

HANDS-ON ORGANIZING ONE-ON-ONE WITH A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZER



Hands-on organizing is exactly what its name implies and is the most common method of addressing a clutter-filled home. It typically begins with the informal phone assessment.

The Initial Phone Call or the Intake Call

During the initial telephone exchange, the PO learns what the potential client would like to accomplish. We actively listen during most of this call, which ideally lasts fifteen minutes but can go much longer. If the PO feels that the client is going to benefit from his or her services, fees are explained and expectations are discussed. Then an appointment is made for the initial consultation at the client's home or office. Let's explore

how this process works in greater depth by meeting our first featured PO, Linda Samuels.

Linda is a PO who works primarily with clients who have chronic disorganization (CD). Linda, an ICD Master Trainer and past president of the organization, has completed all five levels of education that ICD offers since she joined in 2002.

She carefully screens her clients to make sure they're a good match for her. She has gotten better at this process over the years. "Maybe after listening to them," she says, "I discover that it doesn't always have to be *me* that will help them. I try to understand what it is they need." During that initial phone call, she assesses the ability for her and her client to communicate. "If I am not grasping what they are saying, and the rapport is not there, it will not get better if they hire me." In these instances, Linda, who has been organizing professionally since 1992, may recommend a colleague or refer the client to the NAPO website for a better match.

"Right from the get-go, the clients that I was attracted to and that sought me out were those struggling with CD. I never got a call that asked me if I could come and just organize a closet," she explains. "Those were NOT the calls I was getting. Little did I know at the time, but I was going to get involved with my clients in a much longer-term way than I ever imagined. I love the challenge of working with them. And I was interested in the journey. I wanted to help people who couldn't see where they were going. They were the ones that needed help." She knows instinctively that she can help her clients by building a strong relationship with them.

“When you are involved in someone’s life in that way, we need to understand that they are going to be on a trajectory course like everyone else but will need more help navigating these times than others.”

Linda is a patient person by nature and is very comfortable working in a certain amount of turmoil. “For me,” she explains, “I DO like a challenge. I don’t want just mindless work. I need my work to require energy, compassion, and creativity.”

Linda admits that it takes some people longer than others to be ready for the organizing process. “Change does not happen rapidly with CD clients,” Linda states, adding that rarely does it happen that any of her clients are able to make fast changes. She sometimes works with them with her focus on “priming the pump,” and then slowly lets clients get ready for the bigger changes that are coming. The overwhelming feeling usually comes from having too much clutter and too many obligations. “All of it,” she explains, “involves letting go.”

Jonda Beattie, M.Ed., shares how she handles calls inquiring about her organizing services. “Sometimes, I think it is as much of what you don’t say as to what you do say. I do a lot more listening than talking. I never assume anything, nor do I ever push for them to make a decision now. I let them know that there is no judgment being made and that we all have our stories. I may ask them why they called me at this time, and I let them talk. I let them ask me questions. I have a template that I use for the intake, but most of it gets filled out without me asking more than a couple of questions about the why and the why now. I do ask them if they have been to my website as

that shows a lot about me. I also reassure them that if we work together, they are totally in charge and that they have the final say-so as to what happens with everything they own.”

Diane Quintana, a PO who is also an ICD Master Trainer, sometimes gets calls from a mental health practitioner. “Most of my inquiries either begin as an email or as a referral from a therapist. If it is through email, I usually get some information—enough to know if the next step is for the person to ask me more questions in an email or if they are eager to have me call them. Contacting a professional organizer is a HUGE leap of faith for someone who is overwhelmed by clutter and disorganization. Often they are really down on themselves to the point of being almost hopeless. If I can give them a tiny glimmer of hope, kindness, reassurance that help from me (and most professional organizers) is nonjudgmental, then that encourages them to make the next step of scheduling either a virtual or in-person meeting.”

