

Laura Cox Kaplan:

We've all heard about the power that comes from a tidy organized home and office. Studies show that "getting organized" is typically in our top three new year's resolutions right behind "losing weight" and "getting in shape."

Notwithstanding our focus on organization, it's a difficult thing for many of us to get our heads around. Trust me on this, I'm 100 percent challenged in this department—covid didn't help. I tend to be fairly organized, but I keep too much stuff and waaaaay too much paper.

Even when things are tidy, that doesn't necessarily mean they are really organized, at least not based on Lisa Woodruff's definition. She's my guest today to help us kick off the new year.

Lisa is the founder and CEO of Organize 365. She's the author of four books — including her most recent "The Paper Solution." She's also the host of a podcast "Organize 365" that's yielded more than 14 million downloads. I was honestly stunned by the growth of her podcast. It speaks to the millions out there who struggle to make sense of their stuff, and all the emotional baggage that often comes with it when we try to sort, discard, file and recycle.

Before we jump in, here are a few important things I'll draw your attention to my conversation with Lisa:

1. How mindset impacts our ability to get our clutter under control; we talk a lot about mindset on this podcast. Here is yet another dimension.
2. How organization is an investment in yourself and how that small investment actually helps you gain more time;
3. The impact of self talk and making sure that the way you talk to yourself is oriented toward progress and not perfection
4. How our organization systems need to evolve as we grow, evolve and change — and especially as new people enter or leave our lives. Nothing in life is static, including our stuff and our paper. It all has to evolve with us on this incredible journey.
5. And finally how getting more control of our space and gaining more time can actually help us build more influence in our lives. The time we gain can be used to accomplish all those amazing things we dream about. It can give us the

bandwidth to connect more fully and to be more present for those we love and care about... and more.

So, grab a coffee, or your drink of choice and join me for my conversation with Lisa Woodruff.... Coming up now.....

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Lisa, welcome to She Said/She Said.

Lisa Woodruff:

Thank you so much for having me.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I'm delighted to have you. You are an expert on organization and you describe yourself as a professional paper organizer, which I think is just amazing. As somebody who has already made three trips to the container store just this week, this is something that many of us, myself included, really, really struggle with. Why is getting organized, and especially organizing our paper, so challenging?

Lisa Woodruff:

Well, getting organized in general is challenging because when we say we want to get organized, what do you mean by that? Just like when you say, we're going to do housework, what do you mean by that? We're celebrating our 10th anniversary today.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yay. Congratulations.

Lisa Woodruff:

Thank you. And one of the things I've realized in the last, really, 12 months is that these words, housework and organization, which we define our company by, are not defined. And so last year, we defined housework as cleaning, tasks of daily living, organization and maintenance. And now this year, we're diving into research as, what does organization mean? So when you say get organized, that could mean... Literally, in your head, you have 100 different things you could organize. So we're defining organization as four different categories of spaces that you would organize.

Lisa Woodruff:

Your personal spaces like your car, your purse, your backpack, your clothing, your bedroom. Communal and family spaces, like kitchens, family rooms, spaces that you

regularly use and share. Storage spaces like garages and basements, sheds, offsite storage. And paper. And paper is its own category of organizing. And the reason why there is not a lot out there to help you get paper organized is twofold. One, for so long, we were told that we are a digital society and we're going paperless, so no one tackled organizing it, because it was going to be gone, so why even bother? But now that we realize it's not going anywhere and that America especially is a very paper-based society, then how do you organize it?

Lisa Woodruff:

Most professional organizers have deferred paper organization until after the house is organized. And by the time they get the house organized, the homeowner usually says, "That's fine. Just leave them in the filing cabinet."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right. They're just so over it and still overwhelmed by the whole experience.

Lisa Woodruff:

Yeah. And the professional organizer really doesn't have a great situation other than just using color-coded files, which really doesn't work. So they don't have a great solution that they can offer. So they're like, "Great. I'll be back when the house gets or unorganized again." And I know this is true because a lot of professional organizers are using our system, because they're like, "You're right, there never was a system out there that worked."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's so interesting.

Lisa Woodruff:

So I took paper and I've divided into categories, your actionable paper and your archival paper. Your archival paper is your filing paper, but your active paper are all the ongoing projects that maybe you haven't worked on in 10 years, but they're not really archived because you're going to do them someday in your house. How do you organize those? So the active are Sunday Basket and the archive are binders, not files because binders are portable, binders have a constraint on them, and you usually need your important papers not at your house and so you can evacuate safely.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yep. That's really brilliant. I want to get into all of the nuts and bolts of what you just said. But before we do, I'd love for you to take us up maybe to the 50,000-foot level because you're working with a lot of different clients. Talk about the impact of how it

affects your psyche, your thinking, your ability to get things done when your stuff is not organized. This may sound obvious, but I think it's important to do a bit of a high level or maybe a deeper dive into the more psychological aspects of this.

Lisa Woodruff:

I love it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

What difference does it make to get organized?

Lisa Woodruff:

I should say, I don't have an MBA, I'm not a psychologist, I'm not a doctor, I'm not a lawyer, but I have talked to many of these people and so sometimes I sound like them. So just make sure you know I'm not one of them. There's usually multiple things going on at the same time. So I want to address them all. We think being organized is a project, and even academic research before ours has defined home organization as an optional project that women sometimes do.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

When we have time, right?

Lisa Woodruff:

Regardless, that is what academia in surveys is showing that it's totally optional, women do it sometimes. They get a bur and they decide to do this. And when we do get organized, the media, Pinterest, social media, other professional organizers often are showing you before and after pictures, really inspiring. Here's my before, a hot mess. Here's my after, it looks like a magazine. What a before and after is in the media commonly has you doing organizing as it is a project that you are going to show people on your social media, not necessarily looking as if it's functional. And if it functional, then you don't feel like you did it right because you can't really share it on social media.

