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Lesson 9: Organization and Labeling

Introduction

Losing your keys, cell phone, TV remote, umbrella, or screwdriver you had in your hand just moments ago is frustrating to anyone, but for a person who is blind or has low vision, losing items can consume a lot of time and be a safety hazard. This is why organization is so important. It reduces frustration, increases the efficiency of locating items, and leads to greater ease in completing tasks. Individuals who use organization and strategically label items often feel more independent and confident in their home.

This lesson will cover effective organizational strategies for people who are blind or have low vision. It starts with a concept discussed in previous lessons: Everything has a place and everything in its place. Individuals who make a habit of putting their watch in a jewelry box will likely find it in a matter of moments. Likewise, keeping your umbrella or mobility cane beside the door makes these items easy to locate. The specific location chosen for a given item isn't as important as being consistent. Storing items in the same locations in a home or office will greatly reduce frustration.

Lesson Goals

- Learn strategies for organizing areas of the home
- Learn how to choose whether to label items
- Learn methods and devices for labeling items

Organizational Strategies

Some general organizational strategies and tips can be applied to most areas of the home and office. Several of these may be familiar, and others will be new concepts that incorporate low vision or nonvisual strategies.

Start by decluttering the area to be organized. Sort through items, decide what to get rid of, what to store, and what might belong elsewhere. Consider storing items that aren't used often in another place. For example, sort clothing by season. Mixing cold- and warm-weather clothing makes it harder to find a specific item because there are more possibilities to sort

through.

Many individuals use containers as an important part of the organizational process. Confining items to containers can be helpful for anyone and is especially beneficial to people with limited vision. Start with locating containers that are already in your home, such as baskets, plastic bins, boxes, drawer dividers, Tupperware, hooks, rubber bands, or Ziplock bags. These items make it easier to find items because they are separated and confined to a small area. For example, if it is difficult to tell the colors of socks apart, having them loose in a dresser drawer makes the task more challenging. If there's a basket on the entry table where keys, wallet, sunglasses, and other everyday items are placed, you never have to search the whole table trying to locate things. More examples of ways to apply these concepts will be provided for each section. Concepts like increasing contrast, introduced in a previous lesson, may also help create organizational strategies.

Clothing

This section will focus on identifying and organizing clothing and other items typically found in a bedroom closet and dresser drawers. Tips for organizing accessories and other items in a wardrobe are suggested as well.

Before organizing clothes, shoes, and accessories, take an inventory. Remove items that haven't been worn or used recently. Reducing the number of options helps simplify and makes finding favorite items easier. If you have difficulty distinguishing certain colors, such as black and navy blue, it may make sense to eliminate one of those colors from your wardrobe to simplify things. Some people may go as far as limiting their color choices so that any shirt will go with any pair of pants. Don't worry, though: If that's not appealing, the following are some suggestions for identifying and matching items in complex wardrobes.

You may wish to arrange your clothing by type, hanging all the shirts together, pants together, and so forth. You could also organize by category, hanging casual clothes at one end of the closet and business and formal apparel at the other end. Although these are common organizational

approaches, they may not work as well for individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

If you want to minimize the time you spend coordinating clothes, it may help hang or stack entire outfits together. Some hangers are designed for this purpose and can hold a top, a bottom, and sometimes have a hook for accessories. Socks, ties, or belts can be hung directly on the hanger or in plastic or mesh bags. A separate hanger for each item can also be used. Hangers can be grouped using plastic or cardboard dividers placed on the bar between outfits. This method makes it easier to match, especially for individuals with specific items they like to wear together. You can modify this method by hanging several matching garments together, like two pairs of pants that go with any of three different shirts and a sweater. These systems need to be maintained by putting the items back together after they are worn or laundered.

Another approach is to group clothing by color by putting all of the black tops and bottoms in one section, all the blues in another, and so forth. This method works well for individuals who can tactilely identify different clothing pieces but struggle with distinguishing the colors. Many people can use their sense of touch to identify distinctive aspects of clothing. This method is extremely helpful and will minimize the number of items that need to be labeled.

Practice identifying items by touch while organizing. Tactilely or visually search each garment to get a sense of its characteristics. Is there a collar? What is it like? Are the buttons unique in shape, texture, or size? Are there pockets? There may be three pairs of wool slacks, but the brown ones do not have a pocket, the black ones do not have belt loops, and the blue ones fasten with a hook. Brown, navy, and black are usually the hardest colors to distinguish with limited vision and can even pose difficulties for color-identification devices. Looking for distinctive characteristics eliminates that problem. These techniques can also help in identifying shoes, jackets, gloves, and even socks. Make sure to separate items that are difficult to identify or differentiate so they can be marked with one of the methods suggested below.

