

The Chronical

An Official Publication of the Institute for Challenging Disorganization

April/May 2014

Helping Clients Overcome Information Overload

By Emily Wilksa, CPO®

Editor's Note: Recently, I posted a question to the ICD group on LinkedIn asking our fellow subscribers for their tips, techniques, and practices on helping clients overcome information overload. They offered an awesome range of suggestions, from helping clients get at the heart of why they gather and keep information to getting over the "fear of missing out" that keeps many people glued to social media. Here's what they had to say.



Donna Smallin Kuper, Author and Organizing Expert

I believe without a doubt that the only way to help people to declutter any area of their lives is to first help them to "find their why."

Oprah just sold \$600,000 of her belongings because she wanted to fund her school in South Africa. Was it easy for her? No. The whole process from start to finish was anxiety-ridden. But she did it because she had such a powerful "why."

Last summer, my husband and

I sold our home and a lifetime of accumulated possessions so that we could hit the road as full-time RVers. We knew what we wanted and our choice was simple: Keep the stuff or enjoy our new "freedom" lifestyle.

Interestingly, in the process, I created a virtually paperless home — something I had been wanting to do for ages, but just didn't have a powerful enough "why." I scanned all of my receipts to Shoeboxed.com and now just submit new receipts with my smartphone or via e-mail, all of which are searchable, downloadable and printable if needed.

I love the fact that, in essence, I am just "tossing" them all in this big file cabinet in the sky, and they are

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Overcoming Magazine Overload

By Kate Varness, CPO-CD®, COC

My client with hoarding behaviors was not ready to let go of her possessions, including a large collection of magazines, but she wanted it out of her way. I suspected that her life would be better if she just recycled the whole lot of magazines, yet I knew that it was her decision to make. We had developed a solid trust relationship because I was willing to respect her wishes when no one else in her life did.

So we began the process of sorting her mixed-up belongings into categories and then putting them in bins stacked out of the way. Since she

also collected containers, we had plenty on hand to use.

The outside of the bins got labeled and grouped together based on the content. We worked once a week for several months on her basement.

A Logical Conversation

When we got to the magazines, I decided to use a new technique that I had learned from an ICD post-conference training on motivational interviewing, from my Coach Approach training, and from books

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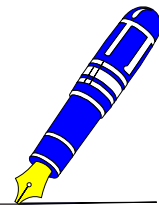
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We welcome your submissions!
Contact the editor at
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A Note From the President



When ICD's Certification Program Director asked me, "Are you going to write an exam at Conference?" my first inclination was to answer, "I'm not on the item-writing team." But then I realized she's from Canada, and she wanted to know if I was going to "take an exam."

Anyway, "taking exams" is what we do in Ohio. But a person is not permitted to literally "take" an exam because, in order to preserve the integrity of the exam process, the exam papers are not to leave the testing room. I ultimately settled on the phrase "sit for an exam," but I'm not sure that means the same thing to everyone either.

Regionalisms can result in conversations that end up sounding a lot like the old Abbot and Costello routine, "Who's on First?" For example:

- Professional organizer: "Do you conduct your banking online?"
- Client: "Yes, I spend a lot of time on line at the bank almost every Saturday."
- Professional organizer: "Instead of all that time online, maybe you should try stopping by the branch office on your way home from work."
- Client: "Why would you say that? The lines are even longer then!"

When people queue up (is that British English?) in the eastern United States, they stand "on line." But when they queue up in the Midwest, they stand "in line," and "online" only means they use the Internet. I have discovered many interesting expressions as I communicate with other English-speaking organizers in different countries.

So what's my point? And do I even stand a chance of making my point with all the different ways my readers around the world may interpret my phraseology?

My point is that, when a client doesn't seem to be understanding what I am suggesting, I have learned not just to keep repeating the same words over and over. I try changing them, using a complete set of synonyms that might convey my intended meaning to the client.

And I think the chance for confusion is even greater when it comes to written communications. In addition to word choice, the reader can group phrases differently or imagine the words with a different inflection than the writer intended.

So, my faithful readers, when you communicate with ICD via e-mail, please be willing, if necessary, to follow up to clarify your message or request. That way, ICD can "be across it." (That's Australian for "fully understand it.")

