

Articles on Compulsive Hoarding

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What is hoarding, and how does it differ from collecting?

Two behaviors characterize hoarding: acquiring too many possessions and difficulty discarding or getting rid of them when they are no longer useful or needed.

When these behaviors lead to enough clutter and disorganization to disrupt or threaten a person's health or safety, or they lead to significant distress, then hoarding becomes a "disorder." Simply collecting or owning lots of things does not qualify as hoarding.

A major feature of hoarding is the large amount of disorganized clutter that creates chaos in the home. Such as:

- Rooms can no longer be used as they were intended
- Moving through the home is difficult
- Exits are blocked

Collectors typically keep their possessions well-organized, and each item differs from other items to form an interesting and often valuable collection. Further, an important purpose of collecting is to display the special items to others who appreciate them. People who hoard are seldom able to accomplish such goals.

What kinds of things do people who hoard typically save?

It may appear that people who hoard save only trash or things of no real value. In fact, most people who hoard save almost everything. Often this includes things that have been purchased but never removed from their original wrapper.

The most frequently saved items are:

- clothes
- newspapers

Other commonly hoarded items include:

- containers
- junk mail
- books
- craft items

What contributes to the development of hoarding?

People who hoard often have deficits in the way they process information. For example, they are often easily distracted and show symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These symptoms make it difficult for them to concentrate on a task without being distracted by other things.

Most of us live our lives in categories. We put our possessions into categories and use organizing systems to store and find them easily. But using categories is hard for people who hoard. Their lives seem to be organized by sight and space.

The electricity bill might go on the 5-foot high pile of papers in the living room to keep it in sight as a reminder to pay the bill. The hoarder tries to keep life organized by remembering where that bill is located. When they need to find it, they search their memory for the location it was last seen. Instead of relying on a system of categories where one only has to remember where the entire group of objects is located, each object seems to have its own category. This makes the process of finding things very difficult once a critical mass of things has been collected.

Do all people who hoard save things for the same reason?

No. But, there are some general themes, such as:

Not Wasting Things

The most frequent reason for hoarding is to avoid wasting things that might have value. Often people who hoard believe that an object may still be useable or of interest or value to someone. Thinking about whether to discard it leads them to feel guilty about wasting it.

"If I save it", reasons the hoarder, "I might not ever need it but at least I am prepared in case I do."

Fear of Losing Important Information

The second most frequent reason for saving is a fear of losing important information. Many hoarders describe themselves as "information junkies" who save newspapers, magazines, brochures, and other information-laden papers. They keep large quantities of newspapers and magazines so that when they have time, they will be able to read and digest all the useful information they imagine to be there. Each newspaper contains a wealth of opportunities. Discarding it means losing those opportunities. For such people, having the information at hand seems crucial, whereas knowing that the information exists on the internet or in a library does little to help them get rid of their often out-of-date papers. Hoarders are often intelligent and curious people for whom the physical presence of information is almost an addiction.

Emotional Meaning of Objects

A third reason for saving is that the object has an emotional meaning. This takes many forms, including the sentimental association of things with important persons, places, or events, something most people experience as well, just not to the same degree. Another common form of emotional attachment concerns the incorporation of the item as part of the hoarder's identity—getting rid of it feels like losing part of one's self.

Characteristics of Objects

Finally, some people hoard because they appreciate the way objects look, especially their shape, color, and texture. Many people who hoard describe themselves as artists or craftspeople who save things to further their art. In fact, many are very creative with their hands. Unfortunately, having too many supplies gets in the way of living and the art projects never get done.

Why can't people who hoard control their urges?

Understanding this requires knowing what happens at the moment the person decides to acquire or save something. At the time of acquisition, people who hoard often experience a sort of "high" or very good sensation during which their thoughts center on how wonderful it would be to own the object sitting in front of them. These thoughts are so pleasant that they dominate thinking, crowding out information that might curb the urge to acquire.

For instance, they forget that they don't have the money or space for the item, or that they already have 3 or 4 of the same thing. When faced with the idea of throwing it away, hoarders have different thoughts than most other people. All their thoughts center on what they will lose (e.g., opportunity, information, identity) or how bad they will feel (e.g., distress, guilt) while none of the thoughts focus on the benefits of getting rid of the item. Saving the item, or putting off the decision, allows them to escape this bad experience. In this way people become conditioned to hoard.

