



# Book When Organizing Isn't Enough

## SHED Your Stuff, Change Your Life

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### Recommendation

Almost everyone wants to become better organized. Thorough reorganization involves getting rid of the assorted rubbish that weighs you down and prevents you from moving ahead efficiently. Some of this junk is physical, but not all of it. Your junk can include an overbooked schedule, a mountain of action items that never get done and bad habits that steal your time. Organization expert Julie Morgenstern developed the “SHED” system to help people eliminate the messes that accumulate in their lives. Do you want to get rid of the bulky load of bricks you’re carrying? Morgenstern can teach you how. Her approach to organizing is pragmatic and highly useful. She doesn’t dwell on working smarter, improving your schedule or completing action items. Instead, she focuses on ridding yourself of your heavy load of junk, whatever it is, so you can start over fresh and light. *BooksInShort* believes her book is perfect for anyone who wants a new, uncluttered start.

### Take-Aways

- The “SHED” program enables you to get rid of the possessions, time commitments and bad habits that have become burdens in your life so you can start anew.
- Use the program to make a change or when unwanted change is thrust upon you.
- SHED stands for “separate” your treasures, “heave” your trash, “embrace” yourself, and “drive into the future.”
- Before you shed, develop a new theme for the life you want in the future.
- Inventory the three primary “shedding points”: your possessions, your activities and your bad habits.
- Assign each item, to-do entry and habit an attachment score and an obsolescence score, so you know what you can discard and what to keep.
- To shed properly, hold onto only 10% to 20% of what currently constitutes your life.
- Once you start to shed, you will feel energized. Don’t look back. Discard your burdens.
- When you are done, spend some quiet time reflecting on what you want and then begin pursuing your real goals.
- Make the shed program an ongoing process, not a one-time target.

### Summary

#### How to Change

Are you in a rut? Do you know some type of change is in order, even if you are not sure what it should be? If you’re in this situation, you can use the transformative “SHED” process to change your life and move ahead. Shedding can blast you out of your inertia and supercharge you.

“Clinging to the old, the irrelevant and stagnant will bog you down, hold you back and make you feel stuck.”

It can help anyone who undergoes a significant transition, such as starting a company, moving to a new home, getting married or having a child. It can help people deal with unanticipated changes, such as divorce, loss of income or sudden illness. And it is the ideal tool to help people reach self-fulfillment. Are you ready to shed? You are if you want a new life course but don’t know how to start; if you recently made a significant life change but feel no different than before; or if some major life change is being forced upon you.

“No one lets go of anything without reaching for something else.”

Using the shed program, you can get rid of the possessions, activities, action items and habits that burden you. Like a boxer getting down to fighting weight, ditch everything that weighs you down. Shedding is a deliberate, deliberative process. It is holistic and encompassing. You do not throw away everything willy-nilly from your old life, and strike out blindly for some vague and unexamined new future. Shedding provides a framework for meaningful change in four steps:

1. **Separate all your “treasures”** – Examine everything that occupies your life and makes it what it is. This includes your possessions, your actions and your habits. Categorize everything in your life according to attachment (whether it energizes and fulfills you) and obsolescence (whether it still supports you or if it drains you of needed vigor).
2. **Heave all your “trash”** – After you identify which treasures to keep, get rid of all of the possessions, activities and bad habits that impede you or slow you down.
3. **Embrace the remarkable individual that you are** – You are not someone who is defined by possessions or titles. Your self-worth has nothing to do with your things.
4. **Drive into the future with ambition and hope** – Begin to fill your existence with only those possessions, activities, habits and experiences that reinforce the ambitious “theme” you have chosen for your new life.

## What Is Your Theme?

A transition into a new life requires careful planning. First, develop a theme for your future life that expresses your goals, your purpose and your broad plan for the future. Typical themes might include finding love, securing career advancement, expanding your boundaries, living healthily, or even pursuing adventure, serenity or learning. Use three guiding principles to find your theme:

1. **Take a big-picture approach** – Encapsulate all aspects of your life.
2. **Your theme should be simple** – Create a lens you can use to view and evaluate your life.
3. **Don’t shortchange yourself** – Your theme should represent your highest aspirations, not just the bare minimum you feel you can manage. At this stage, don’t worry about the obstacles. Aim for the stars. Be willing to look deep inside yourself to discover your theme. Don’t be afraid.

