

# How and When to Intervene

## Behind Closed Doors: Getting a Handle on Hoarding

## Intervention overview

Sooner or later, most Move Managers have an opportunity to work with a hoarder. Before accepting such an assignment, it is important to consider whether you are qualified to work with hoarders, whether it is the right thing for you and your move management business, and above all, whether intervention is appropriate.

This module describes the barriers to effective intervention with hoarders and presents an approach to help you determine when and how to intervene. The module also provides proven tips and strategies for working with hoarders which you can print as a PDF following the course.



# Barriers to treatment

There are numerous barriers to treating hoarders.

- **Denial.** Most hoarders see no problem with how they live.
- **Resistance.** Because of the hoarder's extreme emotional attachment to belongings, forced clean-outs are traumatic. Some hoarders experience catastrophic emotional responses during forced clean-outs and require emergency psychiatric care.
- **Ineffective.** Without ongoing intervention, most dwellings revert back to an uninhabitable state within a relatively short period of time.



# Intervention paradigms

Given all the barriers to effective treatment, the first question for service providers is when do government agencies have the right or obligation to intervene in hoarding situations?

Researchers on hoarding have developed a capacity-risk model to help practitioners determine how and when intervention is appropriate. (Note: the model does not address working with hoarders at the hoarders' request).

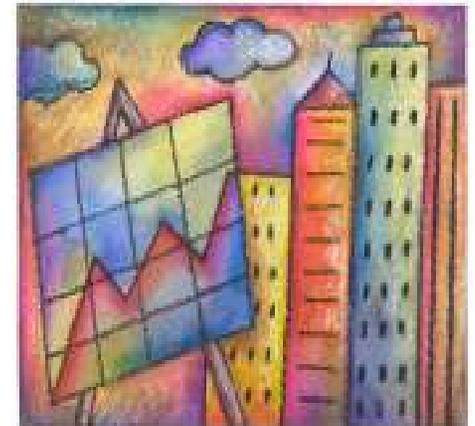


# Intervention paradigms

The model examines three areas of functioning, or capacity:

- Physical — the individual's ability to perform the activities of daily living (ADLs ) --- to feed, dress and bathe
- Social --- the availability of support, the individual's finances, etc.
- Psychological --- the individual's mental competency

The model plots these capacity findings along one axis and the level of risk along the other. The goal of the model is to increase capacity and decrease risk. Since it is difficult to alter capacity, the model's focus is on decreasing risk.

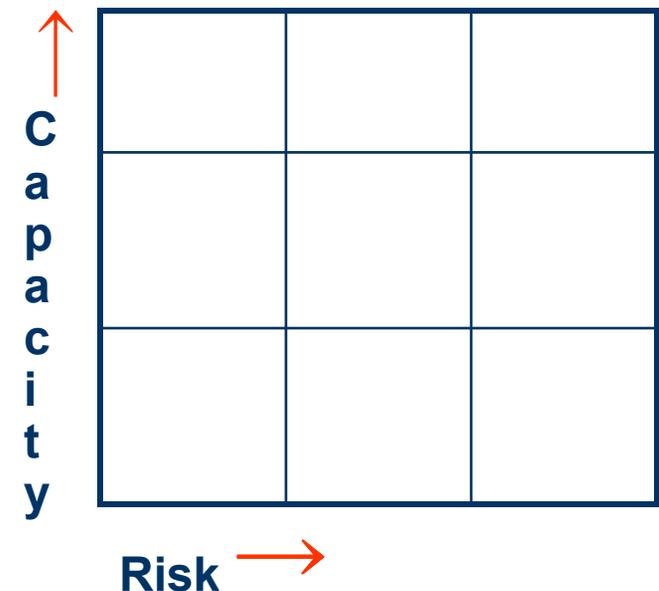


# Intervention paradigms

**When capacity is high**, irrespective of risk, the model suggests that intervention is not appropriate. Unless there is significant danger to **others**, the individual's right to self-determination takes precedence.

**If capacity is moderate** and risk is low, no action is required. If risk is moderate or high, intervention should focus on encouraging the client to accept services so risk can be reduced.

**If capacity is low** and risk is moderate or high, intervention is appropriate, even to the extent of seeking guardianship.



# Intervention paradigms

|  |  |                 |                              |   |   |
|--|--|-----------------|------------------------------|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">↑<br/><b>Capacity</b></p> |  | <b>high</b>     | Do not intervene             | Do not intervene                                  | Do not intervene                                  |
|  |  | <b>moderate</b> | Attempt to reduce risk       | Encourage client to accept services / reduce risk | Encourage client to accept services / reduce risk |
|  |  | <b>low</b>      | Alert agencies – reduce risk | Alert agencies – reduce risk                      | Alert agencies – seek guardianship                |
|  |  | <b>Risk</b> →   | <b>low</b>                   | <b>moderate</b>                                   | <b>high</b>                                       |

## Resources for professional help

Hoarding situations are complex. Many localities have developed multi-agency task forces to increase understanding of the problem and develop collaborative approaches to intervention.