Similar systems can be used for organizing items in dresser drawers or on shelves. Drawer dividers are extremely helpful. You can use shoe boxes or other appropriately sized containers to keep small items like socks and underwear separated. There's no right way to organize things, so experiment to find what makes sense to you. Separate and group items together in ways that will make it easier to locate specific items.

Keeping shoes organized can be an ongoing challenge. It's easy to kick off work shoes next to the front door or haphazardly throw running shoes at the bottom of the closet. However, habits like these cause problems for individuals who are blind or have low vision. There are numerous ways to organize shoes and many types of shoe-organizing storage options. Once shoes have been sorted, consider the best place to store them. Perhaps a shoe rack on the closet floor or an over-the-door option will work best with the available space. If there is extra shelf space, keeping shoes in their original boxes, stacked by color or labeled on one end in large print, braille, or large tactile letters may be an option. We will discuss more labeling options later, but this is an example of items that may need to be labeled.

A helpful tip for people who have two or more pairs of running shoes is to tie the shoelaces together when they are taken off. That way, even if the shoes get put back in the wrong place or are thrown in the bottom of the closet, they can be easily located.

Accessories like ties, cuff links, hats, bags, jewelry, belt buckles, hair clips, scarves, and gloves also need to be organized. Bags, baskets, or storage containers with small compartments can work well. Individuals with lots of jewelry may already have a large, multi-drawer jewelry box, although an organizational system like this may not be effective for differentiating different colors or items. Use the same methods mentioned previously to group items by what goes together or by color. You probably will not want to mark or label every piece, so bags or containers with small compartments labeled are useful. Types of containers that will work include a large sewing box, a multi-drawer toolbox, a pill or craft organizer, or a fishing tackle box.

One thing to keep in mind about choosing an organizational system is that

no matter which system you choose, it needs to be maintained. The simplest way to do this is to immediately put items back where they belong after they are used. For example, when getting undressed at the end of the day, put accessories and shoes in their places and put clothing in the appropriate place to be laundered. Many blind or low-vision individuals use separate laundry baskets or hampers to separate whites from colors. It can also help use mesh laundry bags for socks, underwear, and other separates that you want to keep together as they are laundered. These bags can be purchased in various sizes, the largest of which may hold an entire outfit. If an outfit is laundered in a bag, it can be folded or hung together on a hanger once dry. Socks of the same color can also go in a laundry bag before laundering.

Bathroom

It is crucial to identify and organize items in the bathroom, including cleaning products, personal care items, and medications. Once the items you use regularly are separated, you can choose organizational strategies. Start with things that may be difficult to identify or locate. Items like shampoo, conditioner, and body wash can be organized in a caddy hung on the shower door or over the shower head. It can help purchase products in differently shaped containers for easy identification and then line them up according to use. However, if two or more products are in similar containers, a rubber band placed around one container can differentiate between similar containers.

Decorative trays, baskets, or containers can be used to organize cosmetics and toiletries on the countertop. It can be helpful to group items by what they are or what gets used together. For example, all dental care items, like toothpaste, brushes, dental floss, and mouthwash, can be kept in a container together to make them easier to locate. If you keep a supply of extra toothpaste, bath soap, aspirin, or other personal care items, keep them separated with drawer dividers or divided storage bins under a cabinet.

The key is to keep the items you use daily in easily accessible places and use strategies to make it easy for you to identify each item. Other

suggestions for labeling will be provided later in this lesson.

Linen Closet

Despite good intentions, linen closets often get disorganized or cluttered. Clothing, sheets, and towels can be separated in ways that make identification easier. Some people use different shelves for bath towels, hand towels, and washcloths, and then organize by color. Sets of towels can be folded together and stacked for a simple system. If you use only white towels, then you just have to stack each type of towel in its pile. It's helpful to have sheets and pillowcases folded together in sets. Quilts and comforters can be folded with their matching pillow shams. If it is difficult to identify colors or patterns, it can help to mark them in different ways to help with identification. For example, you could cut the labels out of one set, attach safety pins to the tags on another set, and not mark the third set.

Kitchen

Organizing or reorganizing the kitchen may seem like a huge project, but it can be fun, especially if a friend agrees to help. Consider what will be involved before getting started. Some heavy items may need to be moved, or you may need to reach extremely high cabinets. Consider asking a friend or family member to help, or try hiring someone to help. With so many small and large items to reorganize, it saves time when two people share the work.

Take inventory and declutter before you start to organize. Items that you no longer use can be donated or sold. Also, it may be helpful to take an inventory of the available space. Are there lots of cabinets and drawer space? Is there a utility or laundry room where laundry, cleaning, and paper products can be stored? Consider the space and make a plan for where and how items can be organized.