Our mission is to provide education, research, and strategies to benefit people who are challenged by chronic disorganization.

Research Roundup

By Sherri Fabic, CPO-CD®

When we look into the research on time, we find four general categories: time management and productivity, time perception, biological time, and time perspective. Some of these areas have current and ongoing studies, while others do not. Much of the research has not been translated into everyday terminology.

Time Management and Productivity

- Time management and productivity are key elements for a thriving life. Francis Wade of 2Time Labs, a presenter at the ICD 2012 Conference in Chicago, has one of the most comprehensive collections of research-based information on time and productivity management (www.2time-sys.com/research).
- For information regarding past studies, an excellent review of time management research and literature is *What Do We Know About Time Management? A Review of the Literature and a Psychometric Critique of Instruments Assessing Time Management* by Laurie-Ann M. Hellsten (www.intechopen.com/books/time-management/what-do-we-know-about-time-management-a-review-of-the-literature-and-a-psychometric-critique-of-inst).
- A recent study (published August 2013) entitled *Development of Time Sensitivity and Information Processing Speed* by Sylvie Droit-Volet and Pierre S. Zelanti showed that “the faster the information processing speed of the participants, the higher their sensitivity to time was.” (<http://lapsco.univ-bpclermont.fr/sites/droit-volet/files/2011/01/DroitZelanti2013PlosONE.pdf>)
- The Centre for Time Use Research (www.timeuse.org/research/current)

includes the *Multinational Time Use Study* and the *American Heritage Time Use Study*. They are compiled from time diaries and geographic surveys of volunteers. The results can be used to look for patterns in social and economic activities, such as changing gender roles and work-life balance.

Time Perception

- Time perception is the way we experience duration of events. Does time fly or crawl? Are we running out of time or do we have all the time in the world? This may have an impact on the way people manage time, especially for those clients who are sensitive to issues of depression, anxiety, or boredom. Professor Sylvie Droit-Volet at Blaise Pascal University in France conducts research on time as it relates to emotion, affect, and cognition. (<http://lapsco.univ-bpclermont.fr/sites/droit-volet/publications>)
- Giving time to others increases the perception of having time, as shown in *Giving Time Gives You Time*, research led by Cassie Mogilner at The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania (<https://marketing.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/388/research>).

Biological Time

Studies in biological time normally focus on the area of chronobiology, which includes infradian rhythm (cycles of longer than a day, such as the menstrual cycle), circadian rhythm (the 24-hour cycle), and ultradian rhythm (cycles that are shorter than a day, such as the REM cycle). This is important when our clients do not live or work with a typical 9-to-5 schedule. One of the current studies at the Roenneberg Lab, Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, is on the impact of shift work and the discrepancy between body clock and social clock (www.imp.med.uni-muenchen.de/research/human_chronobiology-roenneberg/shift_work/index.html).

Time Perspective

Time perspective — whether we are oriented to the past, present, or future — is one more area of exploration. How our clients orient themselves may be relevant to their long-term success with the organizing process. The groundwork in this area was done by Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd in 1999 (www.thetimeparadox.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/1999PuttingTimeinPerspective.pdf). In 2009, they followed this research with a book entitled *The Time Paradox*, with an accompanying website complete with a PDF version of their *Time Perspective Inventory* (www.thetimeparadox.com/research).

Chronical contributor Sherri Fabic, CPO-CD, owns FRAMEWORK Organizing & Design in Frederick County, MD. You can reach her at sherri_fabic@supportyourgoals.com.



This column is meant to introduce the subscriber to some of the research being conducted in areas of interest to the ICD. It is a “work in progress.” Subscribers are encouraged to add to our knowledge base by contacting research@challengingdisorganization.org if they are aware of any new research.

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automatically organized for me. My receipts were organized before; they just took up a lot of room. If a client's receipts are not organized, what a relief it would be not to have to organize them!

Carol Sealaus, Professional Organizer/Decluttering 'Demolition' Expert

I remind my clients that it takes about 28 days to establish a habit, then I ask each one to establish a new one and give it priority for a month.

