

Your Life

STOP PAYING FOR STORAGE

Pro advice for cleaning out that rental unit: 'Use it or lose it'

BY MAISY FERNANDEZ



To keep or not to keep? It's a dilemma older adults face with a lifetime of accumulated belongings. But when the stuff has spilled outside your living space and into a storage unit, it's time for a hard assessment.

According to [move.org](https://www.move.org), the average storage unit in the United States costs about \$180 per month. That's more than \$2,000 a year you could save through decluttering. "When you add it up over time, it's a lot of money," says Susan Blumenfeld of Boston-based New Roots Move Management. Some of her clients have spent \$25,000 over a decade for off-site storage.

Another issue with renting a storage unit—or even storing possessions in a basement, attic or garage—is that out of sight means out of mind. You are more likely to hang on to stuff you don't need when you don't see it in your

regular living space. But eventually, you or your heirs will have to deal with it, says Seattle-based professional organizer Julianna Poplin. So why wait? Here, Blumenfeld and Poplin weigh in on commonly stored items.

FURNITURE

Don't hang on to furniture indefinitely, thinking someone might need it someday. "Obviously, if it's in a storage unit, nobody is using it," Poplin says. So give family members the ultimatum: If you want it, come and get it. If they have no room for it now, let them pay for the storage. They might think differently about it when money is on the line. "If nobody wants it, let it go," says Poplin. Some vintage furniture, especially the ever-popular mid-century modern styles, might fetch a nice price at a consignment shop or in a private sale. And don't fall victim to sentimentality. "If it's ultra special, why isn't it in your house?" Blumenfeld asks.

SPORTS EQUIPMENT

If the gear is for a sport you are currently engaged in—say, every winter you go on ski trips—then store the stuff. If not, sell it off. "That bike that you spent \$2,000 to \$3,000 on that you aren't riding? You say 'But I might ride it.' But you're not," Blumenfeld says.

PHOTOS

"This is a very big issue," Blumenfeld says. "Most likely, those are the only thing that matter in your life besides your family." Digitizing them will save space, but that takes "an inordinate amount of time; I don't think people are gonna do it." Blumenfeld suggests storing them at home in a fireproof file cabinet. Poplin advises taking some time to label the photos. "What's hard for people is to inherit boxes full of pictures of people they don't know, so it doesn't hold any meaning for them."

OLD RECORD ALBUMS AND CDs

"If you can get music online, why are you keeping it?" Blumenfeld asks. And don't hold on to these for financial value. "CDs are out. You're not saving those," Blumenfeld says. You can donate them to a thrift store. Vinyl records are in demand, so a record store might buy those.

OLD TECH

It's common to store old computers, stereo equipment, movie projectors and so on. But why? "There's no point in keeping any of that unless you're using it," Poplin says. One item that might be worth digging out of storage is a slide projector, Blumenfeld suggests. Setting it up for a family viewing during a get-together could be fun.

KIDS' ARTWORK

It can be difficult to part with this, but let's get real. "Don't just put boxes of things in storage that someone is just going to pitch later anyway," Poplin says. Go through the artwork, keeping the most meaningful items in a box in your home. Better yet, take photos of them and discard the items, Blumenfeld says.

LUGGAGE

This is a common storage item, but you can reduce the number of suitcases you store. Says Poplin, “It makes sense to keep the sizes you would use on a longer trip and a shorter trip—so two suitcases.”

CHILDHOOD TROPHIES

“Nobody wants that,” Poplin says. “Those things are janky and cheap. You could offer it to your kid, but they’d probably laugh that you were still holding on to it.”

KIDS’ TOYS AND CLOTHES

Parents often hold on to these items with the notion that they could be useful for their grandchildren. “Keep that stuff to a minimum,” says Poplin, who suggests keeping only a bin or two that will fit in your home, rather than paying for storage. “Parents make assumptions about what their kids will or will not want,” Blumenfeld says. Toy trends come and go. But things that might be worth keeping are special items, “like, my father made this really cool wooden box with all different latches.”

FAMILY HEIRLOOMS

Often, we keep such items out of a sense of obligation. But “you might be wasting your space holding on to things that nobody wants,” Poplin says. “And it’s not valuable to you if you’re willing to put it somewhere that’s not in your home.”

CRAFTING SUPPLIES

“If you plan to use it, put it in a clear bin and take it back to your house,” Blumenfeld says. But “very often people say, ‘Those are my grandmother’s knitting needles.’ Ask yourself questions about why you are actually holding on to this stuff.”

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

You might think these are valuable, but they’re probably not. “Those might be more susceptible to damage if the environment isn’t controlled,” Poplin says. “Pass it along to someone who can use it.”

FINE CHINA

“That’s a hard one for people,” Poplin says. “Everyone got it when they got married, but nobody uses it. See if anyone wants it and pass it along.” Blumenfeld is more blunt. “It doesn’t have value. You can go anywhere and buy a set of china inexpensively. If it has sentimental value, keep a couple of plates and bowls and put them with your regular dishes. Use it or lose it.”

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Find more tips in the AARP Smart Guide to Decluttering at aarp.org/declutter.