condo, to staging and selling the big family home—took thirteen months, she said. During that time, the service “made dozens of trips, dragging books off to the library, furniture to the auction house, and household items to the thrift store.”

Door to Door had a truck and did the heavy lifting. “We didn’t want to hurt ourselves,” said Lee.

(See what I mean about the wisdom?)

Their children, she said, all in their forties, wanted very little but took a few furnishings. Many of the large pieces of furniture Lee and Don really liked, such as their dining-room table, went to their new place.

But there was much that they let go. “What you learn is that no matter what you have, nobody wants it anymore,” she said. “There’s no market, and the kids aren’t interested.”

As they whittled their belongings, the move managers helped them plan space for the new quarters and then not only moved the items but helped them settle in the new condo.

“Unlike regular movers,” said Mary Kay, “they don’t disappear after the truck is unloaded. They hang pictures and curtains and set up the cable television.”

For a fee, of course. Two-thirds of move managers charge between \$26 and \$60 per hour, while the remaining third charges more than \$60 per hour, according to a 2014 NASMM survey of approximately two hundred member organizations. Meanwhile, 42 percent of respondents said they spend from seventeen to thirty-three hours total to complete an average job for their clients, and 39 percent spend more than thirty-three hours (figures were unavailable for the remaining 19 percent).

“The more we got rid of, the better I felt,” said Lee. By the time they moved, she felt relieved. Mostly.

“Saying good-bye to the memories is very hard,” she conceded. “But now it’s wonderful to feel free to travel. With the condo association taking care of things, we can lock the door and leave. It’s very freeing. I now spend 90 percent of my time doing what I love.”

TIPS TO SMOOTH A MOVE

After many years of working with retirees and empty nesters, here are some insights and pointers Mary Kay Buysse and Kay Morrison have uncovered that make these moves go more smoothly:

- *Create a vision.* Picture what a great downsize looks like. Kay describes it this way: “Everything is easier, simpler, more enjoyable, less hectic, and less stressful. And

you have the things around that you love and enjoy most. Downsizing is not sad. It's a time when you can reassess what matters and choose to put around you what you enjoy the most."

- *Attitude—and timing—makes a difference.* Moves to downsize are much easier when people choose to move, as the Switzes did, rather than when the move chooses them, which happens when people become too frail, have an accident, lose a spouse who made independent living possible, or start having cognitive issues.
- *Find the silver lining.* If the move is into assisted living, and not a happening condo as in the case of the Browns and the Switzes, the move at first glance may make it seem that one's independence is shrinking, but it's actually expanding, said Mary Kay. "Going to the right level of care can expand independence and quality of life, and extend life."
- *You are not your kids' attic.* When kids move out, the family house often remains a repository for all their memorabilia: baseball gloves, ice skates, school pictures. "It's not your job to save everything from your children's lives," Kay said. "Box up what

belongs to each kid and send it to them.” If it’s furniture you no longer want but your children do, tell them to claim it now or never. Don’t be the family storage locker. Mary Kay adds that a recurring theme she hears from empty nesters is that they wish their adult kids would have claimed their stuff sooner. “For a while it comforts both parties to have the grown child’s belongings at home,” Mary Kay said. But when the children are in their forties and their scouting badges are still in the basement, it’s time to purge.

A NEW GENERATION

Much of the difference in attitude is generational, said Mary Kay Buysse. Many older Americans lived through the depression and World War II, including my parents and Mary Kay’s. They were not big acquirers, but they also did not let go. The next two generations were big acquirers but let go more easily.

“Our attitude,” said Mary Kay, speaking for those in middle age, “has been if we give something away, we can find it again tomorrow. Because we have more stuff, we’re more willing to downsize. We didn’t live through an era where coffee and stockings were rationed.”

- *Give deadlines.* It's easy for family members not living in the home to put off claiming what they want. Meanwhile, the person on the front lines doesn't want to get rid of stuff because he or she fears someone later saying, "I can't believe you got rid of that!" Issue a deadline. Tell family members the date you plan to have the house cleared out and to let you know by then what they would like or otherwise hold their peace.
- *Use technology.* FaceTime or Skype family members. Walk them through the house as you apply colored stickers with their names on what they want. On little stuff such as tools or jewelry, put the items on a table or in a bag that bears a sticker with their name on it.

After Mom moved to assisted living, because of her memory issues and the level of care she required, the staff recommended that we keep her jewelry, with the exception of her wedding ring, which she never took off. When sorting it, I first selected the few pieces I wanted. Then Chickie, my sister-in-law, put all the rest on her dining room table and Skyped with my two daughters, who were in separate states, so that they could pick the pieces of their grandmother's they would like. Chickie chose one brooch,

and the rest we sold at the estate sale. It all sold within the first hour.

- *Don't do it alone.* When going through old belongings that carry a lot of emotional weight, like the closet of a deceased spouse or parent or even a child's room after the child has moved out, have a close friend or family member with you, said grief expert Russell Friedman. "Touching belongings that trip memories is a huge emotional stimulus," he said. "Stuff is a strong connective device. It's important to have someone to talk to as you unspool the thread that's tied to the stuff."
- *Consider an objective party.* When the items are less emotional, experts in this field recommend having an objective (as in, not a relative) outsider help you for a variety of reasons. They will bring an unbiased clearheadedness. "I always find, when I go to a downsizing situation, an awful lot of blaming about who is the pack rat," said Kay. "Usually, the couple has been together a long time and it's a combination." A third party can neutralize the blaming.

"You want someone who brings an abundance of energy and won't get overwhelmed," she said. Also, Mary Kay added, parents, no matter how old, will

always see their children as children. When an adult child takes control, that upsets the equilibrium. “It can get messy.” Often what the outsider brings is not only another pair of hands but a compassionate ear.