“Bad habits steal hours every day.”

Once you discover a workable theme for the future, pick through your treasures and detritus to get rid of the deadweight and clutter. What areas of your life pull you down? Re-envision these stagnant areas as “points of entry.” Through the shed process, you will burst through these bogs into bright, new vistas of energy, purpose and vitality. Points of entry can be rooms full of stuff you don’t need, poor habits that get in your way, or activities that consume your time and focus.

“Bad habits are behaviors that load your schedule with burdensome commitments, tasks and responsibilities, forcing you to continue playing roles that are no longer a good fit.”

Points of entry give shedding a focus. Use them to free your physical and mental space, and revitalize yourself. Some points of entry offer more opportunity than others. Shedding will help you choose the best ones to attack. You’ll find your entry points in three zones: your possessions and the physical space you occupy, your daily schedule and the activities that take your time, and your habits and way of doing things. Free up space in these areas:

1. **Physical** – This is the easiest place to begin. Inventory your furniture, clothing, kitchen cookware and utensils, storage items, books, magazines, physical files and all your other belongings. Place checkmarks next to the things that detract from your theme.
2. **Schedule** – Identify the elements of your schedule and your to-do list that drain your energy. This may include assignments that are no longer appropriate, meaningless meetings, time-consuming committee activities and old obligations.
3. **Habits** – Bad habits steal your energy and time, and deflect your productivity. Of the three points of entry, bad habits are the toughest to control and overcome. They are deeply ingrained in how you do things. They represent adaptive coping mechanisms. Once, they served a useful purpose. The fact that they are no longer useful does not mean they are easy to eradicate. When you do get rid of them, you will free up immense psychic energy and valuable time. You will no longer feel heavily burdened.

## Getting Started

People usually start the shedding process in the physical realm, the easiest area to find things to shed. However, you may wish to shed bad habits first or drop burdensome items from your schedule. Determine which points of entry offer you the best “space gain” and start there. As you free up space and time, you will immediately feel less burdened. You will have more energy later to attack those areas that are not as promising.

“Bad habits wreak havoc on our ability to shed because they are often the root cause of our cluttered space and overcrowded schedules.”

To start with physical items, go through every room of your home and office – all the physical spaces you inhabit. List all probable points of entry and inventory the items in each place. Points of entry could include books, furniture, files, tools, clothing, you name it. Determine the point of entry’s size factor – the bigger the area it takes up, the more space you can liberate. For example, a mechanic is likely to have a large tool area. Assign each item an obsolescence percentage and an attachment level. For example, an old hat you no longer wear may rate 95% on the obsolescence scale and an “easy” on the attachment scale, so you can get rid of it with no difficulty.

“Much of the difficulty in shedding is simply getting started.”

To attack your schedule and to-do items, review your normal daily activities on an hour-by-hour basis. Possible points of entry include meetings, tasks, work activities, chores and other calendared items. Determine the size ratings for each point of entry. Now, inventory each scheduled and to-do item in broad categories, and assign obsolescence and attachment ratings. This analysis often awakens people to the fact that they spend up to half their time on needless tasks – activities that do not further the achievement of their broad goals.

“Developing your list of treasure guidelines is similar to preparing a packing list for a long vacation, or a shopping list before going to the supermarket.”

To address bad habits, precisely track your time for a few days. Record everything you do and the time it takes. Look for nonproductive activities that interfere with the time available to accomplish your main goals. Using your log, develop a points-of-entry list as you did for your physical items and schedule commitments. Write the main points of entry, the size of the habit (too much TV watching would be a “large” size), and your obsolescence and attachment ratings.

## **“Separate the Treasures”**

Now you have an inventory of your possessions, activities and habits. You have rated them according to how much room they take up in your life, how important they are and how useful – or obsolescent – they may be. Now focus on getting rid of the possessions, activities and habits that weigh you down. In your point-of-entry inventory lists, you will find many “treasures” with high attachment scores. To unburden yourself, be prepared to dump 80% to 90% of them. If you shed less, you will still feel bogged down. Only hold on to those things, activities and habits that supply you with energy and purpose, that are useful to your new theme, or that are inspirational or irreplaceable mementoes.

