

What is Hoarding Disorder?

Hoarding Disorder is a mental health condition that typically includes problems with acquisition, decision making, organization, and difficulties letting go of possessions. These tendencies create a cluttered living environment, which makes parts of, or the entire home unusable. Hoarding often escalates after a life transition or significant event. It is a progressive condition that tends to get worse if left untreated.

Who Does Hoarding Impact?

Prevalence rates vary widely, but hoarding disorder is estimated to impact between 3 and 10 million Americans. With increased media attention on hoarding, more people are becoming aware of this condition and are getting help to learn skills to decrease hoarding tendencies. People struggling with this condition tend to be older, but most reported hoarding since childhood. Hoarding is a chronic, progressive condition that is found to impact men and woman equally. Genetics research has found hoarding to run in families. This means that genetically predisposed individuals are at higher risk for developing the disorder.

Can Hoarding Be Treated?

Yes. See our resources section of the website to find options that might be helpful for your situation. Hoarding can result from a number of different circumstances and it is not a “one size fits all” treatment approach. Each situation is unique and requires a specialized response in order to produce long term change. The effective treatment for hoarding includes skills development and replacement behaviors. When others clean the home of someone with this condition, it is important to remember that while the home is temporarily decluttered, the person has not yet received treatment in order to maintain the cleared space.

What is Compulsive Acquisition?

Research shows that 3 out of 4 people who struggle with hoarding engage in over-shopping behaviors. Some acquire free items and others experience gradual accumulation over decades. Because hoarding can be genetic, some inherit a home that was already cluttered and the pattern continues. Individuals who hoard are more likely to engage in compulsive buying and will buy more of one item to keep on hand. People who hoard will also acquire possessions through the compulsive acquisition of free items, by taking free samples, handouts, or items others have thrown away. Possessions are acquired with the intention to use the item in some way. However, items that are acquired often go unused due to the quantity of possessions. The compulsive acquisition behaviors resemble behaviors of obsessive compulsive disorder. Individuals often experience intrusive and recurrent urges to purchase or acquire, which are accompanied by discomfort that is relieved by acquisition or avoidance of situations where they are tempted to acquire.

Why do People with Hoarding Disorder Struggle in Discarding Items?

Difficulties with decision making around possessions is the hallmark feature of hoarding. Reasons for saving items can be classified into three types of values that individuals place on possessions. First, items are believed to have *instrumental* value and are saved because they are viewed as practical items that are useful. Secondly, possessions are seen as having *sentimental* value. The individual attributes emotional meaning and attachment to the item, and their possessions are seen as extensions of the self or people close to them. Third, possessions can have *intrinsic* value, where the item may not necessarily be useful or meaningful, but rather these items are saved because they are believed to have some characteristic that makes them too valuable to be thrown away.

Why do People with Hoarding Have Difficulties with Organization?

The inability to organize and classify possessions prevents the use of space needed to carry out daily activities. This behavior likely stems from perfectionistic sorting behaviors and other information processing deficits. Organizational themes within the home are often complicated and ineffective. People who hoard often expend considerable effort in organizing, often creating many categories for similar items. Through the creation of numerous categories attempts to organize are met with much frustration and confusion. Organizational attempts require much time and energy, and often lead to little or no progress. Lack of organization often makes finding items more difficult. This leads to much distress for people who hoard, because they may lose track of important items and papers and often have to repurchase items they could not find amongst the clutter.

Many sufferers also have difficulty determining the relative importance of objects. Hoarders often believe that once a possession is brought into sight or touched its value increases, and the item is likely to be piled with other items of perceived importance. This leads to further clutter and disorganization, as items that are truly important are grouped with unimportant items (i.e., old grocery list, once handled and examined, has increased value and will be placed with other important papers such as current bills or paychecks). Hoarders' beliefs that they must carefully scrutinize all possessions before organizing or discarding them have some basis in reality. When important papers are found in the clutter, this reinforces the beliefs that piles of possessions need to be carefully scrutinized before any items are discarded.