Items you don't use often might be put out of the way or on top shelves. Dishes or small appliances you use daily could go on bottom shelves to make them easier to access. It is helpful to put items near where they will be used. For example, coffee cups can be stored above your coffee maker. Glasses can go near your sink, refrigerator, or water filtration system. Spices can be organized in a spice rack, built-in lazy Susan, or a small

cabinet near the stove and the counter where you most often prepare food preparation. Cooking utensils like knives, spatulas, measuring cups, spoons, and whisks can be kept near the stove or food-preparation area. Store eating utensils in a drawer below where dishes are kept. The pattern here is to create a simple workflow, minimize the steps for each type of task, and keep like items together.

The kitchen is another area where it helps use containers, dividers, and storage boxes with compartments. There are storage containers specifically made for organizational purposes, like silverware dividers, knife blocks, wall hooks, and magnets for utensils. You can also make your organization system with containers found around the house. Attach large print or braille labels to spices for easy identification. Large, bold print or braille can be used on magnetic tape for cans. As in other rooms, it is important to put items in a specific place and make sure they get put back in that place every time they are used.

Cleaning Products

A common recommendation is to use other senses, like smell or touch, for identification. However, this can be dangerous when it comes to cleaning products. To make identifying cleaning products more safe, consider buying products in containers with distinct shapes. You can also try marking or labeling your cleaning products. It can be helpful to keep different products in the areas in which they are used. For example, keep shower cleaner in the bathrooms and oven cleaner in the kitchen. It can also be helpful to use a caddy for products you use together to keep them organized. If there are small children in your home or if you use particularly harsh chemicals that might get mixed up, keep cleaning supplies in a locked cabinet. Cleaning products can be harmful if mixed or used incorrectly, so it's best to have multiple identification methods in addition to an organization system. Some people may find using a magnifier or an electronic device to read aloud labels and cleaning information helpful.

Labeling and Identification

Once your rooms and items are organized, you may want to mark or label some items to help with identification. This strategy is mainly useful for

items that may be mixed up or are not distinguishable using other senses, like smell, sound, or touch.

There are different methods for marking and labeling. Labels can be handmade or purchased. Some basic labeling ideas, like using rubber bands to mark similarly-shaped items, were mentioned previously. The methods that work best for you will depend on your functional vision, number of items that need to be labeled, the types of items to be labeled, and your comfort level with technology.

Tips for Making Labels:

- Rubber bands, twist ties, safety pins, and tactile letters can be used to label items tactilely.
- Letters can be made with a bold felt tip pen, drawn with puff paint, or cut from a tactile material.
- Bump dots are commonly used for marking appliances, but they can also mark items around the house.
- Use index cards for identification by printing or gluing tactile letters or braille to a card.
- Try adhesive labels and a bold pen to write large, readable letters.
- Create labels using items like adhesive options available in craft sections of stores, making labeling more fun and attractive.
- Reuse containers or create removable labels, so you don't have to create new labels for consumable products constantly.
- Keep your labeling system as simple as possible. If it's too complex, then it might be abandoned.
- Attach labels for canned goods with a rubber band. When a can is used, keep the label to take when shopping, then reattach it to the new can before leaving the store.
- Set aside a catch-all drawer or container where labeling supplies can be kept, including scissors, rubber bands, twist ties, several kinds of tape, glue, bump dots, post-it notes, bold pens, and index cards.
- Find ideas for labeling in specialty catalogs or search stores for items that can be used.
- If your home is shared with sighted people, use clear labels that don't

cover the print.

Audio Labels

Sometimes it's faster to use physical features, like shape or color, or handmade labels to identify items. At other times, a high-tech device might be a better option. A labeling system should save time and reduce frustration, not add to it. So, before purchasing any piece of technology, you may want to test some devices and applications before deciding which to buy.

One helpful device is a pocket-size PENfriend. It's an easy-to-use audio labeling system for recording and rerecording labels to put on medication bottles or anywhere else a label is needed that contains a longer explanation. Touch the adhesive label with the PENfriend, hold down the record button, and create a message as long or as short as necessary. To play the message, hold the PENfriend over the label to hear the recorded message. The PENfriend comes with sticker labels. Additional adhesive labels and laundry tags can also be purchased.

Another electronic labeling system for people who are blind or have low vision is WayAround. WayAround has a free smartphone app that pairs with WayTags, which can be purchased to label various items, like clothing, food, cleaning products, or documents. The type of tag you purchase should be based on what you want to label. There are clips, stickers, and magnet tags that are easy to apply and buttons sewn on to clothing.

Some apps can be used on smartphones or tablets for identification. Seeing AI, Envision AI, and the K-NFB reader are the most commonly used. These apps can all read text aloud to help someone who is blind or has low vision to identify items or information. Some of these apps can also scan bar codes; read handwriting; or identify people, denominations of money, and colors.

