

Hoarding: The Impact of Compulsive Keepers

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According to the International OCD Foundation, between 700,000 and 1.4 million people in the United States exhibit compulsive hoarding behavior.

Hoarding is defined by the Mayo Clinic as the excessive collection of items, along with the inability to discard them. Hoarding creates cramped living conditions and homes filled to capacity. Many homes only have narrow pathways through the house that wind through stacks of clutter.

The Mayo Clinic states that hoarding, which is also known as compulsive hoarding or compulsive hoarding syndrome, can be a symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). However, many people who hoard do not have OCD-related symptoms. Researchers are working to better understand this disorder and define it as a distinct mental health problem.

Hoarding creates personal complications that include unsanitary living conditions, posing health risks. Hoarding can interfere with performing daily tasks such as bathing and cooking. Above all, the clutter is a safety and fire hazard.

Some of the common characteristics of individuals who hoard are the accumulation of large quantities of objects, documents, papers, or possessions beyond apparent necessity or pleasure. They struggle with parting and letting go of possessions. They may have a wide range of interests and uncompleted projects. A chronically disorganized person gets distracted easily and has weak time-management skills. A hoarder often makes decisions differently than a non-hoarder. People who hoard do not see these characteristics as a problem. That makes it hard to treat the disorder, but treatment can help people who hoard live a safer life.

Clutter provides a feeling of safety and comfort to the hoarder, say researchers at the Mayo Clinic. People who hoard usually have very few meaningful relationships. The relationships they do have, they have had for a long time. Sometimes the hoarding compulsion is driven by a traumatic life-changing event. If a person has not adequately dealt with this trauma, it can trigger a hoarding problem.

The impact of hoarding can even be felt in business. Compulsive keepers have a poor sense of time, often misplace files, and are tardy or absent frequently. They struggle with instructions, have a hard time making decisions, and miss important deadlines. These problems create havoc in the workplace and reduce productivity.

Risk Factors

Hoarding can affect anyone, regardless of age, sex, or economic status. It is hard to determine how common hoarding is, because it has only recently been studied and few people seek treatment.

Age — Hoarding often starts early in adolescence and gets worse with age.

Family history — People are more likely to hoard if they had family members who did.

Stressful life events — Some people start to hoard after experiencing a stressful life event they find difficult to cope with, such as the death of a loved one, divorce, eviction, or losing possessions in a fire.

Social isolation — Often people who hoard are withdrawn from society because they are isolated or lonely.

Perfectionism — People who compulsively hoard are perfectionists. They worry about making the right decision about what should be done with each possession. The process of trying to decide what to do with possessions creates distress, so they avoid making any decision and keep everything instead.

Animal Hoarding

People also sometimes hoard animals. Often animals are kept indoors and hidden from public view. If there are too many animals, the person cannot take care of them properly, and a veterinarian or neighbor may be the first to see the signs of a problem. It is not uncommon to find both humans and animals in unsanitary and unsafe conditions.

Solutions

Neighbors and family members can be part of the solution. According to the Mayo Clinic, hoarding can lead to isolation and loneliness, which in turn can lead to more hoarding. As with the saying “it takes a whole village to raise a child,” it takes a community to help a hoarder come forward and find the help necessary to overcome this problem. Hoarding problems will only continue to get worse unless there is an appropriate intervention. The worst thing to do is to go into the hoarder’s home and clean it up. The hoarder will just revert to old habits or even worse. Social supports need to be in place to help a hoarder deal with the problem.

If you identify someone who is a hoarder, be patient. This situation did not happen overnight. It takes time to learn new skills and strategies to cope with a hoarding disorder. Effective treatment of hoarding can take up to a year, not to mention the long-term support needed to keep a hoarder from falling back into old habits.

Living with or working with someone who is chronically disorganized can be a challenge. First and foremost, keep lines of communication open. If you get angry with a hoarder, be direct and emphasize he or she is more important to you than the clutter.

Coaching is an important skill to have when dealing with people who hoard. Often family members do not make good coaches. Here are some coaching skills to consider:

- Listen without making a judgment.
- Treat people who hoard as you would like to be treated, with respect and dignity.