Feelings you might have before, during, and after calling a Professional Organizer for the first time:

- Guilt
- Excitement
- Relief
- Anger
- Determination
- Embarrassment
- Denial
- Elation
- Annoyance
- Hope
- Agitation
- Shame
- Overwhelm
- Anxiety

Behaviors you may exhibit as a result of anticipation of the first session with a Professional Organizer:

- Isolating more than usual inside the home
- Socializing more than usual outside the home
- Impulsively tidying up and shifting piles around to “clean up” before the organizer arrives
- Irritability and acting out some uncomfortable emotions towards others
- Avoidance that could result in canceling and rescheduling the session

It’s all right to cancel. It’s okay to reschedule. *We are here when YOU are ready.* Just as there’s no judgment from us in how your home looks, there are no hard feelings when we receive cancellations.

Clients have reported feeling a sense of relief after contacting me for the first time. I’ve had clients tell me that they could actually hear my empathy and gentle nature in my voice. Our conversations made them feel safe and at ease.

I remember this same feeling after leaving my therapist’s office after the first visit. I had found her contact information on the *Psychology Today* website directory or therapists in my area for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). I had been feeling somewhat depressed and anxious, and then when it came to a head for me, I felt desperate for the answers—for the help. I had let my negative feelings go unchecked for way too long, and it was time for a professional to step in.

When I got into my car after leaving her office that day, I felt as though I had just opened a pressure valve in my body. I had been carrying around so many heavy rocks in a backpack that only I could see for quite some time. I think my therapist might have felt like I was spraying a firehose full of angry Chihuahuas at her every week, but better at her than my family, friends, and work team! When it all gets too heavy for me to carry anymore, she's there to listen and share the tools to make my life easier to manage. The fears are less terrifying and the moments of accomplishments actually celebrated, even small ones. My sadness can't be erased like I had hoped, but I can bear it. And that's key for me. This is coincidentally how my clients report feeling after each weekly session with me or a member our organizing team.

Here's one thing for certain that will happen once a Professional Organizer is hired: your life will change.

There will be a shift in awareness of the way the items in the home will be viewed, approached, and handled. There will be some discomfort as difficult decisions are made to discard, donate, sell, or keep possessions that up until now were part of the everyday home atmosphere. Even if the initial assessment is all that gets accomplished at first, that's still useful. It's still a new insight that wasn't there before. If, during that initial assessment, a written plan is developed and provided, it's yet another tool to use when ready to commit further to the process, independently or with the PO. And maybe that change, that small, tiny shift, is enough for now.

If our clients are open to even one visit, we can make a difference. We won't minimize what our clients feel is important. What we WILL do is talk to our clients about what kind of home environment they wish to have and create a plan with them, complete with achievable steps, dates for any phases, in order of priority. We will then walk beside our clients as they step through their goals, one at a time, at a pace that works for them, gently challenging them when it's safe to do so and being professionally present during emotionally charged sessions.

Initial Organizing Assessment

This face-to-face visit is crucial for the PO to understand the true scope of services required and to establish a bond with the client. During that critical first hour, the PO needs to build trust with the client and make sure the relationship is a good fit. The client will be evaluating the PO's reaction to their home as well as listening to and contemplating the validity and feasibility of the solutions offered.

The initial visit usually includes a tour of the home or, at minimum, the spaces that need the most attention. Sharing a private home (and its contents) with a stranger is never easy, especially when the client may feel trepidation, vulnerability, and shame regarding their home's condition. There are also areas that the client may not feel comfortable sharing just yet, or ever. The PO does everything she or he can to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere to make it possible for the client to

communicate their challenges, discuss what they have tried in the past, and talk about their hopes for a better way of managing their life. It's an emotional time, and the PO empathetically understands the courage it takes for the client to make that initial phone call and allow the PO into the sanctuary of their home.

In some cases, the PO will create a written and somewhat detailed organizing plan and share it with the client. This is a highly individualized, customized plan for the client. It can include plans for addressing the physical space as well as for changing the client's daily habits and practices. Goals are discussed and set during this meeting, and some ground rules and expectations will be agreed to by both parties. An example of a ground rule might be that all magazines published prior to a certain year will be recycled after the client has inspected the pile. Another example would be that anything in a certain category, such as books, be grouped together for review, and any that are damaged or not repairable will be discarded. Some POs prioritize the spaces to be addressed based on the client's wishes. Some will also design a plan that begins with clearing a storage area, such as a garage. Once a storage space like this is cleared, it can be used as a temporary location for items leaving from other parts of the house.

