

A Professional Organizer Overhauled My Closet—Here's What Happened

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Full disclosure: I may have the world's tiniest closet. Studio living is real in New York City, and the real estate gods did not grace me with the wardrobe square footage a woman really deserves. When I first moved into my "charming" (read: small) East Village apartment, I saw it as a challenge—it was the year of Marie Kondo, micro-living was the new buzzword, and my décor editor brain spun like a 3D jigsaw puzzle in the making. I can do this. I can live in 280 square feet and have only one closet.

With the amount of organizing and decluttering stories I had written, I thought I knew everything I needed to claim the title of most insanely organized wardrobe... I knew the KonMari folding method. I owned matching felt hangers, and color coded my clothes. But after months of shopping for the latest event, work function, or trip—it didn't matter how many storage hacks I knew—the clutter behind my closet doors painted a different portrait.

So I brought in the big guns. In this case, the ammunition to help me conquer the perfectly organized closet came in the form of a witty and charming (but slightly ruthless) home staging expert and professional organizer named **Tori Toth**. A born and bred New Yorker, small space living held no secrets for her. I was already doing a few things right, she told me, my pride momentarily restored: I hung my clothes by style, length, and color. All my hangers were non-slip. I had wire baskets to organize my winter accessories. As it turns out, I was doing everything else all wrong. **You may think you're a pro at organizing—but how much do you really know? Read Toth's advice and find out.**



Original Illustrations by Stephanie DeAngelis

Use Your Vertical Space

"You're not really using your vertical space at all," **Toth** says after taking a first glance at my closet (and—if I'm being honest—my entire apartment). Look at all that space up there." She was right. My closet top shelf was a jumbled mess of tote bags, clutches, portable filing boxes, and out of season items. What's worse, I couldn't remember the last time I used anything I was storing up there. "You need to use your vertical space, and get everything off the floor (shelving is great for that). A lot of people don't notice the space up above their heads, and that's crucial space to utilize." My beautiful white walls may have seemed soothing, but with some clever organizing, they could also serve another purpose.

Lesson learned: Don't limit yourself to your closet's clothing rod—or even to your closet. Consider the vertical space in adjacent rooms and how it could be better utilized with bookcases or shelves.



Keep a Step Stool

Her next order of business: "You need a step ladder," she told me while watching me struggling to grab items from the higher shelf. "Keep a small plastic one on a hook or on the side of your closet so you can easily pop it up and go." Considering I most often use the nearest chair to grab hard to reach items—aka a desk chair on wheels—I had to agree. "When storing items above eye level, it's important to have a convenient way to get to those items," she says. "I recommend keeping an easy folding footstool that you can grab, use, and then store away between cabinets or hanging on a door." Maybe if the items on my higher shelves weren't so out of reach, I would actually remember they exist!

Lesson learned: If you are using your vertical space correctly, you'll need an easy access—one that's safe and easily tucked away. A foldable step stool hung on the side of your closet is the perfect accessory.

Store Away Off-Season Items

Full disclosure: I normally swap my closets every season like a normal person. But between a few too many recent trips and a hectic work/life balance, there I was: standing in front of my closet with my professional organizer staring at a collection of sandals and summer dresses. "All the bags and coats I actually wear frequently are actually hung on my barstools," I hesitantly admitted. "I don't remember the last time I wore the coats in my closet." This was true. "So then you're just keeping clutter," she joked. "First, you should keep it seasonal. Put your summer shoes away, and purge the ones you don't wear. You have sandals front and center here—there's no way you're wearing them for a while." I knew this was closet organizing 101—and yet by letting my closet go day after day, I had failed to realize the obvious: it was February and I still hadn't stored away my summer clothes.

"If you have limited closet space, a way to gain square footage is store away belongings that you won't use for each season," she told me. "You can even store these items off-site to stay clutter free. Make sure to use clear plastic bins and label them so you can easily locate the items you have stored."

Lesson learned: Make a point to swap out your closets every six months and cut your clutter in half. If you haven't worn something all season, don't store it away. Toss it in the donate pile instead.

Fold Your Pants and Sweaters

"So you hang everything, your sweaters and all of that," she observed while looking through my clothes. While I knew that sweaters should really be folded and not hung, the lack of proper shelving made me revert back to bad hanging habits. "I have some sweaters in my dresser," I replied, but it's also filled to the brim. Then, with pride, I added: "I used the Konmari method to fold my clothes in there to make more space." This was true and I actually truly enjoyed this clever folding hack that made finding things so much easier.

