

The Washington Post

Why your belongings hold so much meaning, and how to decide what to grab in an emergency

By Galadriel Watson

September 2, 2021 at 8:00 a.m. EDT

The air outside was thick with smoke and ashes as I stood frozen in front of my closet in my home in the Pacific Northwest. Although there was no evacuation order yet to flee a nearby forest fire, I was preparing bags and boxes in case that time came. Items such as passports and underwear were easy choices, but my efforts slowed when it came to other, more personal selections. All those boxes of photo albums from predigital days? My lifetime collection of journals? The sweaters that took me years to knit? Family jewelry I rarely wear? What should take up precious space in my vehicle, and what could I abandon?

Whether escaping emergency situations or downsizing or decluttering, many of us have been overwhelmed by dealing with our material possessions. Though sometimes derided by others as “just things” or “stuff,” especially in a time when minimalism seems to be growing more popular, many of our belongings hold such special meaning that it’s deeply painful to part with them, intentionally or otherwise. Why do we cling to physical objects? How can we ease the pain of losing them? And how can we prioritize which items matter in an emergency? Here’s what the experts say.

Why our possessions matter

“Mostly, when people think about the self, the self is residing within the physical boundary of our body,” said Kyungmi Kim, a cognitive psychologist and assistant professor of psychology at Wesleyan University. However, we also have an “extended self,” she said, which includes important people in our lives, plus certain objects that help us “define ourselves, because they belong to our personal history.” The extended self “gives life to our understanding of who we are, how we became who we are today, and how we will be in the future.”

Holiday decorations, for example, may not simply be festive knickknacks. Mary Ann Murphy, an associate professor of social work and sociology at the University of British Columbia, spoke to victims of the 2003 wildfires in Canada’s Okanagan Valley who described the year following the fire to her as one of “monumental disruption and loss.” One woman who had lost a cherished Christmas ornament told Murphy that, whenever she thought about that ornament, she pictured the child who had given it to her.

“We begin to attach all these memories and give value to these things,” Murphy said. “They represent a unique history and what you have worked your entire life to acquire.”

Possessions are also a means of self-expression.

“They’re a projection of who we are now or who we want to be, and a projection of the social groups and the people that we care about,” said Ayalla Ruvio, an associate professor of marketing at Michigan State University.

Plus, these items can provide a sense of comfort. Like a child clutches a favorite blanket, “there’s something in the tangibility of possessions that gives us a sense of security,” Ruvio said.

How losing beloved items can affect us

Deprived of these objects, your sense of self and safety may be undermined. Karen Lollar, a professor of communication studies at Metropolitan State University of Denver, experienced this when she lost her home of 30 years to a fire in 2008. Her family and pets were safe. Everything else was destroyed; she could grab only her shoes and coat.

“My home has always been more than a structure to me,” she said. “It is part of me. It is my exoskeleton.”

Gone were the oil paintings of her children, her heirloom china, a grand piano purchased as a gift from her grandmother.

“It made me feel empty and lost and insecure,” she said. “I felt like I had been violated and just left raw.”

Although Lollar didn’t have time to make decisions about what to save and what to leave, many of the Okanagan wildfire victims did.

However, “Under the acute stress of evacuation, people become very panicked and confused,” Murphy said. “They can’t make good decisions, so they tend to just kind of grab whatever is around them.”

This means they sometimes rescued trivial items — tennis rackets or frozen foods — instead of their record collections or irreplaceable artwork. In addition to loss, therefore, “they carried this incredible regret and self-blame.”

As a silver lining, some of these people also remembered the significance of the people around them and the power of belonging. Lollar, too, realized the importance of her personal relationships, especially her family — but not until later. “In the initial stages, I was too numb to appreciate that they were there.”

Ways to cope with the loss of our belongings

Whether you had time to grab some beloved belongings or lost everything, experts offer these tips for moving forward.

Take time to grieve. Lollar’s house and its contents were “a part of me. And that part of me, I had to grieve before I could do something to move on.” Ruvio shared that sentiment. Can you buy a new grandfather clock? Yes, but “that is not what you lost. What you lost is the meaning that was embedded in that specific possession, and that is irreplaceable,” she said. “We will mourn it almost like we were mourning over a person.”

