

Hoarding 101

Behind Closed Doors: Getting a Handle on Hoarding

What is hoarding?

Hoarding is the name given to behavior that is characterized by:

- The acquisition and failure to discard a large number of possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value
- Accumulation of belongings to such a degree that they impact functioning and/or preclude the activity for which the space was designed; for example, when a bed cannot be slept upon or a tub that cannot be used for bathing because they are used for storage
- When the quantity of items creates a potential hazard or puts people at risk



Hoarding versus collecting

Hoarding is a spectrum of behavior more than a defined set of characteristics.

Many people collect things. Some collections have great value; others have value only to the owner. Many people who collect things worry they may be hoarders. Most collectors, however, do not accumulate things to such a degree that they prevent function or pose a safety risk. Although hoarders collect many things, collecting is not the same as hoarding.



Hoarding versus eccentricity

What makes one person a hoarder and another eccentric? The answer may simply be space. Individuals with enough space can collect in huge quantities without it really being a problem, as long as they have enough space in other rooms to function safely. For these individuals, hoarding may become an obstacle only when the individual decides to move or passes away and family members are left to deal with the accumulation of stuff.



Hoarding and socialization

Hoarding is a private disorder. Many hoarders have not had anyone in their home for years. Spouses of hoarders, too embarrassed to invite people over, become socially isolated. Children of hoarders often recall never inviting friends over during childhood, for fear that others would find out how they lived. For hoarders and their families, it can feel as if things have replaced people.



Meet Frances

My husband Don is a hoarder. He goes to garage sales and tells people he will take whatever is left over. “Maybe I can do something with it,” he says. There are piles on the floor in every room in our house, broken washing machines in our front yard.... I am so embarrassedit has been six years since I have had anyone visit our home.... it’s so lonely.

Don won’t consider seeking professional help. I suppose I could divorce him, but we have been married for 50 years. I don’t know what else to do.



Hoarding and the elderly

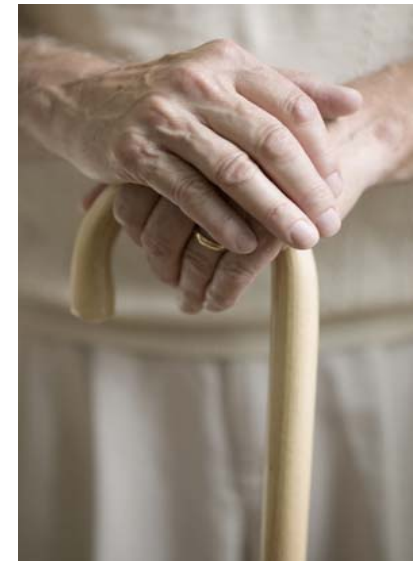
Hoarding does not begin suddenly. It takes years for items to accumulate to such a degree that they constitute hoarding. Some experts believe that hoarding increases among older adults as compensation for accumulated human losses. Others believe that hoarding only seems to be a bigger problem among the elderly because they have had more time to accumulate. As more and more cases of extreme hoarding in older adults are revealed, hoarding among the elderly is being recognized as a significant problem.



Hoarding and the elderly

What experts do agree upon is that hoarding becomes a greater problem as individuals age. Floors in hoarders' homes are normally covered with debris, and as balance and mobility decrease, the hoarded belongings become a significant risk factor for falls.

Most older adults have multiple chronic conditions that are impacted by hoarding as well. Medication compliance among hoarders is poor because pill containers can become hidden under mounds of clutter; pulmonary conditions can be exacerbated by the dust. Frail older adults may be unable to receive needed assistance because most home care agencies will not provide services in hoarding situations until the unsafe conditions are remedied.



Profile of a hoarder

Listed below is the set of characteristics that experts believe define hoarders. It should be noted that hoarding situations that defy each of these characteristics are also common.

Hoarders are typically:

- Female; unmarried
- Living alone; socially isolated
- Related to other hoarders
- Suffering from anxiety, depression and/or personality disorder
- Lacking insight into the problem or in denial
- More entrenched in hoarding as they age



How common is hoarding?

It is estimated that slightly less than 1% of the population hoards. One percent of the U.S. population represents approximately three million people.

Hoarding is private and in all likelihood, is underreported. Researchers believe that fewer than 5% of hoarders ever come to the attention of authorities. This difficulty in identifying hoarders has hampered research efforts. Experts hope that more people who hoard will be identified so there will be more cases to study and more experience gained on how to successfully treat hoarding.



How do people hoard?

Hoarders acquire their belongings through numerous methods.

Excessive buying – Many hoarders acquire belongings through excessive buying. Items may be purchased in person, through mail order (i.e. catalogues, QVC) and increasingly, through the Internet. It is acquiring items, more than using them, that many hoarders crave. It is common to find piles of brand new items, still with tags, in the homes of hoarders.



Hoarding and mobility

Decreased mobility, which especially impacts older adults, often contributes to hoarding. Individuals who depend on others for transportation to and from shopping may overbuy in order to minimize the need for future trips. Discount warehouses that sell items in large quantities are a favorite (the “Costco syndrome”).

Catalogue and Internet shopping enable hoarders to purchase items without having to leave home. For individuals with limited mobility, the human interaction involved in the purchasing process itself may seem to fulfill important social needs.



