

Smart Moves: Emotions can overtake downsizers moving from their homes

Smart Moves by Elizabeth James Martin: Here are a few pointers for homeowners trying to cope with the emotions involved in downsizing.

By Elizabeth James Martin 

Published: October 22, 2011

Ronald Phipps will never forget the 91-year-old widow whose home he listed recently. Because of ill health, she had to let go of the property and move to an assisted-living facility. Still, she found it tough to give up the place where she'd lived for more than 30 years. "There's a huge emotional quotient to downsizing. And when you're under duress, it's particularly painful to let go," said Phipps, president of the [National Association of Realtors](http://www.realtor.org) (www.realtor.org). Before her New England-style house went on the market, the widow fought the need to eliminate her many possessions that wouldn't fit into her tiny space in the assisted-living facility. "Everything she had to give up became a proxy for the grief she felt for having to leave her treasured home," Phipps recalled.

Here are a few pointers for homeowners trying to cope with the emotions involved in downsizing:

- Look for an ally to help you downsize.

Vicki Norris, a former real estate agent and professional organizer, said it can take up to 24 work hours to de-clutter the average-sized room. To avoid becoming sidetracked, she said many home sellers need an ally to help them view their possessions objectively and let go of things they can't take with them when they move.

"When you have to downsize, your whole life is upside down. It's tremendously stressful. So it's good to have someone there with you to help you stay focused and create an organized strategy," said Norris, author of "Restoring Order to Your Home."

- Check in with family members to ask if they want memorabilia.

Older downsizers often hang onto nostalgic items they believe their grown children might want "some day." But Norris said many parents believe their offspring will want many more things than they do, including their childhood story books and elementary school sports trophies.

"Typically Mom and Dad hang onto things the kids really don't really want," Norris said. He suggests that downsizers ask grown children what items they value.

- Create a memory book containing photos of your place.

When Norris' baby boomer parents retired and put the family home up for sale, they did so voluntarily. Even so, they found it emotionally thorny to let go of a residence where they'd lived for 28 years.

Still, the process of downsizing was eased after their listing agent gave them a book of photos showing all their rooms and furnishings just as they looked before the home was staged for sale.

"That way they were able to seal their memories — including how the dining room table looked when their whole extended family came over for Thanksgiving dinners," Norris said.

- Donate useful things you can't take with you.

As they plow through their property room-by-room, most downsizers encounter many items that crowd their space and would make it harder to market their property. For instance, they may have an extra sofa or two or oversized bedroom furniture that won't fit in their new place. Whenever possible, Norris encourages donations of serviceable items to a nonprofit institution that will put them to good use. "There's a lot of satisfaction in giving well," she said.

