

# Chapter 1

## Let's Get Started

In setting out to write **My “Everything” File®**, my hope was to create a resource that goes beyond the mere listing of assets and debts, places where legal documents are stored, the names of your legal, investment, banking, accounting advisors, and other basic information someone needs to know about you. There are many other books, magazines, websites, and resources available that will provide you with handy checklists to help you compile that basic information.

My goal behind writing **My “Everything” File®** is to provide you with a single, comprehensive place to keep the details of your ever-changing life story. You have so much information buried in your brain, not only about your past history, but about your day-to-day living experiences, that unless you provide someone with a resource that contains all this information, it will be lost forever. Much of that information may be important for the person charged with your care or finalizing your affairs to know.

This book is all about you! **My “Everything” File®** is not just about your stuff! It's a storybook about all you have accomplished, experienced, life lessons you've learned from those experiences, and yes, all the stuff you've accumulated over the years, too! There is a virtual encyclopedia of information inside your brain, and it's all about you.

And while most of that information encompasses your life memories, both good and bad, a lot of that information is about important matters that concern you and your loved ones. If you are rendered incapable of sharing that important information with others due to stroke, disability, or death, someone else is going to be handed the enormous task of figuring everything out on your behalf, and it will be during a period in which they are dealing with all your affairs while experiencing high stress, worry, and grief.

Forgive this stark example, but imagine you wake up one morning, have suffered a stroke, and have lost the ability to move or speak! It happens.

We all know about the important things about our own lives that one should know, such as where bank accounts are located, what bills need to be paid, and whether we have prepared a Last Will and Testament, etc. But who else knows?

Think about what you do every single day. Most of it may be described as a mundane daily routine that you do without conscious thought, thanks to years of habitual repetition.

In order to prepare for completion of your own “Everything” File, I encourage you to pay attention to the details of what you do every day from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep. Keep a notepad with you and, for several days, jot down details you would want someone to know about if you couldn't tell them about it.

While some, or even most, of the details of your daily routine may not be of importance, such as what soap, toothpaste, or toilet paper you prefer, or whether you have milk and cereal instead of eggs for breakfast, it may be important that a particular brand of soap gives you dry, itchy skin, that you are lactose intolerant, that you need to take an insulin shot for your diabetes before breakfast, or that you need other medications and when you need to take them.

It may not be important that you spend a few moments each morning reading your emails and friends' Facebook postings, but it should help you realize that someone needs to know how to access your emails and social media, in case there are important messages waiting for your response, or to enable them to post an entry on your behalf about what has happened to you.

It may not be important that you like to read the investment section of the newspaper over breakfast, but it may be very important if you have an investment account with open orders to buy or sell securities. Someone needs to know not only that you have an investment account or what action needs to be taken, but also who has the legal authority to manage the account on your behalf.

You reach down to pet your dog as you leave for work. Who knows which veterinarian you use and whether or not your dog is taking any medication? Jot it down. Is the dog microchipped? Do you have a preference as to who will take care of your dog while you are incapacitated? If you are single, does somebody even know you have a dog that needs to be fed?

You get in your car to drive to work. It may not be important what gasoline you use, but use that as a reminder to jot down your driver's license information, whether you owe money on the car and, if so, to whom, and your automobile insurance carrier, including policy number and your agent's name and contact information.

When you get to the office, particularly if you own your own business, it will be worthwhile to note down the vendors from whom you buy your supplies and to whom you pay rent or mortgage, insurance, etc. Who has the legal authority to continue your business operations, deposit your receipts, and pay your bills, if you aren't there to do so? I'm certain your employees would like to know that someone else has the ability and authority to write their next paycheck and that it isn't going to bounce.

The idea of this exercise is not to overwhelm you with all the details of your life, but to spend a few days focusing on the important details of your life that someone taking care of you or your affairs would need to know about.

