

Anyone Can Become Organized With The Help Of A Good Coach
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I have spent years trying to explain to friends and family that what looks like disorganization and chaos is actually a sign of creativity. I know where everything is. Really.

So when I heard about Nicole Gabai of B. Organized, a professional organizer, I went through the equivalent of the five stages of grief.

Dismissal: A professional organizer? Get a real job.

Denial: Maybe some people are not organized, but I certainly don't have a problem.

Detachment: I'll write an article just to help other people who have a problem.

Finally, Acceptance: Hey, she really has something here.

And Revelation: Being organized can make you happier!

After my first conversation with Ms. Gabai, one thing became clear. With apologies to Tolstoy, "All organized people are alike. Each disorganized person is disorganized in their own way."

While people who are among the organizationally challenged have many of the same problems, with mounds of papers or dysfunctional filing systems, for example, each one is distinct, matching their hectic lives.

Perhaps someone has a large project that they cannot get done because the task of organizing the material is too daunting. Or they have such busy lives that it is hard to keep everything straight. Or between children and work, nothing is getting done.

Whatever the problem is, Ms. Gabai assesses it and develops systems in order to get the person's life organized and back on track.



Michele Brandt of Falmouth, who owns Curves fitness centers o the Cape, talks to Nicole Gabai about her filing system, as they sit in the gym office in Mashpee.

Watching Ms. Gabai working with a client, it is clear that a professional organizer is a combination parent, friend, boss, teacher, and even therapist. She is non-judgmental but firm. "Do you really need five sets of golf clubs?" she asked the husband of one client. He agreed he didn't.

Among her skills are that of a "Ms. Fix-It," who can quickly solve stubborn problems.



She arrives at a job site with the tools of the trade, a cute little satchel containing a tape measure, a labelmaker, a face mask, rubber gloves, a glue gun, tape gun, Scotch tape, a heavy black marker, and a little red drill.

The drill is to fix what is apparently a perpetual problem, broken file cabinets that have become useless.

Organizing people's lives is like walking through a minefield. You never know when you will hit a nerve: a tattered doll that reminds someone of their deceased mother, a document that turns out to be the final papers for a divorce.

Ms. Gabai said 99 percent of her clients get emotional at one point or another during the organizing process when they come across something sentimental.

What qualifies Ms. Gabai to survey people's lives and manage them? An innate knack for systems she developed through years of jobs in which organization was a requirement.

Growing up, Ms. Gabai never thought of organizing as a particular skill of hers.

She was born in Lima, Peru. Her father, a Holocaust survivor, emigrated with his family from France during World War II. When she was 7 years old, her family moved to Miami where her mother's family was from. She lived there until she was 17.

Ms. Gabai attended college in New York City, studying art and design at Parsons School of Design and the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Her first job out of college was at MTV in New York. What followed were numerous jobs in the television commercial production industry, where being organized was a requirement of the job.

Her job was to create the filing systems, to manage all the receipts and paperwork generated in making commercials, sometimes as many as five at a time in different states or even different countries.

"What I learned in production jobs was that commercial productions are the most heavily audited business in the country," she said.

The reason for that is that the productions go through such an enormous amount of cash in such a short time, about a half million dollars on average, and it is mostly all cash. That attracts the attention of the Internal Revenue Service.

"I learned a lot about keeping track of money, materials, and inventory," she said. "My job was making sure all the paperwork was in order on all the productions. I really learned a lot about how to manage systems."

Ms. Gabai lived in New York for 20 years, until a couple of years ago when a fire and water damage in the apartment building where she lived forced all the residents to move out of the building for a month. One of Ms. Gabai's clients had a house in Falmouth Heights and offered it to her as a temporary residence. Ms. Gabai fell in love with the town and stayed.

For Ms. Gabai, learning she had a special flair for organization came over time.

She found that after she moved from one production company to another, the people who had her previous jobs would often call her up and compliment her on her filing systems.

"I didn't think about it. To me it was logical," she said of her systems.

She thought she might be able to use that gift for organizing in creating her own business.

One of Ms. Gabai's main mantras is that there is hope for the organizationally challenged.

To those who believe being organized is genetic, you either are or you are not, Ms. Gabai disagrees.

Sure, there are people who are naturally more neat and tidy. But when it comes to organizing, "it's a learned skill," Ms. Gabai said.

Among her clients are creative people, artists and scientists. She calls them "non-linear thinkers."

"Once I teach them skills, they fall into step," she said.

When Ms. Gabai started her own business seven years ago as a professional organizer, it was something relatively new, but now, as she says, it is "a hugely growing field."

Recently, she helped Michele C. Brandt, owner of the Curves franchise on Cape Cod, to organize her new office in her gym at Deer Run Crossing in Mashpee.

Michele and her husband, Nelson J. Brandt, own and manage five Curves gyms on the Cape, in Mashpee, Sandwich, Centerville, South Dennis, and Orleans.

Besides running the gyms, Ms. Brandt and her husband, who live in Ballymeade in North Falmouth, also own and manage Clipper Ship Landing, which are 28 rental units in Teaticket. Ms. Brandt's husband is a Coast Guard pilot and they have two children.

Faced with a stack of papers from Ms. Brandt's businesses and personal life, Ms. Gabai went through each one and assessed what it is, whether it is needed, and where it should go.

Ms. Gabai works with her clients in three-hour sessions. Anything more is too exhausting for the client.

Once she gets a feel for what needs to be organized, she designs systems to make it work. The key is that everything needs to be accessible and easy to find. For Ms. Gabai, that means all papers need to be vertical-that is, in files-rather than horizontal-in piles.

"The whole point is trying to file for retrieval," Ms. Gabai explained.

Ms. Gabai sounds like a therapist when she asks questions to which she already knows the answer.

For example, when she saw Ms. Brandt's desk chair at her house, Ms. Gabai asked, "Is that comfortable?"

Ms. Brandt responded, "No, but it matches the desk."

Ms. Gabai made the suggestion of a more comfortable chair, so that Ms. Brandt will spend the time she needs to at the desk.

"It's not always how it looks. It's how it functions," Ms. Gabai said.

Ms. Gabai said that she surveys everything in a client's surroundings with a critical eye.

"By the time they call, no matter how it looks, it doesn't work for them now," she said.

Ms. Brandt said that for her, using a professional organizer has been invaluable. What started as a filing project has become a life-organizer. "It's made my life so much more manageable," she said.

That's exactly what Ms. Gabai seeks to do. "It is about making your life more efficient," Ms. Gabai said.

Ms. Gabai can work with some people for years, returning to help maintain the systems she has set up. She mentions the case of one client with several homes, in which one of the homes is perfectly organized, where the others are "falling apart."

For another client, Ms. Gabai organized thousands of documents in preparation for a court case. The woman credits winning the case partly to how organized she was thanks to Ms. Gabai.

Ms. Gabai has also been hired by the children of elderly parents to help the parents with a move or a downsizing project.

She has been hired by parents to work with children whose collections have gotten out of control. That duty is not as tough as it sounds.

"Kids love to get organized," Ms. Gabai said.

Organizing photographs has its own category of professional organizers, Ms. Gabai explained. She subcontracts out such jobs to a woman she knows who can take "suitcases of photos" and make beautiful albums of just the best pictures, giving the client back the remains for disposal or to keep.

Projects like organizing photos often do not get done because it "sends people down memory lane."

Working so closely with people with their most personal belongings, Ms. Gabai calls "a privilege."

"They trust me and I am very honored to hold that confidence," she said.