

Say yes, yes, yes to

closet rehab

QUALITIES OF LIFE

Sure, it hurts a little to open up to an expert. But then you're free of your wardrobe funk.

By Heidi Moore | SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The first step toward recovery: Recognize there's a problem. Stylist Robin Walker, who runs My Wardrobe Companion in Chicago, says clients' calls are usually triggered by a crisis—it could be a job promotion, an upcoming television appearance or something more prosaic, such as a busy morning spent rooting around for a missing shoe.

The closet is an extension of self, Walker says, and if it's disorganized or crammed with outdated pieces—tapered pants, anyone?—it's holding you back. Hiring a professional stylist for a wardrobe detox puts you on the mend.

These sessions involve an overhaul of the closet, from tossing out ill-fitting and ill-advised purchases to rearranging the closet by clothing type and color. What results is an edited wardrobe comprising only your best pieces—ones that fit and flatter.

Daryl Roe, 57, of Lakeview faced a closet crisis after moving to Chicago from the Baltimore area. In the process she downsized from a 4,000-square-foot home to 1,500 square feet, with similarly scaled-down storage space. Her new closet was "a disaster: I'd open the door and just close it, and I couldn't find anything to wear," she said. "I had to start over."

'It was just the most terrifying thing'

A work friend bought her a gift certificate for a closet-organization session with Chicago stylist Noelle Cellini of My Best Foot Forward, but Roe stalled. "I put it off and put it off," Roe said. "It was just the most terrifying thing, having someone see my closet."

Roe was afraid Cellini would pass judgment on her cluttered closet or, worse, on her taste. But Roe was pleasantly surprised. During a three-hour session, Cellini brought order to the chaos. By the end, blouses, skirts and suits were separated and rearranged by type and color, as were shoes and purses. With Cellini's help, Roe shed three lawn-size bags of clothing, which went to Bottomless Closet, a non-profit for women re-entering the workforce.

"It was so incredibly liberating," Roe said.

In fact, Cellini said, most of her clients express relief over their pared-down wardrobe. They're also more confident knowing that what remains



Stylist Christine Matsunaga (left) evaluates the clothes she stripped from the closet of Erin Gallagher, a jewelry designer. Gallagher hired Matsunaga partly to help her tame her playful wardrobe for the business world.

Tips for a DIY closet detox

Practice tough love: If you haven't worn an item in a year and it doesn't have sentimental value, get rid of it.

Suffering separation anxiety? Pick a favorite charity that accepts clothing donations and label it on empty boxes intended for discards. Or choose a friend a size smaller—or larger—to be the recipient of pieces that no longer fit.

Hang as much as you can in the closet, advises stylist Christine Matsunaga—including jeans and pants. Keeping everything together helps you find things easily and put together complete outfits. Just don't hang sweaters, because they take up too much space and can stretch out on the hanger.

Matsunaga also suggests using matching hangers: "It really aids the flow of the eye." She prefers white plastic hangers: they make the closet look uniform but don't take up as much space as wooden hangers.

Keep it together: To save time on busy mornings, stylist Robin Walker suggests keeping MVP foundation garments—panties, Spanx, hosiery, bras—in the closet for easy access. She also tells clients to move their formalwear and seasonal clothing to a secondary closet or storage area. Only everyday items belong in the bedroom closet (not special-occasion lacy bras that look lumpy under many garments), along with a few preassembled outfits—go-to ensembles that have been "road tested"—for last-minute invites or mornings you sleep through the alarm.

Tribune photo by Chris Walker

Style

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has passed the litmus test of a style professional.

Regrets are rare, she added. "No one has ever called me and said, 'Do you still have that pink pinstriped blouse? Can I have it back?'"

But purging the wardrobe isn't always easy. Clothing represents a financial investment, Cellini said, so people hold on to it. "They may not wear it, but they can't get over what they paid for it."

For this reason, Christine Matsunaga of Chicago- and Los Angeles-based Tristinstyling treads lightly when purging clients' closets and always takes the discards with her when she leaves. "That way there's no turning back," she said. "Otherwise they start digging through it."