I have one client who lets the mail pile up so it's a huge task to plow through it. While we are dealing with the "old" stuff, we set up a routine for handling the new stuff. She is to spend 15 minutes a day dealing with the new mail, every day, for a month. After a month, it's a routine. Then we pick another "issue" and turn that into a 28-day exercise ... and so on. I stress the necessity of the 28-day commitment in order to get on top of things.

Vicky Sim, Simplicity Services

One of the biggest areas of information overload is e-mail, especially if you are subscribed to a number of blogs, newsletters, etc. I am a bit of an information junkie, but at the end of the day there is only so much information that you can take in or actually need!

They can be such time-wasters, too. So I advise clients to unsubscribe from e-mail newsletters and blogs that they don't really need or that are distracting them from their core focus area (especially when at work), and to subscribe only to those that are really helpful.

Switching off your e-mail alerts and only checking e-mails at periodic intervals is another way to

curb information overload. This is especially important if you need to concentrate on a task.

Social media (like Facebook and Twitter) can be addictive, but it also results in information overload. Again, decide how much time you want to devote to it, and stick to your boundaries.

FOMO (fear of missing out) is a major challenge these days with social media. Ask your client, "What is the worst that could happen if you didn't go onto your Facebook page for a week?" It can be really liberating to step back from all the information that we fill our heads with.

Kim Tremblay, Case Manager at WOTCH Community Mental Health Services

Looking at how you are spending your time can be helpful. Sometimes we think we have no time, but if we look at what we are really doing, then maybe we can eliminate some things that are not necessary or are not serving us.

There is such a thing as "time clutter," where people just keep themselves so busy that they don't spend any time at home or never have time for basic tasks.

DaLona Niland, Organized by Design

I have my clients ask themselves a series of seven quick questions (in the beginning they tape them to their computer or desk) to determine if they have to keep the paper they have in their hand.

If it needs to be kept, I suggest the desktop file system I developed that prioritizes what they keep. It is very simple and very effective, and I've been using it for years with my clients, both residential and corporate. This is a very nutshell explanation, and there's more to it, but overall, these are the bones to the process. I flesh it out differently for each individual.

Suzy Wilkoff, Tasks Unlimited

I find that many of my residential clients save magazines and newspapers with articles where they may have been mentioned or that have information they want to refer back to (for example, a travel article for a place they would like to visit).

Because the magazines and newspapers are bulky and take up unneeded space, I often recommend that they cut out the specific article they want to save. We file the articles based on categories (like travel, mementos, etc.). It's so much easier later on to find them, rather than rooting through an entire newspaper or magazine.

Linda Arena, Organizing Made Easy

One thing to look at is what is driving the collection of information in the first place.

With many clients, the primary cause is an imbalance: the influx of information is greater than the time spent sorting through and dealing with the papers/information. The amount in is greater than amount out ("out" meaning dealt with in some way). This imbalance can be addressed by either decreasing the amount in or increasing time spent on "out" activities.

However, there are often larger underlying causes. Why does someone want the information in the first place? What is the benefit they are receiving from the information? Kim [Tremblay, quoted above] mentioned "time clutter" where the benefit would be avoiding undesirable tasks or situations.

Another underlying cause is perfectionism. If someone is searching for the perfect solution, they may keep searching — the benefit here is to avoid making the imperfect or wrong decision.

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How about when the information is geared toward “things that I’d like to do when ...” (... I have more money, ... I get caught up with my papers, ... my kids get into college, ... I’m not caring for my Mom any more!)? Here, the benefit may be the hope for a better life. When this is the case, giving up the information can feel the same as giving up the hope for a better life.

Then there is the relationship resentment factor. Perhaps the task is something the client resents doing because they really think that someone else should be dealing with it instead. Someone like their spouse, or their child, or the imaginary maid that they really deserve to have but don’t because somebody else bought a fishing boat with double outboard motors!

Maybe it goes back to a bad math teacher in 8th grade. The client believes they are bad at math, and they believe that because of that, they cannot do bills, and bills come in the mail, and mail is paper, and paper is information, and so therefore the client has no idea how to handle any information. There are lots of connections and jumps of reasoning here, but many of these connections may be unconscious to the client.