Lisa Woodruff:

So what we're trying to do is not well defined. And what I finally realized, because I have an education degree, so I'm a teacher, and my thought is that students cannot fail to learn, only teachers can fail to teach. So if you're following me and you don't get organized, it's be because I'm not doing it right, not because you are not doing it right. And that there are all these different learners. And in my classroom, I would have learners that were ahead of the curve and behind the curve, and learners that like to do things through auditory learning or kinesthetic learning or reading.

Lisa Woodruff:

And so almost everything we have, you can use all your different learning modalities to learn the Sunday Basket, it hits every single learning modality. But in teaching adults, the difference happens in the mind before it happens in reality. Children, when they're in school, have to learn whatever it is to pass the test, to pass the grade level. They don't have a choice, so they dive in and they start learning. Adults have a choice. They have to mentally buy in to wanting the after and to putting the time and motivation into whatever they're learning, so they need to at least mentally commit to whatever the after is going to be, before they will financially and physically invest in actually doing the learning.

Lisa Woodruff:

And that is where it's a mental game. The first mental game is realizing that you are able to learn how to get organized, even if you're in your 60s and you never were successful even as a child in your bedroom. I want to say that organization is a learnable skill, anyone can learn it. And 86% of Americans in our survey agree, and we're doing our second survey, and the numbers are the same. So, yay, we all agree we can learn organizing. So what I want to say is, if you believe that you can learn to get organized, which everyone can, does not matter, then it's a matter of finding the right teacher that can get you to mentally buy into the fact that you can do this, and then following the system. It doesn't need to be me, but somebody can teach you.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's really that aspect of mindset that you set your mind to the fact that you can learn to do something new, even if you have historically always told yourself that, "I'm not an organized person." It's a learned skill that you talk about in your books, which I think is really, really interesting. What about, Lisa, the impact of COVID as it has related to our stuff and our circumstances? I feel or have felt prior to reading your book, frankly, really the most disorganized that I think I've ever been. Talk about maybe what's going on with us as it relates to COVID, not just the obvious parts of being home more, but why is it maybe harder for us to get a handle on this?

Lisa Woodruff:

Yeah, it's impacting people differently. There are a couple of things that are going on, as usual. Number one, we were at the height of minimalism when COVID started. Everything has a 40-year cycle, and we were ready to go into more of collecting things and saving things and having more around us in general. I knew intellectually that we were turning away from minimalism, but I could not figure out how America would stop with the tiny houses. And then there was no toilet paper and I went, "Oh, I see it. I see it now." So if you're feeling like you've always lived with just-in-time stuff in your house

and not a lot around you, and you're like, "I don't know why I want to have like a four to six-week supply of dog food and toilet paper."

Lisa Woodruff:

It's normal. It's normal. This is not going to go away. This is how you're going to feel for the next 40 years, so just embrace it and say, "Okay, I'm not going to be a minimalist, I'm not going to be a hoarder, but this is my new comfort level." So that is different for everyone. The second thing is, COVID did one of two things. You either decided, "Fine, I'm safe at home. I got put in my bedroom by my parents. While I'm here, I might as well organize it." So you decided to double down on the thing that you knew you were in control of, which is your house. And you're like, "Okay, I cannot watch the news anymore. I can't worry about what's outside of these doors. I'm going to tackle the pantry. I'm going to do my clothes."

Lisa Woodruff:

And so you've systematically re-channeled that energy into your home, and it's making you feel better because you're in control of something, and it's also making your space better. But if you're listening to this and you have been exhausted, overwhelmed, you're a first-line responder, you just can't even make another decision, the world is moving too fast, things have really sped up in every industry, and you can't make sense of it, and you just need to really watch Netflix and do jigsaw puzzles like me all of the time, I am here to say you are doing the right thing for you at this time. I'm sleeping probably two hours more night in the last 18 months than I used to.

Lisa Woodruff:

Mentally, during the day, I'm fine, but I rest and relax so much more than I ever did before. Our brains are having so much trouble processing the amount of change that's happening everywhere as fast as it is. Give yourself a break.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's so interesting. And it also brings up a topic that, as I was reading your book, I thought, "This is such an aha for me." And that is around, we talk on She Said/She Said podcast a lot about life pivots, about career transitions. A lot of people are going through that as a result of COVID, but a lot of people, especially women were going through that, regardless of COVID, people who take a break to raise children for a period of time then they get back in the workforce. And so that change and evolution that we go through also carries with it a change in the way and the things, the stuff, and the paper that we have to be responsible for organizing and processing.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Maybe talk a bit about that particular piece of your strategy and how you work with people around that. Because I think that's such an important and fascinating piece. Despite the fact that it's obvious, it completely escaped my attention.

Lisa Woodruff:

The book you're referencing is The Paper Solution that came out in 2020.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Lisa Woodruff:

So in 2021, I self-published my memoir, which is called Organization Is a Learnable Skill. And in December of 2011, I quit my teaching job and I came home. I was overweight, I was depressed. We were with so little money. We are in debt up to our eyeballs. Our kids were not doing well. Just nothing was going well, nothing was going well. And in December, my administrator said I wasn't a very good teacher, and I was 39. And in the past, I was like, "Okay, I'm not a good teacher." I was teaching middle school math in a Montessori school, and I had 14 different math lessons that I was keeping straight so that everyone was learning at exactly their pace. And I was like, "Okay, I'm not a bad a teacher. Your assessment of me is incorrect. And if I'm officially failing now at teaching and everything else in my life, then I'm going to choose to quit teaching and see if I could become a success in being a mom and a homeowner and all the things that I've now let fall by the wayside trying to chase money."