If someone is especially resistant to parting with certain items, Matsunaga will create a memory box, like she did for one client's collection of concert T-shirts. For her, a closet audit is really about reading her clients and determining what they need from her. "I always say I'm part wardrobe psychologist," she said.

One recent client of Matsunaga's faced an unusual challenge—Erin Gallagher, 29, needed to tame her wardrobe, not kick it up a notch. An up-and-coming jewelry designer with a flagship store in the West Loop and department store clients such as Nordstrom, Gallagher found that her funky, avant-garde wardrobe didn't suit the corporate meetings and events she was increasingly attending.

"There are certain settings where I don't know what to wear," Gallagher said. "I know what to wear to a fashion event or gallery opening but not the Chicago Entrepreneurial Center dinner. At those events, you don't want your clothes to be distracting. You want to keep the focus on your business."

Bye-bye, purple tights

During the closet audit, Matsunaga suggested that Gallagher shelve her purple tights and other trendy pieces and focus on classic basics. Instead of the "big belt, big necklace and tall boots" Gallagher said she normally would have paired with a simple black dress, Matsunaga steered her toward minimal jewelry and a pair of sleek black pumps.

For those "Wait, what am I supposed to take off?" moments, Matsunaga e-mailed Gallagher images of business-appropriate outfits. Gallagher credits the stylist with taking her wardrobe "out of the studio and into the corporate boardroom."

A closet auditor is as much a life coach as style adviser, explained Chicago stylist Bridget Smith, a.k.a. the Wardrobe Coach. The inside of a closet reflects a person's shopping habits, she said, which are influenced by emotions.

Her approach is to identify what works on a client—and then get rid of everything that doesn't. "We look at the overall picture," Smith said. "Do these items align with ... goals, personal and professional? So many clothes are just creating confusion." Every item in the closet, she said, should support a person's desired image.

After an audit, stylist Robin Walker said, you should be able to open up your closet and see clothing that truly supports who you are—the right colors, the right shapes and the right size. "That's how you want to be greeted in the morning," she said. "To open up your closet and see a celebration of yourself, it's a relief."



Fashion stylist Christine Matsunaga (above left) talks with client Erin Gallagher about three of the more colorful outfits she has assembled for Gallagher. The rebuilding continues (below) in Gallagher's closet. Tribune photos by Chris V.



Resources

Ready to enter wardrobe rehab? Here are a few resources.

CHRISTINE MATSUNAGA, TRISTINSTYLING

Contact: 312-545-5529, tristinstyling.com

Caters to: A younger clientele, both male and female—she has worked with everyone from models and PR people to teachers and college students.

Bonus: A personalized look book, or photographs of key outfits, which Matsunaga sends via e-mail after the session.

Cost: \$150 to \$300 for a complete closet audit, depending on closet size and complexity.

NOELLE CELLINI, MY BEST FOOT FORWARD

Contact: 847-858-9193, mybest-footforward.com

Caters to: Women (about 98 percent of clientele), especially working and stay-at-home moms.

Bonus: A shopping list with images of recommended pieces and links to where they can be ordered online.

Cost: \$250 for a three-hour session.

BRIDGET SMITH, THE WARDROBE COACH

Contact: 773-301-0521, thewardrobecoach.com

Caters to: Busy urban professionals from their 30s to 60s, stay-at-home moms and people facing transitions such as returning to work or re-entering the dating scene.

Bonus: Smith will scout out items after the audit for a follow-up shopping trip (if scheduled).

Cost: \$400 for a half-day session.

ROBIN WALKER, MY WARDROBE COMPANION

Contact: 312-431-9662, mywardrobe.companion.com

Caters to: Predominantly male clientele (about 70 percent), including power brokers, TV personalities and politicians.

Bonus: A shopping list identifying missing core pieces.

Cost: \$350 for initial 90-minute session.

—Heidi Mo