Depending upon the severity of the hoarding situation, it may be appropriate to bring in professional resources who have prior experience with hoarding. The National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization ([www.nsgcd.org](http://www.nsgcd.org)) provides a national referral network of individuals with specialized training and credentials in working with hoarders.

**NSGCD** NATIONAL STUDY GROUP ON  
CHRONIC DISORGANIZATION

## Resources for professional help

Extreme hoarding situations can also be referred to Adult Protective Services (APS). APS is a state-mandated program whose mission is to protect older adults and persons with disabilities from abuse, neglect and exploitation. When appropriate, APS can initiate legal action for appointment of a guardian. Contact information for Adult Protective Services is available through your local Area Agency on Aging. Access a directory of all Area Agencies on Aging at [www.n4a.org](http://www.n4a.org).

National Association  
of Area Agencies on Aging  
[www.n4a.org](http://www.n4a.org)



1730 Rhode Island Ave, NW, Suite 1200  
Washington, DC 20036  
Tel: 202-872-0888  
Fax: 202-872-0057

*Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.*

## Guidelines for working with hoarders

The slides that follow present best practice tips for working with hoarders. These tips are also assembled in a PDF that you can print from the eSMMART Exam Center after completing the exam.

Although many of these tips are appropriate for all clients, keep in mind that working with hoarders is NOT like working with other clients.

**1. Never remove anything without discussion and obtaining the individual's permission.**

**Never do a "surprise" clean up.**



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**2. Don't expect miracles overnight.** Progress with hoarders is slow. Removing two bags of trash may seem like a drop in the bucket to you, but to a hoarder, it may seem like a great deal. Clearing a sofa so it can be sat upon may take many hours and numerous sorting sessions.

**3. Let go of ideal notions of cleanliness.** The hoarder may value items that appear to you as worthless or trash. The goal is not to make the home perfect or to reflect your values of cleanliness.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**4. Name the problem and define the standards.** The goal in working with hoarders is not to “fix them.” Establish goals based on minimum safety requirements and review these with the client:

*“The home health agency will not provide services unless there are 24-inch paths for circulation and access to the bathroom is clear,”*

**or**

*“The retirement community has safety codes for the protection of all the residents that we need to meet...”*



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**5. Listen to the individual's ideas and plans for their belongings.**

Explore their hopes, both realistic and unrealistic. Design your intervention to help them achieve at least some of their goals.

**6. Work at the client's pace if you can.** Start with short periods of time, keeping in mind how anxiety-producing the decision-making process can be for a hoarder.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**7. Partner with a legal group, home care, or nursing agency** to determine what level of cleanliness your client needs to achieve in order to attain the stated goal, whether that is eviction prevention, home care services, or a return to independent living. You must meet certain standards, but you don't have to exceed them.

**8. Focus on fall prevention.** Create pathways free of debris, loose cords, or slippery rugs. Some frail elderly hold onto furniture or other items while moving through the home. Ask your client how he or she gets around and don't remove their "props" until other assistive devices (canes, walkers) can be introduced.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**9. Focus on fire prevention.** Make sure your client has a smoke alarm and test it. Red flags include newspapers stored on or inside the stove or near radiators. Help relocate belongings from a hazardous area to a safe place.

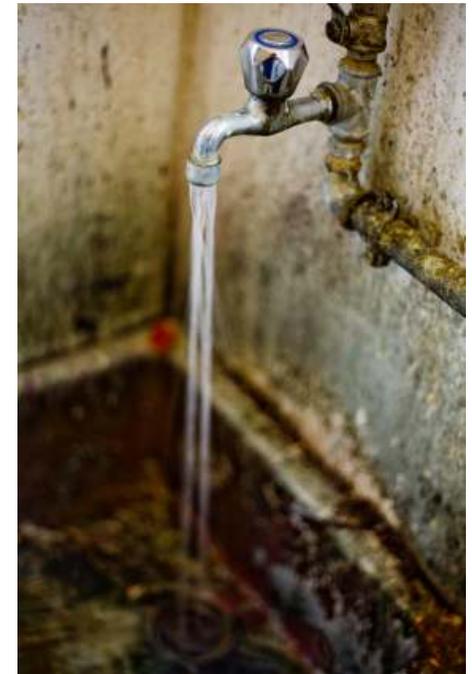
**10. Be creative and negotiate.** Perhaps the client can keep the previous year's copy of a magazine, but throw away the prior twenty years' collection. Look for creative donation opportunities.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**11. Ask the client what they would like to do that they cannot currently do because of the clutter.**

*“Would you like to be able to take a bath?  
How could we do this differently so  
you could use the bath tub, which is  
currently being used for storage?”*



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**12. Motivate your client by helping them be realistic.** Some clients will de-clutter only when they face eviction or cannot be discharged home after a hospitalization. Use gentle but firm pressure, reminding the client of the consequences if conditions are not improved.