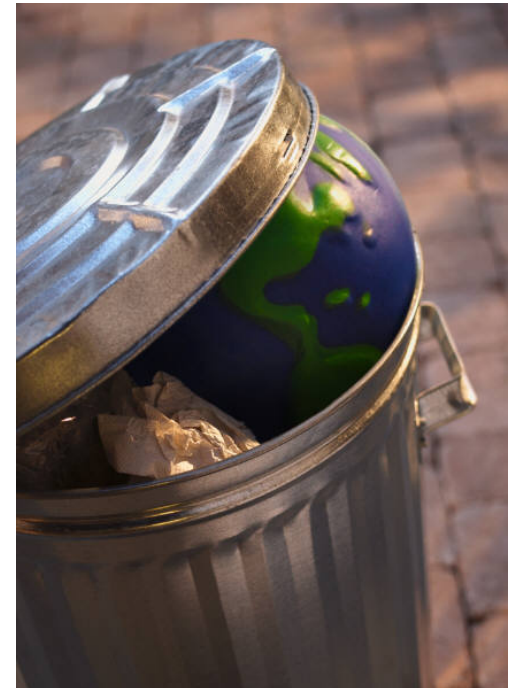
Meet June

I never learned how to drive, and I can't get around much by bus anymore. You can see things on TV now and order them right from the phone. I have bought video cassettes, curtains, vacuum cleaners, jewelry...all kinds of things. The UPS man is my friend. I look forward to seeing him everyday. If I stopped ordering things, I would be lonely.



How do people hoard?

Acquisition of stuff (trash) – Many hoarders acquire things that have been discarded by others. Hoarders are often big proponents of recycling and regard discarding objects as wasteful because “you never know when you might need something.” Lack of proper disposal opportunities are often cited as reasons why items cannot be gotten rid of. Piles of aluminum cans or paper are kept so they can be “recycled properly.” A retired physician keeps cartons of sample medications “because they need to be disposed of in a certain way.”



Items most frequently hoarded

Although hoarders collect many different items, the items most commonly hoarded are paper, containers, clothing, food, books, furniture, other people's trash, catalogue purchases, collectibles, electric appliances, and animals.

Most hoarders collect a wide variety of items. However, there are also “specialty” hoarders who focus only on certain items. Many people have great difficulty with papers or books, but are not otherwise hoarders. Individuals who hoard animals do not necessarily hoard other things, and most hoarders of “things” do not hoard animals.



Causes of hoarding

Hoarding is associated with four disorders:

1. **Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)**

Experts believe that the most common cause of hoarding is OCD. Approximately 3% of the general population has OCD. However, most of these individuals are not hoarders. OCD is a complex and broad spectrum disorder. Individuals may exhibit mild, moderate or significant symptoms.

There are four subtypes of OCD:

- Pure obsessions
- Contamination and checking
- Symmetry/ordering/arranging
- Hoarding/saving/collecting



Causes of hoarding

Hoarders engage in saving/collecting behavior in order to combat obsessive doubts and anxiety-provoking thoughts. Most hoarders experience intense anxiety or distress when attempting to discard, or even think of discarding, what others may view as useless objects.

Certain medications may help individuals with OCD manage symptoms; however, medication has not proven effective for reducing symptoms associated with hoarding.



Causes of hoarding

2. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Adult ADHD – the inability to focus or control impulses – often contributes to hoarding. Like OCD, many people who hoard have ADHD, but most individuals with ADHD are not hoarders.

3. Psychosis

Individuals with paranoid schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are often hoarders. However, most hoarders do not have schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.



Causes of hoarding

4. Dementia

Approximately 20% of people with dementia exhibit some degree of hoarding behavior. Hoarding is common in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, as individuals attempt to keep things in sight for fear of forgetting where they are. As the disease progresses, hoarding behavior may increase as individuals seek to gather together familiar objects. Although 20% of people with dementia hoard, most hoarders do not have dementia.

Hoarders come from all walks of life. Many are highly intelligent and successful.



Is hoarding genetic?

Experts are divided about this question. It is known that OCD and ADHD, two conditions that contribute to hoarding, are prevalent within families. Accordingly, the predisposition to hoard may be genetic.

Research has demonstrated that many hoarders grew up in homes with hoarders. Consequently, it is believed that hoarding may also be a learned behavior.



Meet Alison

My mother broke her hip and is coming home from rehab in two weeks with a walker. I'm concerned because there is not 18" clearance for the walker in many of the rooms in my parents' home. My father is a retired physician and had his office in the basement of the house. It was always cluttered when we grew up, but not like this. Now you can't walk into most of the rooms down there, and the upstairs isn't much better.



Alison's Dad

My father contributes to over 1000 charities. That's a good thing, contributing, but do you know how much mail he gets from those 1000 charities? I think mail makes him feel important.

He has an entire room full of medical journals from twenty years ago. He has this dream that he may use them someday to write an article. That will never happen. Maybe he uses the fantasy so he can still view himself as a doctor.



Alison's brother, Nick

My brother is no help at all. His home is almost as cluttered as Mom and Dad's. Every time I try to throw away something from Dad's house, Nick takes it back out of the trash. I know he won't contribute to any clean-up effort.

Alison and Nick could not come to terms on what to do about their parents' cluttered home and their father refused to cooperate with any clean-up effort. When their mother was released from rehab, the home had not been cleared to accommodate for her walker.



Congratulations!
You have completed the **Hoarding 101** module.