



Style File: Shopping in your own closet

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We've all been there, that moment when we stand in our closet pawing through our clothes and utter those words, "I have nothing to wear!" We may feel that way, but rarely is it true.

Sometimes all we need is to reassess what we have and look at our clothes with fresh eyes. That is exactly what Kristy Downer, owner of Closet Remix in Boston (Richochet617.com), does for her clients.



"After having worked in retail for several years, I decided to take my favorite part of the business — styling — and turn it into a job," she says. "The Closet Remix idea came to me one night when I was helping a friend 'shop' her closet for an outfit for a date. She didn't want to go out and buy another piece of clothing that would be worn once and then make its way to the back of her closet, never to be seen again. So I pulled together a whole new look with what she already had. She told me I had an amazing eye to see what's not there. That was it! I loved the challenge of re-creating and thought, why not make it my day job?"

What Downer does for clients is help them to see what they are overlooking — the many ways they can make new looks from items they already own.

Downer says the first step is to take all your clothes out of your closet — you may find a hidden gem back there.

"As a general rule, if you haven't worn something in a year, toss it," she says. "Make three piles — 'keep,' 'maybe' and 'toss.' After making those piles, then look through the 'maybe' pile again to decide what to keep. Try everything on to make sure it has the right fit and to remind yourself of that great piece that sits in the back of your closet."

Once you've done this, Downer says you can begin to remix what you've got. You may want to add some classic items to round out your wardrobe.

"It's about adding key pieces to what you have that you really need and will covet for a long time in your closet," she says. "A black or navy fitted menswear-inspired blazer is essential, but it must fit really well and be tailored properly. You can throw it over any dress or any jeans and a top you've already got. A high-waisted pencil skirt, mixed with a very tailored jacket, is a great, classic look.

"In addition, some flouncy skirts with a fitted white T-shirt are great to add to your closet and, of course, a fantastic pair of jeans that fit you just right. And let's not forget about the very feminine, stylish wrap dress.

"Focus on getting pieces that can be dressed up and dressed down. You can add a statement necklace to make the outfit yours, it's the mixture that's key."

Be careful about falling into the trendy trap — buying something on impulse that doesn't really have a home in your wardrobe.

"I run into this problem all the time. People buy pieces they like without giving any thought as to what they already have and if they have anything to go with that piece. It then gets pushed to the back of their closet with the tags still on it. When you are out shopping and you see a piece that you really love, stop and think, 'What do I have in my wardrobe that I can wear this with?'"

Creating a wardrobe that fits your lifestyle, budget and figure isn't always easy; Downer says she sometimes helps clients with the additions once she's culled their closet and seen what they need.

"The very first step is to meet for a free consultation to assess the clients' style and needs," she says. "Then I can come in with a few style options in mind when we do the real remix. With some of my clients, the closet remix turns into personal shopping. I go out and pick up pieces, then bring them to her house and remix them into what she has. I can also make a list of staple pieces that would fit into what the client already has that they can buy for themselves."

Downer says you may be surprised to discover many new looks with what you already have lurking in your closet.

"You can take a casual long-sleeve dress, something very plain. You can belt it and wear it with flat boots, for one look, or add tights and wear heels, pair it with a blazer for another," she says. "Adding a cardigan and jewelry can bring together a look, there are so many ways to get different looks out of that one main item. It's about thinking outside of the box and having fun with it."

With a little time and creativity, you may never again dread having nothing to wear the next time you go out.

"Sometimes people are afraid of what they aren't used to," says Downer. "For example, one of my clients only had black, gray and brown in her closet. I picked up a few patterned and colored pieces for her to try. At first she was very skeptical, but she wore all of the pieces and thanked me for pushing her in a different direction.

"I want to inspire the client to look at themselves in a new way and think outside the box. Having style does not mean breaking the bank or trying to pull off something that isn't for you just because it is 'in.' Try new things, but you know when it's just not for you.

"To me, there is nothing better than styling someone and have them look in the mirror and feel great in what they are wearing. Chic is when a woman is in harmony with herself. It's all about rocking it with confidence!"

Getting the most from your closet

We asked two experts at style and organization for their advice on digging into the closet.

Karen E. Costa of Mattapoisett, a fashion consultant with Organization By Design Inc. based in Needham (www.dressingwell.com), offers these tips:

1. The way you hang your clothes in your closet is an important tool in educating your eye to see outfits as opposed to separates.
2. A great way to help you get out the door quickly in the morning is to assemble complete outfits on a suit-type hanger. Add accessories either by hanging them on the hanger or put them in zip-lock bags and then clip them on the hanger.
3. Organize your clothes by color within type (pants, skirts, tops, jackets). Usually it is appealing to the eye to work light to dark colors.
4. After removing the clothes and accessories that no longer work for you, set up your closet like a warm, happy place that you look forward to visiting each day. Decorate your closet with your accessories. Hang necklaces, scarves and handbags and totes. You will usually only wear the accessories that you can see immediately.
5. Always have a full-length mirror in or next to your closet. That way you can see the whole outfit paired with your accessories.

Falmouth's Nicole Gabai, owner of B. Organized (B-organized.net), suggests the following:

1. Maximize your space. Look underneath the hanging clothes ... there is always lots of unused space from the floor up to the bottom of the hanging items. Here you can stack shelves for shoes. Also, above the shelf in a closet is another great place for more storage. Think of getting cubbies or shelving so you can stack clothes and other items up to the ceiling

2. Look carefully at your clothes and shoes, one by one. Are there stains? Small tears or holes? Do the shoes or that sweater look just too worn out? Then it's time to toss those items. If anything is in disrepair, make a decision to fix it or toss it.

3. Use the one-year rule: If you haven't worn an item of clothing in a year (through all four seasons), then chances are you aren't going to wear it. In general, we only wear about 20 percent of what's in our closet. Toss or donate items you are just not wearing. If you love clothes and tend to collect pieces, then you can use the two-year rule - but be very selective!

4. Ask yourself, do you love it? Does it love you? If not, toss or donate!