Resources

For more information:

Hoarding Coalition, Wichita/Sedgwick County, www.sedgwickcounty.org/hoarding

Mayo Clinic / Health Information/Diseases / Symptoms, www.mayoclinic.com/health/hoarding/DS00966

Institute for Challenging Disorganization, www.challengingdisorganization.org

International OCD Foundation Hoarding Center, www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding/

Examples of potential resource groups and agencies that might be involved:

- Professional Organizers Association, www.napo.net/
- Area Agencies on Aging and Senior Centers
- Adult Protective Services – SRS
- Animal Services and Shelters
- Fire Department
- Housing and Community Services
- Police Department
- Code Enforcement
- Environmental Resources

- Focus on the person's good qualities, not the mess. Find ways to draw out his or her best assets and not focus on faults.
- Recognize small steps of progress in eliminating clutter.
- Remember that good coaches help shape the decision so it's easier to make; they do not make the decision for the person.

It may be hard to reserve judgment, but seek to understand first. When listening to the description of the problem by someone who is hoarding, carefully reflect on what is said. Then, look around the community for local groups or agencies to help support and address the person's problem.

Everyone who hoards wants to feel accepted by family and others in the community. There is an increasing stigma on people who hoard. Communities and family members need to work together to create support systems for these individuals.

Prevention and Treatment

Since little is known about what causes hoarding, no one knows how to prevent it.

According to the Mayo Clinic, you should seek help from a doctor if clutter and difficulty in discarding things is a problem. This condition usually surfaces in the teenage years. As an affected person grows older, he or she typically starts to acquire things for which there is no need or space. By middle-age, when the condition is usually diagnosed, symptoms are often severe and difficult to treat.

If you or a loved one has symptoms of hoarding, talk with a doctor or mental health provider. Some communities have agencies that can help you locate resources in your area.

It may be difficult to do, but contacting local authorities — such as police, fire, public health, or animal welfare agencies — may be the best choice, especially when health or safety is at risk.

Are You Chronically Disorganized?

Here is a questionnaire to help you determine if you are chronically disorganized.

Answer the following questions yes or no:

1. Has disorganization been a factor in your life for many years?
2. Does your level of disorganization interfere with the quality of daily life or negatively affect your relations with others?
3. Has disorganization persisted despite self-help attempts to get organized?
4. Do you own at least one organization book?
5. Do you save many articles, newspapers, or books you've read?
6. Do you suffer from "fear of filing"?
7. Do you feel every paper must be kept in sight or you'll never find it again?
8. Do you lose or misplace papers and items despite keeping them out?
9. Does your filing system cause difficulty in retrieval?
10. Does it take you more than 3 minutes to find most papers in your office?



11. Do you like to collect things?
12. Are you a shopaholic?
13. Do you accumulate possessions beyond apparent usefulness or pleasure?
14. Does your disorganization cause you embarrassment or humiliation?
15. Are your desk, floor, and/or countertops covered in papers?
16. Did you feel deprived as a child, either emotionally or materially?
17. Is it difficult for you to part with things even though they have outlived their usefulness?
18. Do you consider yourself a pack rat?
19. Do you have a wide range of interests and several uncompleted tasks and projects?
20. Do you find it difficult to stay focused or are you easily distracted?
21. Do you tend to lose track of time?

If you answered “yes” to questions 1, 2, 3, and some of the other questions, you could be chronically disorganized. Chronic disorganization is found at the extreme end of the continuum, differing from severely disorganized. Chronic disorganization is marked by its longevity, interference with quality of life, and resistance to self-help efforts.

If you answered “yes” to several other questions, don’t panic. There are solutions. There are many types and levels of disorganization relating to the areas of paper, time, and clutter management. Anyone can be taught to increase his or her level of organization. It is never hopeless. Professional organizers can help you succeed where self-help falls short, while saving you countless hours of effort trying to discover the most effective solutions for yourself.

This quiz is from the Institute for Challenging Disorganization, www.challengingdisorganization.org, ICD Fact Sheet 001, Diane Hatcher, author and professional organizer. Find it at www.challengingdisorganization.org/content/fact-sheets-public-0

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