Several years ago, I was interviewing a prospective client whose husband had died a few weeks earlier. It turned out that he had an investment account, and the market, along with his investments, were rapidly declining in value. The financial advisor on the account had no discretion to take any action, and his wife had no legal authority to give the financial advisor instructions to take any action. She couldn't get the authority to do so until being appointed as Personal Representative of his estate—which took several weeks—and by then, the account had dropped significantly in value.

How about your banking, investments, and retirement accounts? In the past, when handling an estate, I could advise a client to watch the mail for monthly statements, so we knew we wouldn't miss an important asset or bill.

But now, consider how many companies encourage you to "go green" by taking electronic delivery of your monthly statements instead of requiring them to mail paper statements of your bank accounts to you. It is a noble cause to save a few trees, but if something happened to you, how would anyone else know that your bank account, investment account, insurance policy, etc., even exists?

Many of us have a lot of bills automatically paid out of our bank account or charged to our credit cards. Somebody needs to know how to stop these payments immediately without having to wait until they are appointed your Guardian (if you are alive) or Personal Representative (if you have died).

If you've ever had to handle the estate of a loved one who has passed away or have had to take over the financial affairs and care of a loved one who has had a stroke or dementia, you'll know it is a time consuming, laborious task, having to search through their drawers and closets, files, boxes in the garage, attic, basement, and mail in the hope of finding where they banked, kept their investments accounts, with whom they had their mortgages, loans, and credit cards, figuring out what bills had to be paid, and whether or not they had insurance coverage.

And in the back of your mind, you were always wondering if you were missing something of importance.

So, consider these questions:

Does somebody know where all your important documents are located? This includes not only your estate-planning documents such as a will, trust, durable power of attorney, health care surrogate, living will, etc., but also the location of deeds to your home, insurance policies, medical records, address books, etc.

Does somebody know your medical history, what doctors you see, which medications you are taking (including dosage) and if you are allergic to any other medications?

Does somebody know where you maintain your bank and investment accounts, your account numbers, and the name, address, and phone number of your banker and investment advisor?

Does somebody know what types of insurance policies you maintain, the account numbers, where the policies are located, when the premiums are due, and the name, address, and phone number of your insurance agent?

If you have your bank account set up to automatically pay some of your bills each month, such as your utility bills, does somebody know how to access those accounts to stop the automatic outflow of money from your accounts?

Think about everything you do online. Would somebody know about all the paid websites to which you may belong? Would they know all your passwords, have access to your social media accounts, your Netflix account, and your iTunes account? What about all those frequent flyer miles and credit card points you might have accumulated?

Would somebody know about any property you own, debts you owe, how everything is titled, and whether you have named beneficiaries on those accounts?

How about storage lockers, safe deposit boxes, or hiding places? How about retirement or other employee benefit plans at your current or former places of employment? How about assets you may be holding for someone else, or assets someone may be holding for you?

The list of questions that need to be answered is very long. As I previously mentioned, over your lifetime, you have accumulated a lot of information that someone else needs to know, should something prevent you from being able to handle your own affairs.

So, where does one start? If you're like me, you have probably accumulated boxes of old bank statements, tax returns, cancelled checks, receipts, closing documents to former real estate or investment accounts, old holiday cards, and the list goes on.

Your important and not-so-important papers tend to pile up in many different places, such as the kitchen, the bedroom, the home office, your place of work, the trunk of your car, and pretty much wherever there is a place on which, or in which, to place the paper. You really do intend to deal with all it "someday!" But the piles continue to get bigger until they are so overwhelming, you simply shove them into a box or a drawer to get them out of your sight, and then the cycle starts again.

The bottom line is that, someday, someone is going to be forced to go through all those files, boxes, drawers, and cabinets. If someone else has to do it because you have been severely injured in an automobile accident, do you really want them to be forced to search for your insurance policies or other legal documents? Wouldn't it make more sense to have all the information they will need in a single convenient location, and wouldn't it make even more sense for you to have shown them, in advance, where the location is?

