



Dirt and dust don't stand a chance against Ken Levito's Main Line cleaning company, A Personal Touch.

*Don't feel bad
if you hate
cleaning the
house. Me
...
Our experts
explain how
to make it
less of a chore*

Clean Freaks

Let's make one thing perfectly clear: Cleaning house, except to a small minority of fastidious Felix Unger types, is not fun. It's hard, time consuming and takes away from other things you'd rather do. Like wash your hair, play with the dog or read Kafka.

But, like death and taxes, housecleaning is ever present and won't go away. For some Mainliners, hiring a professional cleaning service is the answer, a perk no longer restricted to the rich and famous. "It seems silly, because I'm a cleaner, but I have somebody cleaning the house every other week," says Kristen Reilly of Downingtown, a part-time cleaner for Hamilton's Cleaning Service by night and stay-at-home mom to Nona, 2, by day. "It's the last thing I want to do.

I'd rather spend time with Nona."

Open the local phone book. There are more than 30 listings for local cleaning services that promise to do it all—even windows. "Our customers cover a wide range of people: two-career families, working single parents, and singles who work inside or outside the home," says Ken Levito, whose 16-year-old business, A Personal Touch, regularly cleans about 400 households on the eastern and western Main Line. "We even have customers who don't work, but have three kids, pets and a busy life. They want us there to manage the chaos."

If you're still managing your own chaos, here are a few tips from the experts to make your life a little easier.

- Make a plan: Get back in control—and feel

less overwhelmed—by making a list of the must-do jobs first. This will also help you prepare. Make a note of what products or equipment you'll need to do each job so you'll be ready to work. Levito's cleaning teams keep vital supplies together in a portable carrier or bucket, a strategy which will save you steps as you go.

- Get rid of the clutter. You'll be amazed how clean your house looks once you put everything in its place. "My big shortcut is not to accumulate a lot of stuff," says Beebe Bahrami, a self-employed artist and writer from Narberth. "It's too much to dust. I really love everything in my house, so it's a pleasure to clean."

- If you don't know where to put that miniature Statue of Liberty or your grandmother's Hummel collection, move it to a shelf in the basement. Chances are you won't miss it, and you'll be more apt to get rid of it altogether. Levito suggests keeping cherished knickknacks under glass. "Store things behind glass doors, where you can see them, but they don't collect dust."

- Pick your battles: Jim Ireland, who along with his wife Sarah owns the Manhattan-based cleaning service White Glove Elite, advises that you decide what's important, then tackle those jobs first. "How does the light come into your room? Those are the areas where the dirt will show," Ireland says. "You can spend three hours scrubbing your bathroom, but people are going to notice if there are spots on the fixtures. Hit anything that shines, then go back for the rest." If you're having house guests, be sure to clean the fridge. People often help themselves, and a cruddy refrigerator is a turn-off. "I never leave dirty dishes in the sink," says Joe Graci, president of Franklin Engineering in Bala Cynwyd. "That's my job. I don't always cook, but I clean up the kitchen. And I vacuum. My wife Barb does everything else."

- Do dusting right: Don't use a damp cloth on your baseboards. You'll just set the grime. Ireland is in love with a product called the Scotchbrite High Performance Cleaning Cloth. It's a reusable micro-

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fiber cloth that works dry and wet. "I use it to go over everything from chrome to wood surfaces and windowsills. It's really great."

- Levito says dust from the top down. Start with cobwebs, ceiling fans and blinds, hit the furniture and baseboards, then vacuum. He likes to use a damp rag to remove dust, then make a second pass with a polishing cloth. Most importantly, he recommends minimizing the dust and dirt that comes into the house by taking off your shoes in the mudroom, wiping the kids' hands frequently and keeping your pets clean, groomed and off the furniture.

- Banish germs: Joe Rubino, a microbiologist with Lysol, advises using antibacterial cleaners in areas of the kitchen and bathroom where cross-contamination is a problem. "Water and detergent don't kill bacteria," says Rubino. "Cross contamination can happen in places you don't think about, like refrigerator door handles, dishcloths, stove knobs, counter tops, etc." Using an antibacterial product or a 10 percent bleach-to-water solution kills germs before they become a problem. Antibacterial sponges are now on the grocery store shelves, but you'll get the same effect by putting a regular sponge in the microwave and zapping it for 45 seconds.

- Avoid overkill on the cleaning products: You don't want your house to smell like a hospital ward. Use antibacterial products where they make sense, not on anything that doesn't move. The same goes for furniture and floor polish. Waxy build up is bad for wood, including floors. If you like to use more natural products, consider using baking soda as a non-abrasive cleaner in the kitchen. Old-fashioned baking soda—now available in a plastic shaker—can be used for everything from removing the film from the coffee pot to deodorizing trash cans to washing tile and no-wax floors to scrubbing shower curtains. "A mixture of lemon juice and salt works wonders for shining brass and copper without the chemicals," says Bahrami.

- Tricks of the trade: Levito suggests wiping clean shower walls and doors with a thin film of lemon oil, the stuff

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usually used for polishing furniture. It creates a sheen that prevents mildew and is easy to clean next time around. Another tip: Used anti-static dryer sheets are excellent for cleaning electronics, cleaning and repelling dust at the same time.

"I think the two most important tips to make cleaning easier is to get the whole family involved and to clean up as you go," says Levito. "If you ignore a spill in the microwave or toothpaste in the sink, it takes a lot longer to clean it up than when it first happens."

The bottom line is to clean what shines, be sure the house smells fresh, stash clutter and, if guests are coming, use plenty of candlelight—it hides a multitude of sins.

And if you don't feel like cleaning, don't feel bad. There are others like you. "Our kitchen floor gets messier than anything, but cleaning it every day is a waste of time," says artist Johanna Dunn of Belmont Hills, stay-at-home-mother of Evan, 5 and Jamie, 2. "I've learned to live with it. I'd rather do something with the kids and clean it once a week."

Clean Up—Online...

Here are a few websites designed to make your cleaning easier:

www.carpet-rug.com: The Carpet and Rug Institute's homepage has a comprehensive section on stain removal;

www.remodelonline.com: chock full of cleaning tips and remodeling hints;

www.sanitarymaintenance.com: a detailed guide to all kinds of stain removal;

www.allabouthome.com: a treasure trove of cleaning tips such as automatic dishwasher detergent works well on refrigerators, stoves, floors, walls and glass;

www.4cleaning.4anything.com: endless Hints from Heloise-type goodies like "crushed egg shells and water make an excellent scourer for vases";

www.CornerHardware.com: like having the local hardware store guy online—a terrific site for home improvement hints geared to do-it-yourselfers.

Says Gloria Billhuber, a full-time gardener and homemaker from Rosemont, "I get my husband, Hank, involved. He vacuums, cleans the copper and folds laundry for me." ♦



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