HELP! I'm drowning in paperwork!

Helen Lederer reaches chaos crisis point and calls in a personal lifestyle manager

Have you reached that stage where all your decent pants seem to have been kidnapped, your passport's been stolen by aliens and you've no time to sort the cutlery drawer? Then it's time to get help. And it's not just me. The teenager clogged the dishwasher up with paper plates the other day. And the family kept asking me questions that were becoming increasingly difficult to answer.

"Where's the Sellotape?"

"Under the cat litter."

'Where are my cut-off leggings?

"I borrowed them, sorry, France…"

"Where's my school report?"

Silence.

But just as the spinning jenny helped the industrial revolution, we too have an invention to oil the wheels of 21st-century life – it's called a lifestyle manager.

After a helpful phone call, my very own Personal Lifestyle Manager arrived on the doorstep. I just knew she'd be called Claire, Emma or Katie, because in my experience, nicely brought-up young ladies with a background in project management and neat handwriting tend to favour these names.

Anyway, enter Claire, a pretty, smiley mini-Mary Poppins. No, she hadn't flown in when the wind changed, but had parked her Vespa outside emblazoned with the logo "Buy-time" for all the neighbours to see. "Person in mess inside," I wanted to shout out to passers-by. "But I'm getting help, OK?'

Nor did she have a carpet bag of tricks – just her Blackberry, a smart notebook, a tape measure and a digital camera.

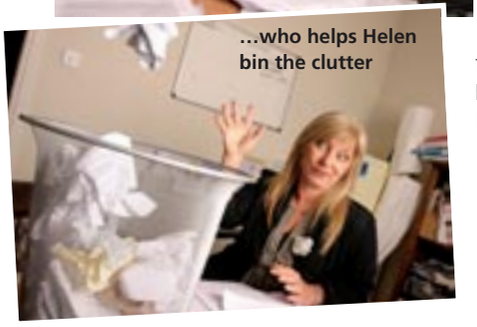
I dramatically waved a hand around the study as if it had been trashed by unknown forces. I nearly said, "At least they've left me my computer and ten years' of debris," but didn't want to push it. When it came to a peek at the wardrobe I muttered, "It's south-facing, not user-friendly for hanging."

"I've seen worse," Claire smiled at me, and I felt instantly relieved.

She suggested putting my non-seasonal clothes in a case, re-ordering the clothes

Overwhelmed by paperwork…

…Helen calls in Personal Lifestyle Manager Claire…



…who helps Helen bin the clutter

I used most in the hanging bit, and offered to take the ones I never wore to a charity shop.

"What, you mean there might be some space in here, then?" (The hangers were so tangled up, they looked like they were having some kind of orgy.)

"And…" (now I was excited), "…could we have all the skirts in one section?" (i.e. not draped over jeans on a heaving piece of metal).

"Absolutely," was the reply. "And maybe I can source some skirt and trouser hangers for you?" Source? Yes, please! I hate sourcing.

Back in the papyrus-hell-cum-study, Claire took out the smart notebook and made a list. I would have done the same, only I couldn't find a pen, obviously.

It seemed that we needed to purchase some *box files* and *plastic folders*. And putting time aside every month for a sort out might also help. Hmm, I just wanted a quick fix. "Most people do," Claire nodded understandingly, before adding, "Which is why they sometimes get in a mess."

Without revealing confidences, Claire told me one of her clients asked her to sort six years' of back tax for him. I think I'd have left the country.

Claire asked me if I'd "input" my addresses into my computer. Once I'd worked out what she meant by "input", I had to admit I couldn't even click on my fancy time-saving address programme. What followed was a very Mary Poppins moment. I'd dreamt of reaching December and finding, at the click of a button, my addresses would ping out on to sticky labels, ready for Christmas cards. Thanks to Claire's mastery, this is no longer a dream.

Next, Claire turned her attention to the shelves, and I barked back answers to her "Chuck or keep?" inquiries. Cards, bank documents, bills, nasty letters, not to mention a parking fine, all flew into their own piles. From here, we filled several bin bags of yesterday's news – it felt a bit like being given a colonic irrigation in Rymans. I even found a letter with a crucial address on it – wow, I could start having a social life again at this rate…

When it comes to paying you can just buy a few hours – be it iPod downloading, sourcing new schools, buying birthday gifts, shaving off the bottom of doors, moving house, framing pictures. Anything you haven't the time, inclination or courage to do yourself. Why hadn't I done this before?

Oh, and could she find me a ghost writer, female tailor, and promise to sort my spare tyre? (For my *car*, OK?) Actually, isn't this what wives do? Does this make me a polygamist?, I wondered as I surveyed my super tidy desk and neat wardrobe. I can breathe freely again – so bring it on! **w&h**

WANT TO BUY TIME OR TREAT A FRIEND?

Lifestyle management costs £35 per hour, £29 per hour for ten hours or £25 per hour for 20 hours. Call 0870-4862624 or visit the website www.buy-time.co.uk.

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