Maybe it is just difficulty making a decision. Any decision. The benefit to believing you can’t make a decision is that you have an excuse for not making a decision!

If the underlying problem can be identified, then it can be addressed. Becoming aware of an underlying issue can give power to a client to release a blockage that is holding them back in a big way. There is power in awareness. Now, instead of trying to deal with all of the information in front of them, the client is instead practicing what to do about that one underlying issue.

It is the same problem manifesting over and over again. Solve that one problem, and then leverage the skill. It can be a relief to focus on practicing just one skill, to see success in that one area, and to glimpse what is possible using the new skill.

For example, if the difficulty is in making a decision, practice making decisions. Any decision. Decide to decide. Encourage the client to start to become aware of decisions they’re making but aren’t recognizing. It’s easy to be attached to the idea that they don’t know how to make a decision. It can be trickier to recognize that they actually can make a decision, because that recognition means the excuse for not deciding goes away.

For perfectionists, the practice of decision-making needs to go hand-in-hand with the foreknowledge that some decisions might be “bad” or “wrong” and that is OK. Invite self-compassion. Recognize that the cost of becoming unstuck from protectionism is giving up the benefit of not making

the wrong choice.

For people who make lots of connections and jumps in reasoning, disentangling one thought or belief from another can be quite helpful. Inviting awareness is not always easy, but it is powerful! It is definitely worth the effort! As always, be sure to recognize when support from behavioral health professionals is required.

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CD Issues in the Media

By Jennie Vlietstra, CPO-CD®

Rita Braver. "Seeking help for hoarding." *CBS News*. Feb. 23, 2014. In this comprehensive cover story, Braver interviews individuals with hoarding behavior, reviews the disorder and research history with Smith College psychology professor Randy Frost, and features the support group treatment model. Frost and colleagues have developed a support program called "Buried in Treasures" to help hoarders understand, and change, their behavior. Program participant Lee Shuer shares his success story. "I know that I haven't changed as a person; nobody else has either. You still have the impulse. But your reaction to it changes over time." www.cbsnews.com/news/seeking-help-for-hoarding

Donna Fuscaldo. "4 Triggers that Make You Overspend." *FOXBusiness*. Feb. 7, 2014. "Compulsive shopping is becoming a global problem," says Terrence Daryl Shulman of The Shulman Center for Compulsive Theft, Spending & Hoarding. Some of the triggers leading to overspending are boredom, feeling out of control, family history, and insecurity. Experts comment on the common triggers and offer solutions, like awareness and a good support system, to challenge compulsive behaviors. Author Andrea Bonior says, "Sometimes the first step is just being able to look at the bills and see the reality of the situation. It's very hard to break the cycle unless you have a reality check." www.foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/2014/02/07/5-triggers-that-make-overspend

Margaret Berton explains, "Clutter reduces our ability to focus and it increases our stress. Your brain is not able to distinguish between what needs your attention and what doesn't because there is just too much disarray." The link features a video and article, with website resources and local donation organizations. www.kens5.com/news/Conquering-clutter-to-help-transform-your-life--246047961.html

Rick Nauert. "Improving Decision-Making Skills with Mindfulness Meditation." *PsychCentral*. Feb. 13, 2014. Researchers from INSEAD and The Wharton School found that one 15-minute focused breathing meditation can help people improve their decision-making skills. The phenomenon where people have trouble cutting their losses is driven by what behavioral scientists call the "sunk-cost bias." Lead researcher Andrew Hafenbrack explains, "They don't want to feel wasteful or that their initial investment was a loss." Through a series of studies, researchers found that mindfulness meditation, which cultivates awareness of the present moment and clears the mind of other thoughts, may help to counteract this deep-rooted bias. Meditation can reduce how much people focus on the past and future. Co-author Sigal Barsade says, "This tool is very practical. Our findings hold great promise for research on how mindfulness can influence emotions and behavior, and how employees can use it to feel and perform better." www.psychcentral.com/news/2014/02/13/improving-decision-making-skills-with-mindfulness-meditation/65840.html