Lisa Woodruff:

And I think a lot of people today are where I was 10 years ago. And so in January, I started organizing my house, what I had control over. And I, step by step, went through that year, rebuilding my income, starting my professional organization business. And you can really read that book seeing how going through my closet was a problem, not because I was overwhelmed, it was because nothing fit in my closet, because I was so much more overweight than I had been in the past, and we had no money for me to buy clothes that did fit. So I literally had two pairs of jeans and like four or five tops or sweater or sweatshirts that fit and that was it. And nothing else fit, and that's what I had to live with.

Lisa Woodruff:

So when you get rid of it and there's not enough left, that's where I was when I was getting organized. And so I think that when we are looking at a time like this, like COVID, our experiences of this pandemic are different, but we all have been changed during these experiences. Some of us have lost jobs, some of us have voluntarily given

up jobs, and we end up in the same thing, "Okay, here's what we have today, what do we want to do going forward?" Some of us have kept our jobs, but what we buy, the pace of inflation for the things that we need have outpaced our income. And we're all in these places where we're like, "What am I going to do next?"

Lisa Woodruff:

So when you're in this place where you're like, "What am I going to do next?" The first thing I usually ask you is, "What do you have control over? And what don't you have control over?" And if you sit down and just make a list, "I do not have control over COVID, the presidential election, all these things that are on your social media. I have control over how often I do my laundry, what the state of my home looks like, how many things I say yes to, how many different places I go for errands, if I shop online or not, these are the things I have control over." And then you look at the things you have control over and you say, "Okay, let's go on this list and let's refine and organize and deep dive into this list, the things that I have control over."

Lisa Woodruff:

So here's a great one. If you're like, "Oh my gosh, I do laundry every three days, and I really would like to do laundry once a week." Here's the solution. Are you ready, Laura?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yes. I'm ready.

Lisa Woodruff:

All you have to do for most people is buy more socks and underwear, that's all you have to do. I usually have at any one time eight to 12 outfits per season that I like wearing. I don't have more than that, I don't have less than that anymore, but I've worked up to that. And the way I worked up to it is in resale shops, which are bursting at the seams right now. That's how I replenish my wardrobe and how I found really great different designers that I liked because they were at the resale shop. So buy a couple more outfits so that you have enough outfits. You're a school kid, so you should have like eight to 10 outfits so that you go a whole week with a couple of extras.

Lisa Woodruff:

And if you have enough underwear and socks, you can wear all of those before you do laundry, you can literally do laundry only on Saturdays if you have enough socks and underwear.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that suggestion. Lisa, what about dealing with... As you went home and looked at your closet and you had all of these outfits that were designed for your past life, and you were making a transition into something else. One of the things that I have found particularly challenging personally, is that as we reinvent our ourselves in a different way and need a different "costume" to wear. Sometimes it's hard to let go of those pieces like clothing, for example, that really fit a different way of working than perhaps what many of us, myself included, are doing now. Maybe talk about the psychology around coming to terms with that, saying goodbye to that piece that really doesn't serve us well anymore, and what your advice is for clients.

Lisa Woodruff:

The clothing is so hard. I don't know, until I've really thought about it, how much we judge with our eyes, ourselves and others. But what I've observed is this, for myself personally, when I was a kid, we didn't have a lot of money, but when I was in high school and college, we had an exorbitant amount of money. My parents got a second house and multiple cars, it was cushy, it was really nice. And my mom took me on multiple shopping sprees each year, just credit card, whatever you want, it would create these wardrobes for me. And so when I went to Catholic school, Catholic high school, you had a uniform and she went and bought these eight to 12 outfits that I'm talking about, that all mixed and matched.

Lisa Woodruff:

And I got to go to the mall and came home with all the bags, felt like pretty woman, just before Pretty Woman was even a movie, but let's not talk about that. I went to college, she did the same thing. She bought me a whole wardrobe for college. Every summer, I got more in my wardrobe. And then when I got married the year after college, she bought me a whole wardrobe for my honeymoon and the first year of marriage. So I was used to going to Talbots in the mall and all these stores and spending a couple thousand dollars to build this wardrobe every year or more often. And then those clothes lasted a long time. And by the time I was sitting in that closet with like three outfits to wear, I was about to turn 40. And my parents got divorced at 35 and the money train stopped at like 32, I had to be on my own woman.

Lisa Woodruff:

And so a lot of the clothes that were still in my closet were these really nice, expensive clothes that my mom had bought me that were literally like a size zero and size two, and I'm a way bigger size at that time. And I could never even fit in them again if I wanted to, but I didn't want to give away, not only the money that those clothes represented, but that time of life when I could go to the store and pick out whatever I wanted and everything matched and I always look great in everything. My mom is English, very

formal. I went to White Gloves and Party Manners. I know what all of the forks are if I were ever at the White House, I know what they all do. I've been trained.

Lisa Woodruff:

I don't live that way, but I had khakis. I didn't have jeans until I went to college and I had one pair because we wore khakis and we wore dresses and we were very prim and proper. My wardrobe at 39 was really old jeans, definitely mom jeans, sweatshirts, it just was not the wardrobe that my mom had had. And so two things, one, I was giving up an expensive wardrobe that didn't fit, I was wearing a wardrobe that did not match who I was energetically at all. It was very, almost like I was punishing myself by buying the least expensive and lowest grade clothing I could find just to say that I have a little bit more, but I didn't look and feel great in any of it.

Lisa Woodruff:

So I did use resale shops to rebuild my wardrobe over the next five years, and I ended up buying like White House Black Market. That's how I even found that store, was at resale shops. And I found out that those jeans looked and felt great on me, and different kinds of jackets and different designers that I didn't know about. But every time I went to that resale shop, I could spend 60 to \$80 and come home with 14 things. And pretty soon, I had a pretty nice preppy wardrobe that I had bought at a resale shop, and then I went and I organized people's houses.

