

# What to Do When Sorting Gets Sad

by Matt Paxton (<https://www.sparefoot.com/self-storage/blog/author/mattpaxton/>) on September 20, 2017  
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After my father died, I paid \$120 per month to store the items I found in his house – for 10 years.

When I finally decided to clean out the storage unit I had been holding on to, I knew I wouldn't have an easy time. I had been avoiding both the storage unit and my own emotions, so for those ten years I never really processed my grief in a healthy way. But I knew it was **time to face it** (<http://www.legacynavigator.com>).

I like to tell the story about how when I finally cleaned out the unit. I found a box marked "fragile" with paper wrapped all around a mysterious item. When I unwrapped it, I immediately broke down in tears. Was it a long-lost heirloom or a touching letter?

Nope, it was a stick.



(<https://www.sparefoot.com/self-storage/blog/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/09/stick.jpg>)

Though I enjoy the great outdoors, I don't normally get weepy over twigs. Granted, it was a stick I had whittled myself, and it brought back some happy memories. But I was kind of upset with myself that it had taken me 10 years to deal with this stick.

Obviously, when I say I know how tough cleanouts are, I *really* get it. But there are strategies and tips you can use to help you prepare to sort through emotionally powerful items in a storage unit.



(<http://www.anrdoezrs.net/click-8367506-10608756>)

## Resist the Temptation to Avoid the Clean Out

Take it from me: Avoiding the clean out only prolongs your sadness! The question isn't *if* you will get emotional during the clean out, it's *what* to do *when* you get emotional. You will find items that trigger a lot of feelings, but it's healthy to connect with those feelings, and allow them to release. Embrace the clean out, don't avoid it.

## Take as Much Time as Needed

Would you go to therapy for 48 hours straight to unpack ten years' worth of emotions and memories? Of course not. You would take the time that you needed in order to feel better. Approach an emotional cleanout the same way. If you have a day every weekend that you can devote to cleaning it out, do it. Set realistic goals for yourself, like cleaning out 1-3 medium-sized boxes per session. It's okay if you don't make the mark every time. What matters is that you are making progress.



(<https://www.sparefoot.com/self-storage/blog/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/09/personal-time.jpg>)

## Pause When Necessary

Whether it's seeing a hand-carved stick from your childhood or a photo album with old family pictures, you may need to pause after uncovering items associated with lots of memories. If you are overwhelmed with sadness, take a moment to embrace your feelings. Feel free to cry or take a photo of the object to remember it. And no matter what, aim to get up, take a walk, or stretch every hour of the clean out as a refresher.

## Make it a Personal Journey

You will recognize your younger self in a lot of objects, but you are a different person now than you were then. To give yourself the space and time you need, it's logistically best to do the clean out by yourself if possible, with a maximum of one extra helper if you need the support. Of course, if **your three siblings show up** (<https://www.legacynavigator.com/managing-family-volunteers-cleaning-parents-house/>) to all clean out the unit, it makes things a little more complicated—but not impossible. Each day after a clean out, go out to dinner, go bowling—anything else you find fun—to decompress.



(<https://www.sparefoot.com/self-storage/blog/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/09/camera-memory.jpg>)

## It Isn't All Tears

While I enjoy telling the story about how I cried over a stick, it's worth noting I smiled and laughed at a lot more things in the unit than I cried over. You'll be shocked by how many fun surprises you'll find. I found ridiculous (but totally awesome) '80s clothes my father wore, like his **Crockett Tubbs jacket** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ed9LfscOIBs>) (that's a character from *Miami Vice* in case you aren't up on your '80s trivia). I also found pictures of my grandparents and other relatives. I even found pictures of me as a kid, and I was surprised to learn I looked just like my own son. The best part about finding the photos was being able to show them to my family, bringing new life to them. Think about what you will find that will bring new joy for generations to come.

## You Will Know When It's Time

Many people ask me how you can know when it's the right time to approach an emotional clean out. I can't give you that answer, because only *you* know when you are ready. Maybe seeking this kind of advice means you have been contemplating and preparing for it, even if you never realized it. When you really are ready, you'll instinctively know it.