Psychologist

Deborah Knapp. "Conquering clutter helps transform people's lives, health." *Kens5.com*. Feb. 18, 2014. This news report highlights the relationship between clutter, increased stress, and body weight. Kim Chica shares her story of clutter accumulation and how increased weight gain led to developing diabetes. Chica's favorite saying is "Shed the clutter; shed the pounds." www.psychcentral.com/news/2014/02/13/improving-decision-making-skills-with-mindfulness-meditation/65840.html

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www.challengingdisorganization.org

CD in the Media from page 6

Teresa Tanoos. "Room lighting affects mood and decision-making." *EmaxHealth*. Feb. 23, 2014. A new research study from the University of Toronto Scarborough in Canada and Northwestern University in Illinois reports that different lighting conditions can have a major impact on mood. Six studies with varying lighting conditions found that, even on sunny days, people prone to depression actually became more depressed. The study revealed that people experience more intense emotions under bright lighting conditions and that light affects decision-making. One conclusion was that dimming the light might help people make more rational decisions. Lead researcher Alison Jing Xu explains that "bright lighting conditions intensify our initial emotional reaction to different types of stimulus, including products and people...." www.emaxhealth.com/11400/room-lighting-affects-mood-and-decision-making

Editor's Note: The links included in these references were working as of submission date. If you find that the link doesn't work, the website may have removed the material or moved it to another web page location. You may still be able to find the article cited by using a Google search with the article title, keywords, and publication dates provided here.

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Certificate Holders as of February 15, 2014

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that described the downward arrow approach. Now that our trust was solidly established, perhaps it was time to have a conversation where we explored different perspectives around why she was keeping hundreds of magazines.

Here's an example of the conversation we had.

Once we completed sorting, she and I looked at all the bins with the magazines, and I asked, "How long do you think it takes you to read one magazine?"

She said an hour.

Then I said, "We have six bins of about 150 magazines each, so that is 900 magazines. If it takes an hour each, that is 900 hours. If you spent one hour a day reading a magazine it would take you 2-1/2 years to get through these bins.

"And that doesn't count the magazines that you will continue to

receive during that time. How will using 900 hours in that way impact your ability to do the other goals you have?"

She was silent. I could tell she felt very conflicted about the magazines.

So I asked, "What's the worst thing that can happen if you don't have these magazines?"

Her response was, "I won't have that knowledge available."

I followed it with, "And what's the worst thing about not having that knowledge available?"

She said, "I won't know the best way to fix a problem."

My response: "Have you ever been able to solve a problem to your satisfaction without using information found in a magazine?"

"Yes," she said hesitantly.

"What made it possible for you to solve it without that information?"

"Well," she said, "I knew what to do because I had other experiences like it."

"So you solved it without needing these?" and I pointed to the magazine bins.

"Yes, but what if I have a problem that is something I'm not good at, like technology? I have to have these to help me with that."

I responded, "OK, let's say you have a technology issue. The first thing you would do is come down here and look through your magazines?"

"Ah, no."

"What would you do?"

"I would probably call my son," she said.

"And then you would come down to look at the magazines?"

She was quiet. And I knew that she knew there was very little chance that she would ever get around to reading or referencing these.

"Are you ready to let these magazines go to be recycled?"

"No," she said.

"Can we try an experiment?"

"Maybe."

"Can I place these magazines in cardboard boxes in the garage, and if you haven't wanted to get into the boxes for a month, then I have your

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Product News

Stop Information Overload Before It Starts

By Sara Wiggins, CPO®

Limiting the volume of incoming information can make a big difference when clients are overwhelmed. These resources can help them reduce junk mail — both paper and digital — and unwanted telephone solicitations.

Junk Mail

www.dmachoice.org

Pre-Screened Credit Card Offers

www.optoutprescreen.com/?rf=t

Catalogs

www.catalogchoice.org

Magazine Subscription Offers

www.dmachoice.org/searchCatalogs.php?categoryId=3

Commercial E-Mail

www.ims-dm.com/cgi/offemaillist.php?PHPSESSID=b136b1a38355b09da84b3f36d8d89dda

Telephone Solicitations

www.donotcall.gov

(This works for both landlines and cell phones.)