Forgive yourself. If you could have saved some prized articles but didn't, understand that guilt and self-blame are "a common experience of disaster," Murphy said. It's not your fault that you couldn't think clearly under stress or forgot items in your haste. Victims "don't need to feel so guilty."

Express yourself. Lollar was particularly hurt by how dismissive the insurance representatives were, as they stated that many of her ruined objects hadn't been valuable. Her reaction was: "Don't talk about my stuff that way." By writing down the story of her experience, she reestablished value. "It gave me the opportunity to say, 'It was important to me.'"

If you're a friend or family member of the victim, you can also take steps to ease the pain:

Don't invalidate their feelings. Remarks such as, "Well, you walked out alive. Nothing else matters," aren't helpful. Of course, she was glad that she, her family and her pets were safe, Lollar said, "but to totally blow off everything else didn't help the grieving process." Instead, be understanding.

Help the victim restore some of the losses. If you have copies of destroyed photographs — or similar ones — or an archive of family recipes or a family heirloom you are willing to part with, consider giving these to the victim.

How to prioritize which possessions to save

The best idea is to minimize losses in the first place — if possible. "Think ahead," Murphy said. If it's not a grab-and-go-within-seconds situation, "think about the things that you value most."

To make these choices, here are questions to ask yourself, which you can also use if you are decluttering or downsizing. As you walk around your house, think about:

- What are the three to five things that matter most to you for sentimental, historic or other reasons (keeping in mind that the expense of an item rarely determines its personal value)?
- Picture losing everything. If you had only 15 minutes to pack, what is irreplaceable?
- What are some of the oldest objects in your home, and do you care for them?
- Is there something that most reminds you of the comfort of home, such as your everyday coffee mug? (One Okanagan victim also suggested that, while fleeing, you snatch the clothes out of your laundry hamper, because those are the ones you love to wear.)
- What handmade items have special importance?
- Do you have loved holiday decorations, travel mementos, boxes of photos, collections or possessions that bear personal inscriptions?
- To preserve the ritual of mealtimes, have any specific dishes been used by your family hundreds of times?
- What objects do your children cherish (an old baby blanket, stuffed animals, trophies or report cards)?
- As for artwork or jewelry, do you truly adore them, or can you have them appraised and rely on insurance to cover their loss?

Once you've made your selections, fill easy-to-grab bins with these treasured items, plus passports and critical papers. As an extra measure, put small objects in a fire-resistant safe (although few are foolproof, Murphy warns). For regularly used possessions you can't yet pack, make a list, so you don't forget them (including the items in the safe) if the time ever comes.

For insurance purposes, take a video of every room in your house, including the contents of closets and drawers. Make sure your insurance policy adequately reflects the replacement value of your possessions. (For more packing tips, refer to resources such as these guides from the U.S. Forest Service, the University of Nevada and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.)

Your preparation won't necessarily be easy, or even thorough.

"I suppose none of us really appreciate many of these things until we lose them and miss their place in our everyday lives," Murphy said.

She, too, recently had to pack because wildfires threatened. "I had all the basics covered. But even me, after thinking about this for so many years, at the last minute I realized, 'Oh my God, I forgot my mom's recipe box.'"

With cooler weather and the occasional bout of rain, the wildfire evacuations in my area have been rescinded — so hopefully this year's threat is done. I have unpacked my hand-knit sweaters and jewelry so I can wear them again. My photos and journals remain boxed, but their bulk means they might not have made the final cut, anyway. Many other items remain undecided upon; that internal struggle will be left for another day.

As for Lollar, she and her husband rebuilt their home and moved in about a year after the fire. She purchased a new piano. Although it will never replace the one she had obtained thanks to her grandmother, "I play every day. And I savor those moments." The old items may be gone, but refreshed surroundings mean she can finally build new memories.

Galadriel Watson is a freelance writer and author of many children's books. Find her at galadrielwatson.com and on Instagram at [@galadrielwatson](https://www.instagram.com/galadrielwatson).