"I've tried the Marie Kondo folding method, and found that it doesn't work for me," she replied. "That's not really the way we fold clothes to begin with—I find it's an extra step. I like to organize in a way that I'm not taking all these extra steps. My thought process when I saw your closet was to put more of your sweaters and pants on the top shelf and section them off with shelf dividers—because these are taking up so much space on your rod. Many times sweaters and pants can eat up valuable rod space because they're bulky hanging up. Plus, sweaters can get deformed if hung for long periods of time. Try folding your pants and sweaters on the shelf above the rod. This helps display the different items you have while being able to store more." By the time I completed that step, I had over 30 hangers freed up on my clothing rod.

Lesson learned: Fold your sweaters, especially the chunkier ones, because the thinner ones may end up getting lost in the pile. Do the same with pants, and watch your hanging space multiply.

Store Clutches in a Larger Tote

"What's all these big totes?" she asked referencing the two or three large tote bags taking over my top shelf. In all honesty, I couldn't even remember their contents. So I pulled them down and looked inside—more totes! A veritable collection of reusable shopping bags I had amassed at a variety of events—none of which I had actually ever used. I knew they didn't belong on my valuable shelf real estate.

"You should put your smaller bags—like clutches—inside bigger bags so it's easier to store. There is nothing worse than storing a bag inside a storage product. Save some money and use the biggest bag you have to store all your other purses and clutches to keep them all contained in the same place." While I really would have loved an entire closet section dedicated to shoes and bags, this would have to do for now. And for the amount of times I used my evening bags, it actually ended up being a very clever (and space saving) solution.

Lesson learned: If you haven't used a portion of your closet in a while, question what is stored there, and how you can utilize the space better.

Use Your Doors for Storage

"You're not utilizing your doors at all," Toth also told me. "Whether it be hooks, shelving, baskets or pegboards, this will help keep smaller items visible. The back of a door is a sacred space that should be an extension of your storage plan." Toth suggested hanging jewelry, shoe or clutch organizers on the inside of the closet doors to maximize storage space. Alternatively, she recommended hanging a hamper for dirty clothes or a donation bin for quick editing.

Lesson learned: It's not because a surface in your closet isn't made for storage that it shouldn't be used as such.



Keep a Hook for Empty Hangers

One of the simplest tricks she recommended turned out to be one of my favorites: hang a hook on the inside of your door to keep unused hangers. "Hanging extra empty hangers on the rod that's being used to display clothes can make it hard to rummage through the clothes. Rather use a large hook or nail to place the hangers on when not in use," she said to me. As someone who's always searching for the one empty black hanger in a sea of black clothing, I found this to be a deceptively simple yet brilliant solution. "What you can also do is hang a hook higher up on your door to keep your empty hangers, that way they don't get lost on the rod. So whenever you use something you just take the empty one out."

She also recommended I use my entryway wall to hang a few hooks that could take the occasional overflow of winter scarves, coats, jackets, and hats.

Lesson learned: There is something to be said about a clothing rod that actually has enough free space to let clothes fly across from one end to the other. Don't overpack your closet, and keep it loose hanger-free.



Light Up Dark Corners

My closet had become so dysfunctional that without even noticing, I had started to treat it as a faraway storage place. All my frequently used items (coats, jackets, shoes, and boots in particular) hung on the back of chairs or were tucked under an entryway bench. Why was I not using my closet? "First I think you need to make it a little prettier—maybe add removable wallpaper the back wall—it will make you want to look at your closet more and take care of it," said Toth.

"More importantly, the problem with having your shoes down below is that it gets covered by your clothes—it's just too dark and you forget about them. If you don't have a light in your closet, you can just stick one in—especially on the sides and at the bottom where it gets dark." Sconces would do the trick, but so would stick-on battery operated lights. "If you can't see it, how do you know it's there? Many times closets don't come equipped with a lighting source so use a battery operated light that sticks to the wall so you can finally see all those items you've been missing." Lesson learned: Clear up the gap between your shoes and your clothes. For me, that meant reducing my shoe collection by half and retracting my shoe rack to only tuck under the shorter clothing. A few pairs of tall boots filled the space under my dresses perfectly.



Double Up Your Rod

If all else fails, she told me, a double rod could make space for more clothing—but only if the height allowed. "Expand your closet's hanging space by using a double hang closet rod," she said. "It hooks over your existing rod to hang underneath the clothes and provide more space. This again provides a way to customize the vertical space being used in your closet." While I ultimately decided not to forego my shoe rack to make way for a double rod, I knew that in a pinch, this solution could come handy. Moreover, after going through all her other steps, I had brought the clothing on the main rod to a third of its original content. My top shelf was organized, and my shoes were neatly tucked away. It was as if my tiny closet had instantly tripled in size.

Lesson learned: Keep tweaking the system. "That's what most people do," Toth told me during our meeting. "They put something somewhere and never go back to tweak the system." Just like the old adage goes "The more you think you know, the less you know," I realized that the best road to an ultra organized space is to know you've never really reached your destination, and to keep striving to get there.