



Estate Planning: Get Organized Now

Estate planning isn't just about legal issues — there are practical ones as well. After you die, many of the tasks and decisions your loved ones must handle usually aren't covered by basic estate planning documents.

You can save them some headache by making your wishes known on such issues as:

- Who should be notified of your death?
- Did you prepare a will or living trust? Where did you keep them? (For help creating a will or trust, see Nolo's Wills & Estate Planning Resource Center.)
- Do you own a life insurance policy, pension, annuity or retirement account? Where are the documents stored?
- Do you have bank accounts? Do you have a safe deposit box? Where are the records?
- Do you own stocks, bonds or money in mutual funds? Where are the records?
- Do you own real estate? Where are the deeds?

Most of us carry this information around in our heads and never discuss it with our family members in a comprehensive way. Our loved ones must do their best to sort it all out later.

Avoid Unnecessary Losses

Costly or painful losses can result from a failure to organize your affairs. Stocks, bonds, bank accounts, real estate and insurance policy benefits may go unclaimed and be turned over to the state government. This happens surprisingly often. Each year, millions of dollars go into state treasuries because the rightful property owners couldn't be found. On a more personal level, relatives or friends may not be promptly informed of a death, and valuable pieces of family history may not be passed down to future generations. Fortunately, losses like these can be avoided with a little bit of planning, sorting and organizing.

Organize Your Information

Making things easier for your family is not difficult, but it may be time-consuming. It's best to break the task into manageable sections and take it one step at a time.

Start by thinking about some broad categories of information:

- Funeral plans (arrangements and whom to notify)
- Insurance policies
- Wills, living trusts, deeds and other important documents
- Pensions and retirement accounts
- Bank, money market and mutual fund accounts
- Stocks and bonds
- Items in safes, safe deposit boxes and other locked or hidden places
- Family history, including the location of photographs, heirlooms and other irreplaceable items

Then think about organizing this information in a way that will help your family handle your affairs after your death. You can structure the information any way you like — even some scribbled notes left in an accessible location are better than nothing — but if you have the time and energy for it, consider a more thorough approach.

To organize your wishes, plans and important personal information, you can turn to self-help products. However you choose to organize your affairs, what's most important is that you create a clear, easily accessible system that will light the way for your family and friends.

When you have everything in order, be sure to store your information in a safe place. You might consider keeping everything in a fireproof metal box, file cabinet or home safe. Also, be sure to discuss your new records with those closest to you. Your careful work won't help them unless they know where to find important papers when the time comes.





Keep Your Noggin Fit with Brain Exercise

The dog ran. The dog barked. The dog raced. What else did the dog do? That may seem like a silly question. But the act of thinking up verbs to go with nouns pumps extra blood into your brain, according to brain scans.

“Getting more blood to the brain is an important way to counteract the effects of aging,” says Thomas Budzynski, Ph.D., an affiliate professor of psychosocial and community health at the University of Washington.

“If there’s one general thing that happens as people age, it’s that they show decreased cerebral blood flow in certain areas. If you can increase the blood flow, then the neurons will be better nourished,” Dr. Budzynski explains.

Dr. Budzynski has developed brain exercises designed to increase cerebral blood flow. There are many such exercises, such as the process of adding verbs to several nouns. There’s also serial subtracting. That involves beginning with a number such as 900, and then subtracting any number from it — say seven. So you get 893, and then you subtract seven from that to get 886... and so forth.

“It’s like lifting weights in the gym: it doesn’t always feel good, but it’s awfully good for your brain,” Dr. Budzynski says.

The exercises include visualizing, which stimulates a different part of the brain. For example, Dr. Budzynski asks listeners to visualize a schoolroom from childhood.

Doing the exercises is great, but just doing something novel is good for your brain, too. That’s because as you age, a percentage of your brain’s neurons die. You can still create new dendrites, which are the connections between the neurons. They grow from neurons, like branches grow from a tree, when you do brain exercises, think or see new things. The dendritic networks make a model to comprehend those things.

So your goal is to make more dendrites. They are as vital to mental dexterity as phone lines are to phone networks.

Getting physical exercise and eating a low-fat diet are also important, because their benefits to the rest of the body certainly apply to the brain.

The chemistry of the brain is complex, and does not necessarily improve with age. For example, over the years, stress produces cortisol, which damages the cells that provide nutrients to the neurons in your hippocampus, a part of the brain. Your hippocampus helps handle, among other things, short-term memory.

It’s wrong to assume that older people can’t compensate for those physical changes. There is evidence from studies in other countries that some memory deficits in older Americans may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our culture expects older people to have short-term memory loss, and so they do. In China, older individuals are respected, and do not show the same memory problems, Dr. Budzynski says.

Research by a Harvard scientist showed that presenting older people with subliminal positive words and phrases regarding effective memory actually increasinsed their scores on memory tests, he says. So older folks can keep their minds sharp, even if they can’t do everything they could when they were 17.

“It’s also important for older people to have lots of activities, including frequent socializing with others,” Dr. Budzynski says. Consider taking up hobbies, or a challenging volunteer position. Interact with others on the Internet, but get out with real people, too.