“Your treasures help to provide the most complete picture of who you are.”

Determining which physical possessions to unload will probably be easiest, at least emotionally. However, be prepared to devote a great deal of physical energy, time and effort to the actual removal process. Practically, disposing of furniture, books, clothes and other things is not easy. Do it properly.

“The easiest way to find value in the clutter is to slow down and think back to the time when it didn’t exist.”

Dealing with scheduled activities is even harder. Develop some useful “treasure guidelines” to sort out worthwhile activities and to-do items from those that are unnecessary, obsolete or not worth the effort. Ask yourself why you assumed various commitments. What was your original motivation? Does it apply to your new theme? If not, eliminate it. Use this same process for your bad habits. Why did you first become attached to them? What problems did they solve? You cannot eliminate bad habits until you understand what they supply in your life. Once you know that, you can find productive substitutes.

## **“Heave the Trash”**

Now you understand what you have and you’ve separated the treasures from the trifles. It’s time to unburden yourself of your trash. Don’t hesitate. Be radical. Get rid of unneeded stuff quickly. Don’t drag it out. Remove all the unnecessary items from a particular entry point. If you leave some “stuff” there while you move to a different entry point, it may quickly become a new stagnant area. Develop a good “exit plan” for your physical possessions. You may have to donate or trash your stuff. Just get rid of it. It’s in your way.

“Heaving can be daunting but it can also be tremendously energizing, fulfilling and transformative.”

For tasks and to-dos, delegate whatever you can. Diminish the level of your involvement in other activities or delete them entirely. Expect to ruffle a few feathers. This is often unavoidable. For example, maybe you always participate in a 4 p.m. meeting on Fridays with your colleagues. You now see that it isn’t necessary. Let everyone know that you’re not coming and don’t backslide. For most people, bad habits represent the primary time-stealers. They also are the toughest items to shed. Breaking a bad habit usually takes about a month. Is watching too much television your bad habit? Resolve not to watch any TV for 30 days. Stick to it. Use this 30-day approach to eliminate any bad habit. If you incessantly check e-mail, swearing off entirely may be impractical, so allow yourself just to check it during a few prescribed periods throughout the day. Eliminating bad habits is never easy. Don’t be too hard on yourself if you don’t succeed in the first 30 days. Set up a new 30-day period and try again.

## **“Embrace Your Identity”**

You are now free of the physical possessions, activities and bad habits that have held you back. You feel light, and ready for something new. You are prepared to institute your life’s new theme. At this exciting new point, you’ll naturally want to strike out quickly and boldly in new directions. But like any new journey, you should take things slowly at first. Instead of jumping into another activity, spend some quiet time with yourself. Become centered. Take advantage of this period to be introspective and find out who you really are. Examine and embrace yourself. Build your confidence for your exciting new journey. Develop the discipline you need to achieve your new plans and goals.

## **“Drive Yourself Forward”**

The time has finally come to begin your journey into your new life. You have already chosen a theme for what you want your life to be in the future. Now that you are free of your burdens, don’t be afraid to also explore new experiences and activities that may not relate specifically to your theme. Treasure your time during this period of exploration and self-actualization. The world that awaits you is diverse and fascinating. Try new things. You are a bird with new wings, so fly a little. Afterward, you can begin to connect with your new-theme activities. Take a trial-and-error approach. Experiment. Don’t rush. Explore your theme and all its exciting new opportunities.

“The nuts and bolts of physically removing items from your space can be even more formidable than the emotional aspect of parting with once-beloved possessions.”

The shed process has given you an open road in your life and your schedule. So start your journey. Focus on the activities and interests that excite you the most. As you charge ahead, be prepared for setbacks. Some of your old habits and activities may reappear. This is the anticipated “30% slip.” Don’t be dismayed; everyone experiences some temporary slippage. When you start to slip, put the shed program right back to work. It represents a process, not a solitary end point. It is a valuable tool that you can use over and over to stay loose and free. When new burdens arise, as they surely will, you know precisely what to do: Just start to shed again.

# About the Author

**Julie Morgenstern**, speaker and consultant, teaches people how to get organized. She served on the board of the National Association of Professional Organizers.

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