Once the PO and the client agree that they're compatible and that the PO's services will be helpful, the two will schedule future organizing sessions. This happens before the PO leaves the client that first day. My team and I always schedule at least one date in the near future and usually three.

The First Organizing Session

The PO will arrive on time. Not early and never late. Often, if I arrive too early, I'll park down the road a bit, check emails, make calls, or meditate before I drive on to the client's house. I don't appreciate it when guests arrive too early to my house (I'm always making last-minute preparations), so it's unfair for me to show up earlier than expected at a client's house, especially the first time we work together.

The PO will bring a tote bag. I call mine and those belonging to our team members a workbag. It usually contains these items:

- Tape measure
- Five to ten manila file folders
- Permanent markers of different thicknesses
- Roll of packing tape
- Label maker, refill cartridges, and batteries
- Scissors
- Box cutter
- Small roll of garbage bags
- Notebook and pen (or tablet)
- Snack(s) and water bottle

I usually keep my bag with me at all times during the organizing session, because I need the items in it fairly frequently. Some POs wear a tool belt, which allows them to grab what they need quickly.

I make it a practice to stop periodically and midway through the session to check in with my client and make sure they're doing all right emotionally and physically. I remind them to drink some water, tea, or coffee and take short breaks. Their self-care during the organizing process is key. Sorting and making decisions about the contents of a home is an emotional and tiring process. Releasing objects that have been a part of someone's life isn't easy. Just ask anyone who has ever moved. Legitimate parting with one's pieces of history occurs naturally when home transitions are made. However, when someone needs help to declutter for a purpose other than moving, the reasons are compelling in their own right.

During this first session, which usually runs two to three hours, the PO and the client learn a lot about each other. The PO discovers the best way to communicate with and support the client as they sort, decide on, and dispatch items. Every client experience is different, but when the fit is right between a PO and a client, the rhythm of activities becomes smooth, easy, and even fun. Some clients like to play music while we sort, and they begin relaxing about the process when progress becomes more visible. When the labeled sorting bins I bring start filling up with opened mail, unopened mail, office supplies, receipts, and multiple other categories, there seems to be a shift—a quiet exhale of relief from my clients, a belief that getting organized is actually attainable. The first step has been taken, and that's worth celebrating. About fifteen minutes before the session ends, the PO lets the client know it's

almost time to finish up and begins to tidy up the workspace. The PO and client review the plan and confirm or set the next appointment.

If the client has made decisions to donate items and has agreed that the PO may take them to a donation center, the PO loads his or her car with those items, clarifying whether a donation slip and itemized list are desired. If the client prefers to take the items to the donation center personally, the PO will help load their car. The third option is to designate a space—a room or even a corner of the home—to hold items to be donated. The PO or the client can arrange for a local charity to pick up the items. Not all clients are comfortable with having many discarded possessions out on their porch for their neighbors to see. In those cases, smaller collections (four to five bags or boxes) may be set out at a time until all the items are gone.

Checking in after the first session is a good practice. The PO can confirm the next appointment and also see how the client is doing. This goes a long way to building a relationship of communication and care.

The Second and Subsequent Organizing Sessions

During the next session, the client and the PO strive to develop a rhythm within the organizing space. At the beginning of the session, the PO may present the written plan for review before work commences and check in with the client to see

how they feel after the first session. If this sounds like a therapy session, there's a good reason. Often, POs, while not clinicians, are helping their client much like a therapist or social worker would. There are parallels: letting the client share their stories, their fears, and their hopes of having a better life; giving the client tools to cope with their environment and possessions; and helping the client navigate the emotional consequences of sifting through memories, old bills, paper stacks, and abandoned projects. The process can be emotionally draining. The PO doesn't actually offer any clinical or therapeutic advice but may encourage their client to reach out to a therapist or mental health professional.