Labeling Medication

Medication and vitamins tend to come in large and small sizes of the same type of bottle. Some vitamins can be identified by shape, but labeling is probably more convenient if you take several. Vitamins can be organized

on a tray, in a basket, or on a shelf in your medicine cabinet.

Many over-the-counter medications also come in similar containers. Pill organizers are helpful for identification and verifying whether or not each dose was taken. Organizers come in a variety of sizes and styles and often have large print or braille options. There are several methods for labeling bottles of prescriptions and over-the-counter medications. Rubber bands can be used to distinguish between similar bottles. People with functional vision may want to use a marker to write the first letter of a medication on top of the cap or create an attachable large print label for easy identification. Many pharmacies will provide different colored caps for prescription bottles and large print labels and fact sheets upon request. Some pharmacies will offer to organize all your medications into doses so that the pills you take in the morning are in a blister pack together, while your evening pills are in another pack.

The PENfriend (described above) and other talking devices created for medication prescriptions (described in Lesson 8) can also be useful for medication management and identification. Script Talk is a system for medication identification that utilizes a small device for reading labels. Each prescription bottle has a label that is read aloud when placed on the device. Additionally, a free smartphone app can be used to read Script Talk labels. This system is widely used by pharmacies, including some mail-order options. Ask your pharmacist to provide prescriptions with Script Talk labels at no additional cost. If Script Talk labels are not available at your pharmacy, contact En-Vision America to get your pharmacy onboard.

Labeling in the Office

Many people have a home office or a desk where they keep important household paperwork, like copies of insurance policies, tax information, and medical files, and where they pay bills and handle other financial matters. Organization in this area is essential. Although many businesses use paperless systems, there may still be some documents that are beneficial to maintain in hard-copy. Despite the move toward paperless systems, some individuals may be uncomfortable with paperless systems and prefer to maintain all hard-copy files. For this reason, we will look at

organizational strategies for both types of systems.

Before jumping in, consider the pros and cons of each option. Electronic methods for accessing and storing information can be used with assistive technology. For example, given your comfort level with technology, is it simpler to access bank statements online or to have a system for filing, labeling, and identifying paper statements?

For people who prefer paper documents, systems for organizing, and labeling are essential. You may want help from someone who is sighted as you first set up a labeling system. Different desk and filing cabinet drawers can be used for categories of items. For example, you could designate a drawer for banking items where you keep checkbooks, new and old checks, and check registers. Instead of putting everything in file folders, it might help to keep some items, like bank statements, in three-ring binders, with the latest on top. You could store the binders on a shelf at the desk or somewhere nearby.

For people with functional vision, keeping each set of files separate in color-coded file folders in a desk drawer or file cabinet can make it easier to find the papers they need. Organizing folders in alphabetical order and using bold lettering on the tabs makes them more visually accessible. Consider using large print labels or brightly colored sticky notes to differentiate between sections or categories of paperwork. For individuals without usable vision, consider keeping important files organized by category and stored in file folders in alphabetical order. Label each folder with a raised print letter or braille. You can use WayAround or PENfriend labels.

If you prefer a paperless system, consider how and where documents are received. If documents are available through a website, check how far back records can be accessed and, if necessary, learn how to download or save files in a PDF or other format that can be saved to your computer. Designate a specific place on a computer, Dropbox, or other digital storage location for keeping these items. Make folders for each business relationship, and store relevant items there, ensuring the files' names give adequate information. For example, a bank statement might give the date

of the month and year for that statement. If statements or bills come through email, save emails to a designated folder in case you need to find a specific item.

Summary

There are many different ways to organize and label items in your home; hopefully, this lesson's suggestions will help you start. Once you develop a system, you may notice how easy it is to locate items independently. Individuals with a successful organization and labeling system have good habits that help them keep their systems running smoothly. It helps to declutter and reorganize once or twice a year to keep your system working well and eliminate items no longer needed.

Suggested Activities

Take these steps to get started applying what you have learned in this lesson:

- Identify areas of your home where you want to organize and label.
- Determine a strategy and decide if you need help to set up a new system.
- Decide which organizational, identification, and labeling methods will work best and make sure you have the necessary materials.

Resources

- En-Vision America – ID Mate and ScriptTalk
- Hadley – more information about labeling and organization
- Independent Living Aids – PENfriend, WayTags, other labeling products
- LS&S Products – PENfriend, WayTags, other labeling products
- MaxiAids – PENfriend, WayTags, other labeling products
- PENfriend – audio labeling system for recording labels
- WayAround – an app for your smart device that provides on-demand details about everyday things.