“It’s really about being kind and patient and letting them tell the story of what they’re attached to. We come and bring boxes, but also the tissues,” Kay said.

- *It gets easier.* Start with the easiest places, said Mary Kay. Clear out the basement, the garage, and the kids’ bedrooms. Here’s why: Over time you get desensitized to the downsizing process, so it gets easier. “It is easier to get rid of the garden tools than the cookware, so start in the shed.”
- *Do the math.* If you are moving to a smaller place, say, from 3,000 square feet to 1,500, figure you’ll need to cut your stuff by half or more. To picture what will and won’t fit, sketch a floor plan of the new place and then make cutouts of the furniture and arrange it in the sketch. Similarly, Kay suggests making a diagram of the kitchen cabinets. Use sticky notes to indicate where items such as glassware, dishes, and small appliances will go. “When I show clients this is the only shelf they will have for glassware, they get

it,” she said. “When they become active in the process, their anxiety disappears.”

- *Use hands-on space-planning tools.* These tools, which are available online or can be purchased, can help people see how their furniture will or won't fit. You can virtually “stick” furniture in different spaces to check fit and flow. “When an older adult can see why her seven-foot sofa won't fit, she feels she's participating and arranging her own furniture, and that's a big deal,” said Mary Kay.
- *Colored stickers are your best friend.* Get packs of them and make a key: Purple is keep. Yellow means give away. Green goes to a family member. Red is for a garage sale. Go room by room and put stickers on everything. “When you're done, you will have completed one of the hardest parts of the job—making the decisions,” said Kay.
- *Give choices.* When you are downsizing a large collection, you don't have to give up the entire curio cabinet. For example, in the case of a well-traveled client who had collected eighty-five teapots from all over the world, Mary Kay said the mover helped the woman select three; then they photographed the rest and put them in an album alongside the three she kept.

NO HOUSE IS FOREVER: TRANSITION—PLAN FOR IT

When I moved into my house in Colorado in 2003, I naively believed that would be my house forever. Well, here I am in Florida, six moves later, to tell you that no house is forever. Because I was going through my own household upheaval alongside my parents' transition, a financial planning e-pitch I received one day that I normally would have zapped with my spam blocker caught my curiosity.

Although I personally do not feel the need for a financial planner, this was not your typical pitch.

“The recession is the very best thing that happened to Americans,” it read. “It got them to rethink their priorities.”

I called Guy Hatcher of Southlake, Texas, the financial planner behind the pitch. “Americans got too wrapped up in having things,” he told me as we began talking. “They bought into the culture of stuff. Eventually, many saw that the more they got, the less free and happy they felt. The recession has helped them get back to quality, not quantity.”

“Is that what happened to you?” I asked, my journalistic nosiness kicking in.

“Like a lot of people who get to be forty-five or fifty and have been successful, I looked up a few years ago and asked, ‘This is it?’” said Guy, who was then fifty-two. “I used to believe that having things would bring me respect. But all assets take work. Houses have to be kept up, and that takes time and energy. Whenever I see clients downsize, I see their stress go down.”

“After owning four progressively larger houses,” I shared, “I like having less house and fewer things.”

“You’re ahead of most people.”

“I love to be ahead,” I said. “Even if that means having less.”

Ever on the lookout for advice that I can use or that at least will make me feel better, I asked Guy what insights and advice he had for folks facing life and housing transitions, and he said:

- *You are not your stuff.* “Too many people relate who they are to what they own, but we are not our houses or our things,” he said. “Besides, what’s the point of having a big house if you’re no fun and not having fun, if no one’s coming over to play cards?” Once people grasp that, letting go gets much easier.
 - *Less stuff equals more happiness.* The day Guy hit bottom, he saw that he had lots of material success but was depressed. He started unloading assets, a business, and some land. “As I did, I freed up my life to have more family time, more fun, and more freedom.”
 - *Get wiser with age sooner.* The importance of things goes down with age, starting at age fifty, he said. “By your eighties, possessions really don’t matter.” Why do so many people have to live so long before they understand that?
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- *Manage expectations.* “The biggest problem our move managers have is getting rid of the excess. The kids and grandkids don’t want what the parents or grandparents have been saving for them for years. They don’t want the china, silver, crystal, or figurine collections,” said Mary Kay. “Yet the parents think these are sizable gifts.” Her members try to be straightforward and plant the seed that their stuff isn’t worth that much.
- *Know what you love.* And take it with you. I assure you, most material belongings really don’t matter. But some do. Look around your home and ask yourself what brings you comfort and what would break your heart to leave behind. The latter list should be short. But what’s left will help you define your style, your person, your sense of place. For me, it was my French writing desk, a few paintings, and a four-poster bed that was my parents’ wedding bed. For my parents, it was their favorite blue chairs, their blue-and-white dishes, and select pieces of art and family photos reflecting their life.
- *Put the same things the same way.* My sister-in-law re-created the top of my parents’ dresser exactly the way they had arranged

it at their old home. She even hung the art around it in the same way.

- *Ask the kids.* Have your children tell you what they want. Don't assume they want anything unless you ask and they say so. Many parents make the default decision not to purge because they have deluded themselves into believing their kids will want the twenty-year-old blender. They don't.
- *Allow time.* It took forty years to build a home. You don't have to dispose of it all in two weekends. Give the process the dignity it deserves. But don't wallow or you'll lose momentum. Be thoughtful and acknowledge the sentiment, but keep moving.



TAKEAWAY

As Mary Kay Buysse notes, "When downsizing, clashes between couples or between parents and their adult children are common. It can get messy. An objective expert can smooth the process." If each generation can understand and respect the other's attitudes and have some awareness of the reasons for wanting or not wanting items, together they can come to a rational result.