**13. Create a limited number of categories for belongings.**

Remember that decision-making is anxiety-producing for many hoarders. Minimize the number of decisions they need to make at one time. Focus on “keep” or “not keep” rather than “keep, donate, auction, ebay,” etc.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**14. Be resourceful in finding workers.** De-cluttering a hoarder's home can consume hundreds of hours. Many hoarders cannot afford professional help. Consider volunteers and other informal support groups.

**15. Have a social worker or mental health professional present during a major clean-out,** preferably one who already has a supportive relationship with the client. Clean-outs can be emotionally overwhelming for people with severe hoarding behavior. Have a back-up plan in case emergency psychiatric services are required.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**16. Discuss how to safeguard valuables during the cleaning process.** Since hoarded objects are typically piled without order, it is common to find valuables amidst trash. Agree on what to do with valuables that turn up, such as money, jewelry, checks, bonds, stock certificates and collectibles, and document this in your contract.

**17. Call the ASPCA** if you need help finding a temporary or permanent home for pets while the clean-out is being conducted.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**18. Consider relocating** an individual to a new apartment if the clutter is the result of a physical or mental frailty. A new environment can provide a fresh start and enable the client to receive needed services sooner.

**19. Help the client maintain a sense of control over the process.** Involve them in setting goals for both the project as a whole as well as for each session. Balance the client's need to maintain control with project goals. Be persistent and establish boundaries and time frames for getting things done.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**20. Plan for a carefully orchestrated clean-up** so unexpected problems do not occur. Make sure to make arrangements:

- with the building for entrance and removal of trash and other possessions
- for use of elevators
- for cost, rental and removal of dumpsters (Do NOT leave a dumpster or trash bags on the property after a clean-out, even overnight).
- for storage, if needed, including cost of transportation to the storage facility



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

**21. Plan for ongoing maintenance and supervision.** Since the underlying factors that contribute to hoarding remain, it is likely that the client will continue to hoard after a clean-up. Without ongoing assistance, the hoarder's home may become cluttered again. On the other hand, hoarding requires time. It is unlikely that an 85 year old hoarder whose apartment has been cleaned will be able to accumulate the quantity of items that were in the home or apartment prior to the cleaning.

**22. Don't belittle or talk down to the person.** Do not criticize their environment. Do not talk about the hoarder to others as if he or she is not present.



## Guidelines for working with hoarders

### 23. Establish a positive relationship.

- Empathize with the client's point of view; allow the client to tell stories and provide emotional as well as physical support.
- Respect the client's attachment to possessions, and remember that these may be as intense as human attachments. For many hoarders, "things" have taken the place of human relationships.
- Be supportive; praise often and sincerely.



## Summary

As a society, we are perplexed by hoarders and are not very tolerant of their behavior. At best, we view hoarders as eccentric, independent, and strong-willed. More often than not, we are judgmental and label them as lazy, mentally ill, stubborn, and even disgusting. We cite the danger of fire or the risk of falling as reasons to intervene, yet we tolerate other addictions that involve risk, such as smoking and allow individuals to place themselves at risk through behaviors such as excessive drinking, overeating, or being non-compliant with medications. Yet, we are not tolerant of hoarders or their right to live the lifestyle they choose.



## Summary

It is important to understand the issues that surround hoarding, to know when it is or is not appropriate to intervene, and what resources are available to help. Working with hoarders is not right for everyone and should be a personal decision. Sometimes the most professional act is to refer a hoarder to colleagues with prior experience in hoarding situations or who specialize in hoarding.

Remember that most hoarders are comfortable with their situation, even if others are not. Move Managers are accustomed to creating beautifully organized homes. With hoarders, that is not the goal.



Congratulations!

You have completed **How and When to Intervene** module.

Now proceed to the Terra Nova film, **Packrat**.  
Following the film, proceed to a short quiz and you  
will have completed the course on hoarding.

From the **Start Your Training** Menu, you can also download  
a PDF of the Guidelines for Working with Hoarders.