Lisa Woodruff:

I love to wear heels, so I'd be wearing heels and jeans and some cute little jacket. The entire sum of the total of my clothing was like \$30, but it looked like I was wearing \$200 worth of clothing and people would say, "You're going to organize my basement in that." And I'd be like, "Yeah," and I'd go and I'd organize it. And I looked and I felt great, but it didn't cost a lot of money. And that's when I realized, "Okay, what is my style? What of my parents' style do I want? What of my current style do I want?" I like trendy jeans, not with any stuff on them because I'll rip my chairs or something. I'm not fancy. I love to have heels on, like two inch heels. I like little jackets with turtlenecks or blouses underneath.

Lisa Woodruff:

And now I know what I like. I don't even know if it looks good on me, but I know that I feel great in it, so I know it looks better on me than other stuff does. I didn't go to a stylist and I really rebuilt my wardrobe around that. And it's a lot of thinking, Laura. Almost all of organization, if you noticed what I just said, very little of it was the shopping or organizing the closet. Almost all of it is the mental story of how we got here, where we want to go, the path we're going to get to and how we feel about it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, absolutely. Let's talk about how you apply those rules to the paper tsunami that you describe in your latest book, because I really want to get into this. I think this is such a huge obstacle, and I think that the drain that it has on our productivity is probably bigger than we sometimes realize.

Lisa Woodruff:

Yeah. Paper. I like to talk about paper because I love to talk about things people aren't talking about and get them thinking about it differently so that they can take action. For paper, I've been talking about it for a long time, no one wanted to talk about it with me at all until recently before the pandemic. And that is because we are a paper-based society. I often will say to people, "Do you have paper?" And they're like, "No, I don't have paper." Like at a cocktail party because I ask questions like that at a cocktail party. So I'll be talking to somebody else and all of a sudden that person will come back 15 minutes later and they'll go, "Are unfinished projects paper?" I'm like, "Yeah." "Is mail paper?" "Yeah." "What about photos?" "Yeah." "What are not filing cabinets?" "Yeah."

Lisa Woodruff:

They go, "I have so much paper, you have to help me." Because it's been spinning around in their head, they thought they didn't have it. And then their brain's like, "No, no, let me give you the list of the amount of paper you have." And the biggest obstacle I've had in even having a conversation about paper is Marie Kondo, who is wonderful. She's fantastic. So many people have great closets because of Marie Kondo. But in her book, she says that you should get rid of all your paper. Let me just tell you, Americans, do not follow her advice because the Japanese country has digital birth certificates. They don't understand that you would carry around this piece of paper that says you were born in some other city or a little social security cards.

Lisa Woodruff:

America is extremely paper are based. And so if you're going to take paper organizing advice, make sure you're following somebody that is in your country and understands how paper works in your country. Once we can agree we have paper, I think we can also agree no one knows how to use a filing cabinet. So we put our paper in filing cabinets and we don't need most of it until we need it. And when you need, it is always an expensive and traumatic experience. You have to be power of attorney, you have to be power of healthcare, you have to be a caregiver, you have to settle an estate, you have to sell your house, there's a divorce. There's some big event, usually involving a lawyer and you need to substantiate and find paper documentation.

Lisa Woodruff:

And then you go, "Oh, the paper that I need is mixed in with a bazillion million other pieces of paper I don't need, and now I have to go through all of this paper in order to find these pieces of paper I need in order to deal with this event," that is usually timebound, very expensive and very emotionally rut. The other reason I really like to talk about the paper tsunami is because right now, we're experiencing COVID collectively as a society. And when there is a natural disaster like these horrible fires, hurricanes, all of those things, we experience that collectively in a region, but becoming power of healthcare are settling someone's estate, which everyone pretty much will do, is in a isolated event.

Lisa Woodruff:

And in all of these, you need to get your paper organized. And it's not urgent, you don't have to organize your paper today, you can shove it in the bottom of a closet, you can keep putting it off. But once it's done and it's actually in binders instead of in file cabinets and you need to evacuate, you grab the binders and you just go. And you don't have all that stress and worry and anxiety about, will that paper still be there when you get back?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

What about the different mindsets behind digital organization versus paper organization and concerns about security? Very legitimate concerns about security at this point. How do you think about that? And which pieces should be digitized, how much of it should be digitized? What's the approach we should take.

Lisa Woodruff:

So when I first tried to organize my papers, I tried to digitize everything and organize it first, and I didn't even get to scanning the first piece of paper. I did buy the scanner because buying stuff is always easiest, but I never scanned a single piece of paper. And the reason why is because I couldn't figure out once I scanned it, how to organize it digitally. And so I've learned that digitization and organization are two different skills. The first skill is you have to organize the physical paper that you have. The second skill is you can turn it into digital. By that, I mean you need to go through the filing cabinet, go through all the paper, get rid of as much as possible so you only have what needs to be digitized left.

Lisa Woodruff:

Organize 365 does not specialize in digitization at all. And the reason why we don't specialize in it at all is because it's constantly changing, and it depends on what your favorite digital thing of choice is. And also, I don't think it helps anything. Why I think it doesn't help anything is because when you are settling an estate and you go to see the lawyer, they don't want to log onto your computer, and you could share documents with

them, but there's also stuff you need to share with them that isn't already scanned. So it's so much more helpful if you could on with the binder and you hand it to the lawyer, mine literally flipped through it and said, "You're going to save yourself thousands of dollars. How did you do this?" The other thing is when you make a binder, a physical binder, it is really paper is just used for communication.

