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BALANCING ACT

Getting help to get things right

The Miami Herald's Balance Makeover contest will help South Floridians clean up their act.

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Yes, yes, yes! according to many entries in The Miami Herald's Balance Makeover contest. More than 60 South Floridians entered our contest looking for help. About a dozen others submitted a spouse, friend, family member or boss.

One woman wrote that she's too busy to clear the clutter in her home. After banging her head on the dashboard after a recent car accident, "visions of my messy house came rapidly to mind," she said.

Sifting through entries, my editor, Terence Shepherd, and I recognized common themes: overcommitment, clutter, procrastination, disorganization and especially the inability to prioritize.

"On the surface, it seems like a lot of the applicants are lazy," Shepherd said. "But I think that people are so overwhelmed, they become paralyzed about what to do."

Experts to the rescue!

After my editor and I pared down entries, the final say went to our three specialists -- a professional organizer, a business/life coach and a decluttering company. Each expert will help someone based on whether they can be helped, whether they have issues others could relate to and their willingness to take advice.

Our first makeover will appear in this column next week. But our experts agreed to give advice to all of us. Some of our finalists will get personalized tips over the telephone. Others will get general tips in this column.

MOM WITH A DREAM

Next week, Diane Hatcher, owner of Time-Savers Professional Organizing Services in Cooper City, will make over Pamela Fero, an air-traffic controller who has dreams of starting her own business. Fero has six children; two have already moved out of her home but left lots of stuff behind. Fero's husband works the night shift, seven days a week. Hatcher will help organize Fero's home, her calendar and her daily routine.

Just wading through the entries with Hatcher, an active member of the National Association of Professional Organizers, enlightened me.

I saw myself in the entry from a Miami mother of three who scrambles to find time for herself among other time demands. Not only is the woman busy with the kids, she's a mentor to high school girls and vice president of her son's PTA. She's also a part-time student in a master's program at FIU and works full time in law enforcement.

"I enjoy my life. I love to stay active, and it seems that I can only function in disorder," she wrote. "But I know that there is a better way for me to manage my time and activities."

Hatcher pointed out that some people thrive on being busy. They feel overwhelmed, she says, but they won't give anything up. The first step is a desire to change, she says. Make a goal to simplify your life. Look for things to give up. (This is a challenge for many people). She also recommends scheduling a "day in" to get things done around your home. I tried this, and it helped.

FINDING THE TIME

From your entries, many of you feel engulfed by piles of stuff and lack the time to tackle it all. One woman entered her friend and writes: "She has been wanting to organize her office for years but hasn't found a system that works, so the task is unfinished and creating growing frustration for her."

When overwhelmed by clutter, Hatcher says, "Don't look at it as a big project. Break tasks down into small pieces."

One woman, who calls herself Promo Girl, says she's drowning in a vat of catalogs, paper and files. "Throw me a life preserver," she begs.

Hatcher advises: Attack one item at a time. "Keep it, donate it or throw it away." Then move on to the next item. "Once you get going, it motivates you to keep going," she says.

Your entries revealed this scary fact: Many of you drive our roads sleep deprived, trying to pack all sorts of tasks -- care giving, chauffeuring and a career -- into a 24-hour day. Pat Morgan, president of Smooth Sailing Business and Life Coaching in Miami, helps busy professionals stay focused on reaching their goals while enjoying life. She will choose a winner for our second Balance Makeover.

Sorting through candidates, Morgan noticed time-management issues cost many people a good night's sleep. Terry Sherman says she has an obsessive work schedule that has her rising at 5:30 a.m. and flossing at midnight. She's a do-gooder who has founded a half-dozen charities but needs help creating a more manageable work schedule. Sherman is 80.

SELF-WORTH

Morgan's advice: "It is not time management. It's self-management. It's about how you choose to spend your time. The first thing is determining what's draining your time and energy that could be delegated, automated or eliminated."

After I announced the Balance Makeover contest, the no-nonsense organizing experts from 1-800-GOT-JUNK offered to participate, too. They agreed to convert a couple's home from a hopeless mess into a clean and organized space, and they will be featured in our third Balance Makeover.

For a look at how I put the experts' tips to use, visit my blog. Go to www.MiamiHerald.com and click on the business page. E-mail your comments to cgoodman@MiamiHerald.com.