Session length is usually set by the client and the PO and depends on the ability of the client to focus on the task at hand. For example, some clients are open to working four hours at a time, with a short break here and there, on an area that has easier decisions to make, such as a corner of the basement, which may hold items they haven't seen in a long time. The clients I've worked with have usually been more amenable to working on ridding their home of passive items (objects they no longer use) versus active items (items in their immediate living and sleeping spaces) that they see every day. Sometimes I offer a "mix-it-up" session. For clients who struggle with paper piles, two hours may be just right for sorting those. Then we add forty-five minutes of decluttering a pantry to finish the session. This offers the client a change of scenery and some respite from tougher decisions, and we're still meeting the client's goals.

Session length can increase over time, sometimes in increments as small as fifteen minutes per session. At my company, we try to work with our clients for at least two hours but not more than six. This maximum-length guideline is important. We believe that after six hours (four, really), our clients are so mentally and emotionally exhausted that the quality of their decision-making diminishes and they face burnout.

One of the strongest benefits of in-person appointments is that we're able to be our client's arms and legs. If a client decides they need something from another room, the PO will usually fetch it. If a bundle of clothes needs to go to donation, the PO will bag it, record it, and put it by the door to go out. If a basement shelf is empty and needs to be wiped down before new items are placed there, the PO will not only wipe down the shelf but will also contain and label the new items to be placed there. These actions allow the client to stay focused and maintain their momentum so that they have a successful session.

As with the first session, we allow fifteen minutes at the end of this session to tidy up our workspace, load cars with donations or items to sell, if appropriate, and make or confirm future appointments.

Sessions can be emotional. Linda Samuels relates to her clients in many ways and sometimes, she says, what's happening with a client could also be happening in her own life. "It could be that close," she shares. "But I can give them the gift of my attention. We (Professional Organizers) give our clients that. This is rare for them to receive, and I feel like this is a part of

my job, my responsibility to them.” Linda mentions that she uses her “mirror neurons” to sense when she’s feeling the same as a client is feeling during a session. “I will feel it. I will stop, acknowledge it, and sit with it. I don’t wash the feelings away, in either of us.” Recently while she was at a client’s home, the client’s caregiver announced the death of the client’s husband. Linda sat with her client patiently and supportively that day.

There are boundaries that Linda adheres to as well, lines that she teeters on with each client, and it’s not the same with all clients. When asked how far she pushes without pushing too far, Linda says her technique is to state the goals up front but stay fluid with the process. “What are they willing to do? We don’t want to *make* them do anything, but encouraging them profusely works for me. There is a feel to it—a give and take. I am challenged with sometimes wondering if I pushed them a little more, then they would be able to move faster. It is really hard to push someone through their emotions, so we have to be gentle with them. If there is resistance, I will back off. I will let them lead. *I will not take over.*”

From helping clients cope with their daily lives to simply locating an important piece of paper, Linda feels that she helps her clients at a core level. “The parts of their lives that I can help them with makes a big difference in how they handle the other parts,” she shares. She feels that helping people have little wins among the losses gives them one less stress that they have to deal with. “It’s not uncommon for me to walk into a situation where a client is in distress. My goal is that they are in

a different place by the end of the session. They are laughing, they are smiling, they are *better*.”

Jonda Beattie often shares some of her own story with a client. “I will also let them know that many others walk similar paths, although each person is unique. I remind them that they are special.

“I keep them motivated when working through the process by each time having them share their wins since the last session. I will often add to their win list from things I have heard them say like, ‘I did not get the clothes put away that were on the loveseat but instead I cleared out a drawer and spent some time with my daughter.’ I will turn that into two wins. ‘You cleaned out a drawer that will now make more space for your clothes, and you prioritized your time to allow time with your daughter.’”

Jonda also takes the time to remind clients of their vision for the project and point out what they’re doing to work toward that vision. “Nonjudgmental encouragement and accountability seem to go a long way,” she says.