Lisa Woodruff:

You don't even need the paper that you have, you just need the paper to substantiate the knowledge you already know in your brain. And that's what paper does, electronic or if physical paper. But when it's physical paper, it's like walks softly and carry a big binder. When you walk in a meeting with a binder, everybody's staring at that binder, "What's in there? What do they know that I don't know? What paper are they going to pull out of there? I better be careful about what I say." You have the same knowledge whether or not you have the binder in your hand, but when you have the binder in your hand, people are nervous, "What is in the binder? Is she going to write some, is she going to open it up and write?"

Lisa Woodruff:

You should just open up, write something and close it again, people are like, "Oh, what did I say? I don't remember what I just said." It's the power of that physical paper. The other example I can give is when COVID started, we wanted to do something to give back, so we have a medical binder. We took half of the medical binder and we gave it away free for 18 months. That has ended, but we gave it away for 18 months. And it was just like your health history and all of your medicines you're on, all the basics that a new doctor would want to know so that if you had to go to emergency room, you would have it written down and you wouldn't have to think about it.

Lisa Woodruff:

Having no clue that they were going to stop having advocates go into hospitals with people the next day. So we literally had Organize 365 audience members, downloading this PDF, filling it out and sending their loved ones into the ER alone with this paper. And then having first responders break down crying because they were able to immediately treat the patients versus having to try to get someone who's having a hard time breathing, explain when their last surgery was and what medications are on and are they allergic to anything? And what are their prior histories?

Lisa Woodruff:

They could flip through the pages and start administering treatment. We have yet to have a single doctor, nurse or any medical representatives say, "Oh yeah, we wish you wouldn't bring paper." They love it. They love it. It's an easing of communication. So if you have it digital, that's was your question, if you have it digitally, it's great for you to

organize it, but how are you sharing that with your siblings, for your parents or your spouse or whoever would be your power of attorney, if you and your spouse, God forbid, were to go away, how would the person who has the power of attorney find all the documentation you need for your children? Paper is just so much easier. It's so much easier.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. That's really great advice. Let's talk about how one gets started. I'm sitting here recognizing that I'm surrounded by piles of paper, I'm so overwhelmed, I think I'm just going to walk off and go get a cup of coffee, close the door and ignore it. How do we get over that overwhelm and jump in and get started?

Lisa Woodruff:

I'm an eat the elephant one bite at a time kind of person. I'm not a put the entire elephant in the middle of the room and stare at it for three months type of person. So what I mean by that is if you're like, "Oh, she's right, I have paper." You could start as simply as every time you see a piece of paper, just decide if you need it or not. If you don't need it, just start recycling it and putting it a box to be shredded. If you're like, "Okay, no, I don't see any visible paper in my house, what's my first step?" Your first step, what I did was I would just go get five to 10 files out of my filing cabinet and I'd bring them up on my kitchen counter and I'd go through them in 15 or 20 minutes at night, and then I would recycle or shred anything I could.

Lisa Woodruff:

And then I would put the files back in the filing cabinet of the things I needed to keep. And I would just keep doing that until I'd gone through all the files, which can take a couple of months, but it's no big deal because you haven't made a mess, you can stop and start at any time. And when you're done, you'll have the essential papers. And by that time, you'll realize you could probably get rid of another 40%, but it's a really easy way to chunk through those archival papers. Your actionable papers, you need to carve out a little bit of time to go through those and start to make sense of those. And those go in our Sunday Basket. That's more of a habit and a system we teach.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Let's talk about, a Sunday Basket is really pretty central to your entire approach. What is the Sunday Basket? Talk about why that works and what it is.

Lisa Woodruff:

I'm going to explain the Sunday Basket, but first I'm going to tell you about the binders. I keep saying, make a binder. When you go through your file cabinet, 40% of what you need to have for, let's say your financial binder will be in your file cabinet, 40% will be

on the computer, which I encourage you to print out or at least print out the passwords and all of that into your binder so that somebody could find it again. But 20% of your financial is in your brain. 60% of your medical binder is in your brain. We use our brains as filing cabinets for information that other people might need to know, but we don't have it written down anywhere.

Lisa Woodruff:

So I say that in a binder, because you understand that in a binder, now I'll take you over to the Sunday Basket. The Sunday Basket is a whole bunch of things rolled into one. It is a place where you put your actionable to-dos, like mail, errands you need to run, things you need to remember. It's a holding place for that so that you don't have a kitchen counter pile. It's also a place for you to put ongoing projects. We just got a quote for our bathroom, so where do you put the quote until you decide to say you're going to do the bathroom, or I got my carpets cleaned and then in six months I can have them re-cleaned at 50% off. Where do you put that piece of paper, but you don't need it immediately?

Lisa Woodruff:

All this stuff goes in the Sunday Basket. And then the Sunday Basket habit is on Sunday to take everything out of this box and go through it and decide, "Is this something that I need to tackle before next Sunday? Like it's urgent, I have to before next Sunday, can I do it now or on Monday?" Or secondly, "I've done all the urgent things now, looking at my week ahead, how much extra time do I have? A couple of hours. What projects in here that are in process, do I want to prioritize and do next?" You can do one a week, you do five a week. It doesn't matter.

Lisa Woodruff:

And everything is safe in there. All of your ideas are safe in there, all of your projects are safe in there until you're ready to take action on them. So it's a prioritization, an action thing. It's a lot of things rolled into one. And by doing all of those on Sunday, it frees up your Monday through Saturday so that you're not doing mail and bill pay and prioritizing all that during the week, it frees up your week a lot.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. And it really boils down to establishing that discipline that you're going to work on this every single week for at least a short period of time. You're going to dedicate the time so that it doesn't become something that is so overwhelming. My version of a Sunday Basket is very, very tall because I've just finished your book and I'm like, "Okay, we need this."

