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Kitchen Organizing: A 2-For One New Year's Resolution

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A few months ago, I mentioned in one of my newsletters that I suspect a connection between weight issues and disorganization, especially in the kitchen. Many of my clients struggle with both simultaneously, and once they get a handle on the disorganized kitchen and bring back some control there, they are better able to focus on their wellness and weight management.

Keep in mind, I have no scientific proof on which to base this suspicion, but my experiences points to a connection. So, for January, I thought I would offer a 2 for one deal, organizing tips for the kitchen and nutrition that may also lead to a healthier you. What a deal!

First Step—Counters: Does just walking into the kitchen drive you crazy? Dirty dishes in and around the sink, pans on the stove, papers or empty food wrappers or soccer shoes or soda cans or who knows what else on the counter, and don't even get me started on the months of mail on the dining room table. Who could blame you for grabbing a bag of whatever from the cabinets and eating it on the couch, which at least is cleaner than the kitchen. And how can you prepare a healthy meal if every inch of prep space is filled already?

Put away all dishes that have a home, and throw away all the garbage (actually outside to the can). Pile up papers, and if they have a home, put them there. Wash the dishes in the sink or load the dishwasher, and dry them and actually put them away. Wipe down the counters and cabinets. This first part alone could take an hour or more, but then you have some catching up to do. Maintaining is easy and much faster. Now look around and recognize what Order looks like. Tomorrow morning or evening, get back to this orderly state again, and the next day, etc. And I'm only saying once a day, maybe twice. If you wash every dish as it hits the sink, that wastes too much time, too. Find the balance that works for you. But restore order at least once a day!

Ideally, the counters should be cleared of all stuff and decorations, this is work space, after all.

Second Step—Refrigerator: Give yourself another hour, and take every item out of your refrigerator and put in on your now clear counters. Unidentifiable? Garbage. Expired? Garbage, too. Duplicates? Group them together. Completely unhealthy and not something you should eat again soon? Toss that, too. And I am the organizer, not the fitness instructor, so you will have to decide what is healthy and what is not for yourself.

Take a look at the stuff that is leaving in the garbage, and recognize what you should 1. not buy again at the store, 2. buy in smaller amounts, 3. eat when it is still fresh, or 4. embrace as leftovers (more later). Post a piece of paper on the refrigerator, write Grocery List across the top in big letters ([or make your own spread sheet like mine](#)), and make a note of what you need next time you shop. Do the same thing with your freezer, with the same questions. Unidentifiable, inedible, expired, unhealthy. All going, going, gone. You should be left with fewer but edible, appetizing and useful items. Congratulations. And leave a few things out and make yourself a meal with what you have on hand. And take out the garbage again!

Third Step—Cabinets: Now that your refrigerator contents are pared down and put back away, pick a cabinet (I like to attack every room from left to right, so pick a point and go) and take out every item. Group similar items together, like canned goods, breakfast items, coffee cups, etc. Ask yourself the same questions as with the refrigerator. Expired? Unidentifiable? Duplicates? No longer fits into your healthier plan? All goes away. If you need to purge food that is not expired and not opened, donate it to a local food pantry. If we are talking dishes, ask yourself how many coffee mugs you really need. I am the only coffee drinker in my house, I run the dishwasher at least 3 or 4 times a week, and I have nice cups that go with my good china. So regular mugs are few in my cabinets, and I use the space for other things. All of this

stuff? It is just stuff. No emotional attachments, just stuff. So if there is too much, let it go. And if it seasonal, like Christmas dishes or a turkey platter you won't need again until November, store those items in a container with your seasonal decorations and not in your cabinets.

When it is time to put back the stuff that you are keeping, adjust shelves or use [shelf stackers](#) to maximize your shelf space. I have stackers for my plates and bowls and one for my glass tumblers, fitting them 2 high instead of 1 on a shelf.

Final Step—Menu Planning:

I'm an organizer, of course I was going to mention planning. Menu planning and some forethought can save you time, money and calories and bring you peace of mind. Menu planning is a simple thing that makes great use of your time and money, helps avoid fattening and expensive convenience foods and encourages healthier meals and good nutrition. Research tells us that kids who eat with their family regularly eat better, do better in school and get into less trouble. And adults who sit down to a meal have better nutrition and eat fewer calories overall.

Take out a piece of paper, [check out my example](#), and based on the contents of your pantry and freezer, plan the next 7 days of meals, entrees, sides and vegetables. The contents of most home's shelves and refrigerator or freezer can yield at least a week of meals, if not more. Agree with members of your household that who ever gets home first starts dinner. Next week, look over your grocery store sale pages, and plan another week of meals around things you have on hand and sale items while making your grocery list (saving time and money!). Plan for overages, like using the left over ham from Sunday dinner in a casserole later in the week or chopping carrots for today's stew and Tuesday's salad. Trust me, I am no chef and none of this requires stellar cooking skills. My kids help, ensuring there are at least a few of their favorite items on the menu and teaching them good life skills.

If an item is not on your menu for the next week, do not buy it. This avoids un-eaten or spoiled produce or other perishables, and saves on cabinet space as well. Then you can take advantage of sales when those items go on sale, and stock up.

You can take your planning a little further, too. We plan school lunches and snacks, making them all at once and then freezing them. If I pack my own lunch in the morning, whether I am working outside the home that day or not, I am less likely to grab junk food or more fattening convenience food out of hunger. And even on the days we are home for lunch, if I pack my pre-schooler's lunch, he helps himself to the contents, enjoying the novelty of pre-cut sandwiches and little baggies with raisins or pretzels.

I am the shopper in our household, so it is my decision to have healthy and nutritious food in my cabinets. I decide what comes in my house and what to do with it, and that is part of my own resolution, too. Happy New Year, and enjoy your organized kitchen!