Nobody knows better than you what information is important for you to keep, and what can be thrown away or shredded.

By the way, I keep asking if “somebody else” knows where all this information is located. If your answer is that your spouse knows where it all is, please consider what would happen if **both** you and your spouse are injured or killed in a car crash? **Who else** knows where all this information is located? Who else has the authority to handle everything that needs to be handled on your behalf?

This book is intended to help you to eliminate most of the unnecessary piles of your paperwork, asks you a lot of important questions that you should consider and discuss with your loved ones—as well as your financial, tax, insurance, and legal advisors—and gets all your important information organized and stored in a single location so you can sleep well at night, knowing you have one less thing to worry about.

And while you’re going through all those boxes, shelves, cabinets, closets, and drawers, perhaps this book will give you a gentle nudge to start purging some of stuff you’ve stored, but haven’t used, for the past decade or so.

This is not a task that will take an evening or even a weekend to complete. It has taken you decades to accumulate the information, so dealing with all of it is a huge undertaking that will take you a fair amount of time.

I’ve broken the process down into small, bite-sized steps to be completed one step at a time. So, complete one small section of the project and reward yourself with a glass of wine, bowl of ice cream, or whatever you consider to be a reward. Another night, complete another small project, and take your spouse out to dinner and a movie. Reward yourself each step along the way, and before you know it, you will have tamed the chaos; you’ll feel happy that you’ve accomplished your goal; and your loved ones will be grateful that you loved them enough to go through the process so that they won’t have to do so.

But, in addition to the important, factual details contained in the workbook, I also wanted to include a fun, personal component that goes beyond the factual details someone needs to know about your life. I wanted to include some sections that allow you to talk about yourself as a person, the information someone would want to know about you, about your passions, your favorite memories, and your life experiences.

I’ve included questions that will encourage you to share favorite lifetime memories, recipes, songs, and pictures (and the stories behind them); lessons you’ve learned in life that you would like to share with future generations; and the people who have inspired you and have been a meaningful influence in your life. There is even some information about filming your own life legacy video, if you are inclined to do so.

And finally, there is a section to tell your family and friends how much they mean to you in your life; all the things you always wanted to tell them, or just want to tell them one more time.

So, the “Everything” file will help you organize and provide details in each of these major categories:

1. All about you, including information about your family, school, work, medical history, any military or public service positions you have had, your pets, and also personal stories to be shared with future generations about these topics
2. Your financial details, including information about your assets, business, debts, taxes, insurance, sources of income, cash flow, and other financial details
3. Where you store your tangible assets, such as a safe, safe deposit box, storage unit, hiding place, etc., as well as where you store your digital files and documents, such as on your computer, external hard drive, in the cloud, etc.

4. Your medical history and details, including information about your medical providers, prescription and non-prescription drugs you take, allergies, surgeries, and other need-to-know medical details about you
5. Planning your funeral and related details about cremation and/or donating your body or body parts
6. Internet and security details, including automatic payments made from your checking account or charged to your charge card; websites you commonly use, including email accounts, social media, online backup and storage, usernames, passwords; and other protective security matters affecting your online security, privacy, and presence
7. Your life legacy, including your family history, life experiences, life lessons, words of wisdom, and other memories you want to share with future generations, and important messages to those who matter most to you
8. And anything else you feel you need to let others know about you

My wife, Helen, has lovingly hinted to me that nobody is going to want to fill out over 300 pages of questions. I certainly agree, which is why the questionnaire also contains a “mini-version” to help you decide which items apply to you, and whether you consider those items of information warrant including them in your “Everything” file.

So, whether you take the time to read the entire book or decide to jump right in and start filling out whichever sections of the “Everything” file questionnaire apply to you, please know that someone will greatly appreciate that you made the effort and took the time in providing all this information to them. Completing it is truly an act of love.

Let’s get started.