Sara Wiggins, CPO, Contributing Editor, owns PriOrganize, lives in Colesville, MD, and can be reached at sara@priorganizeyourlife.com.

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permission to take them?"

"OK." But she still didn't sound convinced.

Assessing Discomfort

So then I assured her that it is normal for her to feel uncomfortable because this is a different approach to dealing with the things in her home. I reminded her about her larger goals to have more time to scrapbook and that holding on to the magazines would take time away from that goal and take away space for those supplies.

I said, "I can tell that you are a bit uncomfortable about this, so let's see if your strong emotion stays the same or changes about the idea of recycling these magazines. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being highest, how uncomfortable do you feel about recycling the magazines?"

"10."

"Next week when I come I will ask you about it again, and we will compare your number. Okay? Then we will decide how to proceed."

"OK." And she sounded more at ease.

The next week I came and her discomfort was a 6; she wasn't ready for the recycling.

I came the week following that and asked her, and she said, "Oh, just take them!" So I loaded them up and brought them to a recycling center. All 900. We also worked on reducing her subscriptions after that.

It Is a Process

The process of letting go of paper, which represents potential knowledge, and therefore, the ability to control situations, is very difficult for someone with hoarding behaviors. It requires a great deal of patience on the part of the organizer and respect for the real anxiety that the client feels.

Even though it makes no sense to keep 900 magazines to a rational mind, these clients are using their emotional mind. The emotional mind is deeper in the brain than the rational mind. The emotional trumps the rational every time when anxiety is engaged.

When having a conversation like this, it is critical that the organizer remain open-minded. If in your mind you are judging the client for being slow to release the item, then any question you ask will sound judgmental. By engaging the client in the thought process, his or her own brain gets engaged. They may begin to see how their own assumptions don't add up for what they have stated as their goals.

When having a conversation like this, your role is to ask questions

calmly, and with curiosity. As with any skill, I encourage you to get additional training on how to have effective downward arrow conversations.

Chronical contributor Kate Varness, CPO-CD®, COC, is ICD's Education Director and owns Green Light Organizing in Peoria, IL. You can contact Kate at kate@greenlightorganizing.com.



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(New subscribers as of February 15, 2014)

Teleclass News

Regular Teleclass Night for April and May is Tuesday.

Regular/Standard Teleclasses

Date: Tues., April 1, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: Beyond Safe (ADM-330)

Presenter: Nancy Watson, CPO-CD®

Date: Tues., April 8, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: Dialectical Behavior Therapy:

Mindfulness & More (MH-340) – Webinar

Presenter: David R. Dagg, LPCC-S, LICDC-CS

Date: Tues., April 15, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: Empty Nest Syndrome: Working With Clients Who Are Transitioning Out of Active Parenting (LT-200)

Presenter: Linda Richards, CPO-CD

Date: Tues., April 22, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: Hoarding Task Forces: A Look Inside (ADM-490)

Panelists: Karen Kruzan, CPO-CD; Denise Allan, CPO®, CPO-CD; Jennifer Sampson; & Lee A. Mannillo

Date: Tues., April 29, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: Top Apps to Make Our Clients Rock Stars in Work & Life (ADM-495)

Presenter: Emily Parks

Date: Tues., May 6, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: Resources for Investigating Physical & Mental Health Conditions Affecting CD Clients (ADM-250)

Presenter: Leslie Robison, CPO-CD

Date: Tues., May 13, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: When Environmentalism Goes Wrong With CD Clients (HRD-445)

Presenter: Nettie Owens

Date: Tues., May 20, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: The Hoarding Handbook: An Interview With the Author (ADM-500)

Presenters: Christiana Bratiotis & Terry Prince, CPO-CD

Date: Tues., May 27, 2014

Time: 8 p.m. (EDT)

Teleclass: Getting Past the Chore Wars & Parent-Child Dynamics in ADHD-Impacted Relationships (ADD-160) – Previously recorded teleclass

Presenter: Melissa Orlov

Newsletter submissions are due on the 15th of February, April, June, August, October & December to editor@challengingdisorganization.org.