Lisa Woodruff:

Well, that's right. That's right. It's going to be over for about six weeks, and then you'll settle into a rhythm. You'll settle into a rhythm after that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. But it's a really great idea. One of the other things that I was particularly fascinated by you, one of your books, one of your four books is on ADHD and how it impacts organization in the home. Maybe talk a little bit about that concept and why you felt compelled to write an entire book about that.

Lisa Woodruff:

Well, I mentioned that we have different learning styles, and often as a teacher, I was an intervention specialist first and then I had my classroom. So I understood the challenges of all different learning styles and ADHD. And my two children are adopted and they both were diagnosed with ADHD during their school years. And they went to a private school for learning disabilities and a high preponderance of those students also had ADHD. And this school provides service for teachers in the Cincinnati area through Cincinnati Children's about ADHD. So I became an expert in ADHD for students.

Lisa Woodruff:

And because I am a teacher and I've been organizing kids forever. When I was a babysitter, I would help kids learn how to organize and keep their bedrooms clean. Parents loved me. And so I was teaching kids how to get organized. I was specifically working with some students from this school whose parents had hired me to teach them how to organize their bedroom. And I realized I was doing something different with these students than you would do with non-ADHD students because I understood the eight executive functions of the brain. So I wrote a book and then I had our psychologist read it to make sure I was right, because I told you, I'm not a doctor.

Lisa Woodruff:

And she said, "No, no, you're good. You can publish this." I said, "Okay." So six out of eight of the executive functions affect all of us when we get organized. That's why often when you're challenged with ADHD, it challenges the organizational structures in your brain, not the information or your intellect, but your ability to recall what you want to recall when you want to recall it and to keep your time on tasks so things don't take too long or too short of an amount of time. And so I identified six of those. I specifically in the book explain what does this brain function do, what does it look like in a home when it is not working, and how do you then put in some supports to change that at home.

Lisa Woodruff:

I've had a lot of people read those books for their kids and then self-diagnosed, and then go to the doctor and become diagnosed. They're like, "I didn't even know I had ADD."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. So interesting. How do you start with your kids in participating in a system? Certainly as the mother of a teenager and one who's almost a teenager, we work on organization and executive functioning, but how do you get them involved in the whole family approach to dealing with paper and clutter and all of this stuff?

Lisa Woodruff:

I love all age groups. I can talk to a 14-year-old or an 84-year-old and I am in thrilled. I've always been multi-generational in my ability to talk to people. So I don't look at children as children and elderly as elderly. I look at people as people. And so when I think about people, and my kids struggled with school, school was a big job for them and they did not have a lot of capacity when they came home to do like a chore chart. My children never did a chore chart, they didn't do laundry until they were over 18. Do not ask me for parenting advice, but I have a good relationship with my kids because I recognize what their limitations were.

Lisa Woodruff:

And so I only focused on cleaning and organizing in the summer, life skills. I focused on those in the summer. And I had to really give up the idea that I'd be a homeschooling parent of four children that all had, I had this big, huge dream in my head of these children wearing matching clothing and doing their jurisdictions and having their chore charts, this was my idea because that's what I would've been as a kid and this is not what I got as a parent. And I remember the kids were like six or seven years old and I said, "Okay, Lisa, you are going to have to rewrite the future in your mind. We're not looking at four year white color college students here. These kids have amazing gifts and talents and you need to embrace what they are and what they're capable of and what they desire versus what was right for you and your husband."

Lisa Woodruff:

And so I really started to rewrite my whole story. And when I rewrote my whole story, I had to think about what we expected of them as parents doing chores in which they were not successful at. And I thought, "I'm the adult, I have the house. I bought the house, I'm in charge of the whole house. They're kids, they're in charge of their bedrooms." And my sister and I had this game that I created because we lived in the country, we had nobody in our area. So I created this game for us called Big Friend. And our bedrooms were our mini apartments, and we would get on our bikes and we would pretend like we're driving our cars and we'd meet in the kitchen and that was our café. And I had this whole labor game.

Lisa Woodruff:

And I thought, "Well, what if my kids' life was like Big Friend? Their bedrooms were their mini apartments and they were responsible for them. And every three years I was redecorating the rooms anyway with their input. I thought, "Well, let's let them pick the paint color and let's let them organize room and let them have mini fridges and the whole nine yards." But along with that, they need to clean it every Saturday, because it's their apartment before they're able to do something. And it's that sense of ownership. Once you define what you want your kids to be responsible for and give them the ownership of it and know that it's not going to be done to your expectation, but if it's okay for them and let them do that and wait for them to ask you to help them, then they're ready.

Lisa Woodruff:

They're ready to do it. And if you have three kids, one is always an organized kid and the other two will watch and follow that child's lead.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Interesting. That's really, really fascinating. I have a boy and a girl, as you might imagine, my daughter, she and I think the container store is the mothership, and my son is like, "I'd rather take a beating than go to the container store with the two of you," because gender does seem to play a role, at least to some degree, again, not to over generalize, but this is not going to be earth shattering to most people listening to this.

Lisa Woodruff:

And I could say in general, boys tend to have more electronics and more collections like rock collections and things like that. And they like to have the same collection for really long period of time. So then you have lots and lots of rocks and the parents are like, "They're rocks." And the kids are like, "No, I got this one on this thing." Whereas girls tend to have more things that they collect and then they collect them for shorter amount of time. So they're into makeup and then they're into poly pockets and then they're into this and whatever. And they get like every single thing that goes with that thing and then they get rid of that whole thing, and then every a thing that goes with the next thing. And so it is different kind of organization for boys and girls in general.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. It's really interesting. Let's talk about, Lisa, as we set our goals and we put it in our top five to get more organized and to declutter and to get our Sunday Basket going, what happens and what's your advice for clients when they fail because people are going to, you're going to get busy, your life's going to overtake you, you're going to lose track of

things. So how do you help your clients manage to the failure piece and to getting right back in there and starting again? What's your advice for all of that?