How much truth is there to the common wisdom of hoarding being a response to deprivation?

Although some people attribute their hoarding to living through a period of extreme deprivation, our research has failed to find a link between being deprived of things early in life and later hoarding behavior. We do suspect there is a connection between hoarding and traumatic experiences or chaotic or disruptive living circumstances earlier in life.

Hoarding has been considered to be a kind of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), but are there any differences?

Yes. In fact, only about 1 in 5 people with hoarding problems report any significant OCD symptoms like checking or cleaning rituals. There are also some other important differences.

In OCD, obsessions are experienced as intrusive and unwanted, and the symptoms are always accompanied by distress. But in hoarding, owning things often produces pleasant feelings of safety and comfort, and acquiring can even produce euphoric feelings. In fact, the distress we see in hoarding comes from the accumulated clutter as a whole or from thinking about discarding things. There also appear to be differences in the brains of people with hoarding problems compared to those who suffer from OCD.

For these reasons, many scientists who study hoarding have recommended that it be classified as a distinct disorder separate from OCD.

Is it true that depression is a common problem for hoarders?

Yes. In our research we find that more than half of people with hoarding problems are clinically depressed. However, the depression does not seem to cause the hoarding, although it might be a result of hoarding, especially when the clutter interferes with people's ability to function and they feel embarrassed and ashamed.

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Compulsive hoarding syndrome is the term used to describe a psychiatric condition in which the sufferer or hoarder excessively accumulates things in their homes to the point that their living space is cramped and becomes virtually unusable for its originally intended purpose. Also known as pathological collecting, this condition affects about 1% of the population in Britain and two million people in the United States - it is therefore a problem that is more common than most people think. And it is potentially hazardous as well.

Things that are hoarded include - soap, detergents, salt and other items that can be bought in large quantities; inexpensive but practical things like elastic bands and plastic bags; used wrappers, empty lighters, bottles and other items of no apparent value; items that they think may be of use in the future but which of course never get used at all and books, magazines, bills, newspapers or other printed materials, which may be rare and are bought with the intention of reading them one day. It is not unusual for the amount of clutter present to fill the available living space literally from floor to ceiling that it becomes virtually impossible to move around.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) patients such as Alzheimer's, dementia and anorexia sufferers tend to be more prone to becoming compulsive hoarders even though other people can

also be susceptible. Usually professional help has to be sought to deal with the issues surrounding this disorder.

Compulsive hoarding should not be confused with cluttering. Even though they may appear to exhibit similar traits they are indeed very different. As opposed to hoarding as discussed above, cluttering affects millions of people and as such is more widespread. The clutterer accumulates things without giving it much thought, but will clean up their mess without having to resort to the intervention of a professional if they feel sufficiently motivated to do so. Also the clutterer will usually do something before the mess causes them any form of distress and becomes a hazard.

Apart from the inability to use their living space adequately, hoarding has been known to have other effects on the hoarder such as greater susceptibility to illness due to unhygienic conditions caused by the presence of pests, rodents and rotten foods to mention a few; some hoarders have been known to be trapped in their mess for days on end with some even losing their lives as a result. Other effects include low self esteem and poor social skills, with hoarders too embarrassed to invite people into their homes.

Getting help for the compulsive hoarder is usually a difficult task. The reason for this is they hardly seem to realise they have a problem and until they are willing to acknowledge it, getting help may yield little or no result. A lot of the time, help is brought by concerned loved ones, disgruntled landlords or unhappy neighbours alerting the local authorities to unpleasant smells or the presence of rodents and other pests. Even though compulsive hoarding is a type OCD, the usual medications that are administered in other OCD cases appear to be ineffective with the compulsive hoarder. However more success seems to have been achieved with cognitive behavioural therapy.

Kay Lawson is a compulsive hoarding expert. For more great information on [compulsive hoarding](http://www.thehoardingbehaviors.com), visit <http://www.thehoardingbehaviors.com>.