Lisa Woodruff:

Organization is a journey, it's not a destination. You cannot fail in organizing, you can even have a podcast that says you can't possibly be failing when you're organizing. It's not even a possibility. It's not a skill that you can learn as fast as riding a bike or tying your shoes. It's more like learning a foreign language and you learn different levels of the language as you're learning organization. In this podcast you might say, "Oh, I never thought about a difference between personal organization and family space organization," or, "My kids' rooms are now their mini apartments." It's a learning and you keep getting deeper and deeper and understanding of what organization is.

Lisa Woodruff:

And organization leads to productivity. So as soon as you have one little area organized, that area of your life becomes more productive, and you're like, "Whoa, I didn't expect that." You're like, "Oh, I want more of that." So you'll get one other little area organized and you're like, "Oh, that's productive too." And then you start getting addicted to the productivity. The problem is if you chase productivity, then you get frustrated. You have to chase the organization, which leads to the productivity. And decide what kind of an organization you want. So you keep mentioning the container store. I do not go to the container store, I'm not a container person, I'm a functional person.

Lisa Woodruff:

So my house is not going to be in a magazine, but it's really organized in that we can find everything and everybody can find everything, but it does not look like you would imagine a Pinterest organizer to look, and I'm okay with that. I'm sometimes I feel guilty when I say it, but nothing's labeled in my house. I have multiple label makers, I don't label anything. I don't need to because everybody knows where things go. And so that's not the level of organization I want. So what level of organization do you want? And then organization is like building muscles.

Lisa Woodruff:

You wouldn't say that, "Oh, I failed, I have no muscles in my body anymore." No, you still have muscles. You might have eaten cookies all Christmas so now you need to shed a little bit weight so you can even see where the muscles were, but they're there. They will get stronger and they will get weaker and you will continue to grow. And there are some things that are easier to organize than others. Actually, a file cabinet is actually pretty easy to organize because you can do a couple files at a time and you think that's hard to organize. It's the actionable paper that's harder to organize because it's moving so fluidly.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. But buying another filing cabinet, I know is not your advice.

Lisa Woodruff:

I will go on record at saying, that is not the thing to do.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That is not the thing to do. Maybe let's talk about the self-talk track in our heads as we're going through this process and trying to get a grip on reality. Maybe talk a little bit about what you see your clients, maybe habits that they have that you work to break and help them think about things a little differently.

Lisa Woodruff:

I do think the little mantras that I do, they will pair it back to me, like, give yourself grace, progress over perfection, done is better than perfect. If you have a child under the age of five, just go take a nap instead. These are things that I say all the time. And so then they will say, "Oh yeah, Lisa says done is better than perfect. So if I just do two more things, then I'll be done or just take the next step." And all these little mantras that I say encourage people that you're on the right track, you're doing a good job.

Lisa Woodruff:

Think about what your second grade teacher would say to you. Why are we so mean to ourselves? We speak to ourselves ways that we wouldn't even speak to our enemies, really? And so when you're sitting there going, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe I got in this situation," just stop and go, "Really? Would I say that to anyone else?" And then organization is important, but it's not urgent. An organization will always give you more time. It's a current investment of time for future time. But you do have time to get it done. You don't need to create this external pressure to get organized.

Lisa Woodruff:

I often say there are no organizing emergencies. For the first time, I told you we're 10 years old, for the first time, we completely shut down customer service for four days over Thanksgiving and four days over Christmas. And I was a little nervous doing it, but I told our audience in advance, "Look, we'll be back. The staff has got to have this time off. They have got to be able to take care of their own mental health. And there are no organizing emergencies. What are you going to contact us on a customer service, the day after Thanksgiving that can't we until Monday? Nothing, nothing because we don't run sales.

Lisa Woodruff:

We never run sales, so that way my staff doesn't have to work during that time. And I think that we sometimes set up these urgencies and these expectations and these stresses on ourselves that I don't even know why we do it, just because we see other people doing it, doesn't mean you have to do it that way.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I'd love to tap into your brain a bit as an entrepreneur and maybe get you to share some perspective on when you realized that this was a great business idea. You guys have been in business now for 10 years, but when did that light bulb go off that you're like, "Wait a minute, I'm doing something or have learned to do something that other people don't do as well and I can help them do this"?

Lisa Woodruff:

I told you I have an unusual childhood. I am a fourth generation female college graduate, which means my great-grandmother went to college. My father only did a couple of years, but on my mother's side, we're very well educated. And when I looked back, my mother started a business in the basement when I was in fourth grade and sold it when I was in eighth grade.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

What kind of business?

Lisa Woodruff:

It was a traveling trunk show clothing called the Fine Line. And she would send out these trunks. We would pack these trunks, and it started in two states and ended in 26 and she sold it in five years. My grandmother had businesses, my great-grandmother had four different businesses. She owned a floral shop, she was a school teacher, she owned a gift shop, in the depression after she'd gotten divorced.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's amazing.

Lisa Woodruff:

Yeah, we were crazy. And the men also owned their own businesses too, but they ended up owning their businesses by being really great salesmen and increasing the sales and the businesses that they were in and then getting ownership in the businesses. My father and his father did the same exact thing. That's how they became owners in businesses. And I had a limiting belief before I turned 40 that I could have a business, but I couldn't

have a big business because the women's entrepreneurial businesses were always smaller than the men's entrepreneurial businesses.

Lisa Woodruff:

And it wasn't until a few years ago that I finally voiced that to my husband, he was like, "You can make more money, you should go make more money. Do you see the debtor on here? What are you waiting for? Get going, get going." So that was a huge limiting belief I had. But when I was sitting there at 39 years old, I had other businesses, like 2009, I had 11 Schedule Cs on my tax return. I know how to start a business, I'm just entrepreneurial minded. And I said to myself, "Okay, Lisa, you've got to start the business that you're going to do for the rest of your life."

Lisa Woodruff:

And I always knew I wanted to grow a real business with real products with real team that you could actually drive there and see the business, not just an online business. But I started it as an online business, I knew it would have an online component and just put all those things in play. I remember I was getting ready to go to college, I was 18, my dad took me out to breakfast and he said, "All right, this is going to cost me 100 grand for you to go to school or I can give you 100 grand and you could just start the corporate daycare you want to do anyway." And I went home, I said, "Mom, I'm going to start a corporate daycare crush." She said, "No, you're not, you're going to college." I was like, "Okay."

Lisa Woodruff:

So just that kind of mindset to know that, "Okay, four years of college, plus if there's an next year, that's going to be 100,000," or we get the money is money and time is time versus like an education gets you this, gets you that, that's just not the way my parents ever thought. So we just think differently, really differently.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. So interesting. Lisa, as you think about your life and career, what's the impact that you hope you will have had on your clients and on other people that you touch with this business?

Lisa Woodruff:

It's humbling to think about, I love teaching, so I love getting people interested in what I'm doing, just so they want to talk to me so that they learn more. But I have a new coach I'm working with and she said, "You could be having such a bigger impact than you are because you're limiting yourself." And I was like, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Well, you don't have sales and you don't have a timer. And all these things because you don't want to be a high pressure salesman." I said, "Right, lifetime membership, buy

when you're ready, all of that." She goes, "Yes, but Lisa, what you're giving specifically women back is time."

Lisa Woodruff:

She said, "I got organized with you and now I have so much time. I was able to change my job and spend more time with my kids. And we do all these things because I'm organized, I have time." She said, "You give women time and they need time more than ever. And because you're not really putting any fire under them, they're going, 'All right. Well, Lisa's going to be there and it's okay and I can wait.'" And she said, "But you, literally the women that you're giving time, look what they're doing with it." We don't have after pictures because we're functional organizing, we don't have the cool before and after. So my social media manager said, "Well, what is the after people get from Organize 365?"

Lisa Woodruff:

And I said, "Time, like Sunday Basket gives you five hours a time." She said, "What are they doing with that time?" And she started asking people. And so what people are doing with their time is they're writing books. Someone I just interviewed used her time to go and be a first line responder in New York because she was capable of doing that. We know that the Workbox was inside of the lab that was creating the very first COVID test. It is amazing how far the Organize 365 audience is taking this, and it's time. And specifically when you look at women, I have a grandchild now and I had to leave work halfway through the day to go to the ER with my daughter, my husband didn't do that.

Lisa Woodruff:

And I'm running the company, he's an employee, I'm the one that left because women, our time is compressed and we have so many responsibilities and things we want to do that the more time we get, once we get some time, we really can make a huge impact. So it's just time, being able to streamline people's home lives and understanding of how they use their time and the work at home so that they have more time to do what they're uniquely created to do.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that. I love that. That's really great. Of all the mantras that you share with clients, is there one that's your favorite?

Lisa Woodruff:

Probably progress over perfection. I think as women, we like to be perfect. There's no such thing, by the way. You're striving for something that's unattainable, but we just like to think that it's there because we think everybody else has it. Nobody has it by the way. Nobody.

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Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. But we get stuff done, right?

Lisa Woodruff:

We do.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

We're very action oriented.

Lisa Woodruff:

Instead of a perfectionist, we say we are women of excellence. And everybody can strive to be excellence, but no one's going to be perfect.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that. Lisa, this has been a joy. I loved it and have learned a lot. I know that my audience will as well. Lisa is the CEO of Organize 365. She's got four amazing books, which I will include links to in the show notes, as well as links to her podcast. She has seven million downloads and counting, which is just extraordinary as a fellow podcaster.

Lisa Woodruff:

That's what's in the book, right?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yes.

Lisa Woodruff:

It's 14 million this week.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

No way. Oh my God.

Lisa Woodruff:

Yes. So I'm like, "Where'd you get seven from? We've updated our website."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's in the book.

Lisa Woodruff:

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Oh my gosh. In 18 months, we've doubled our podcast downloads.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Seriously? And do you think COVID had a big impact on that?

Lisa Woodruff:

No.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

No. That's incredible. It's just incredible.

Lisa Woodruff:

Our whole business has steadily grown year over year. We have not had like a hockey stick, anything.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. That's amazing.

Lisa Woodruff:

We're just bragging away over here. [crosstalk 00:50:28].

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love it. Well, congratulations.

Lisa Woodruff:

Thank you.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That is amazing progress. And you're helping people change their lives for the better and helping women get more time. I love it. And I really, really love meeting you. Thank you so much.

Lisa Woodruff:

Thank you, Laura.

Friend, I don't know about you, but Lisa left me feeling particularly inspired to get a much better handle on my paper and stuff. In all honesty, after reading her book and finding some extra time over the holidays, I actually tackled a few troublesome areas in

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our house include my office space — which quite honestly has been a nightmare these past couple of years. My soul actually feels lighter and my brain clearer. I'm not kidding. Maybe it's just the start of a new year, but i have to believe it's making a difference.

Give some of Lisa's tips a try and let me know what works for you and if anything changes for the better. You can send me a message on social media - you'll find me @LauraCoxKaplan on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. And, I'd also love a review which helps others to find conversations like this one.

Have a great week and I'll see you again next time.

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