Why Does it Appear That People Avoid Dealing with These Issues?

Many people avoid things that are difficult or unpleasant to them. A major avoidance behavior in hoarding is the discarding of possessions. Individuals who hoard often have information processing deficits, exaggerated beliefs about items, and difficulty with emotional processing, which contribute to avoidance behaviors regarding decisions to save or discard possessions. Decision-making is avoided by continuing to accumulate items in order to prevent uncomfortable feelings associated with discarding. Uncomfortable feelings often include a fear of making a mistake or making a wrong decision. In addition, people who hoard often feel emotionally connected to their possessions and feel they will lose part of themselves if the possession is discarded.

What are Some Common Problems that Result from Hoarding?

Unfortunately, there are often many consequences of this progressive disorder. Hoarding can lead to health and safety threats for themselves or other people or animals living with or near them (e.g., risk of fire, exposure to mold, saving food that is rotten or contaminated, insects and rodents). Many people also experience interpersonal difficulty (e.g., social isolation, marital or couple conflict, and/or family conflict). Legal and financial conflict also commonly results from hoarding (e.g., health and safety concerns can lead to the involvement of local health departments and social service agencies, hoarding can result in eviction, failure to file taxes). Another consequence of hoarding is damage to one's self esteem (e.g., frustration with self over not being able to get organized, embarrassment if anyone knew how out of control the home had become).

What are Some Common Thoughts People with This Condition Experience?

Thoughts about excessive perfectionism: People become so concerned about making a mistake that they avoid discarding and organizing behaviors. People who hoard also often have perfectionism with the way in which they want to organize (i.e., organize books alphabetically by topic on a new bookshelf).

Beliefs about memory: Belief that objects need to remain in sight or they will be forgotten or lost. Can lead to empty file cabinets and everything in the open. Can also include the belief that they need to remember written information and leads to saving magazines, newspapers, etc.

The opportunities possessions provide: Belief that possession may contain information or opportunities to improve their lives or the lives of others. By discarding items they fear that opportunities are lost.

The importance of items: The belief that everything has a purpose and use. Objects may be worth saving simply because there must have been some reason to have saved it all these years. Many people who hoard also struggle to determine the relative importance of objects. Items that are truly important often get grouped with less important items. This leads to over-saving of items rather than donating items that may still be “good” but not used.

Responsibility for Having Possessions: Belief that they must be prepared for the future. They may acquire and keep many “just in case” items because of their possible utility to themselves or others. May feel responsible for making a mistake or harm occurring as a result of not having a needed possession, and have catastrophic thoughts about not having a needed item. This may also include a sense of moral responsibility and they feel responsible for the appropriate use of possessions, and are careful not to be wasteful.

Control of possessions: Belief that possessions are a source of safety and control. A person who hoards often feels comforted by acquiring new possessions or just being around the possessions they already have in their home. They may have excessive concern over controlling their possessions and feel vulnerable without them. Sufferers are less willing to share their possessions or allow them to be touched by others. Unauthorized touching or discarding of possessions by others can prompt hoarders to feel violated and often evokes strong feelings of anger. This often occurs when family members or friends attempt to help a hoarder clean and organize their home.

Emotional Attachment: People may bestow human-like qualities to possessions and feel like they need to protect possessions from harm. They may view possessions as extensions of themselves that need to be taken care of.

What are the Causes of Hoarding Behavior?

We really do not know the exact cause, but it is likely that hoarding results from several variables. Genetics or modeling from family members is one factor found in this condition.

Mental health therapists describe the thinking and behavioral patterns that evolve over time, which results in people becoming more entrenched by this condition. Hoarding is commonly believed to be a way for genetically predisposed individuals to cope with stress, previous traumas or losses, or emotional upset. Hoarding is thought of as a neurobiological condition that can also be influenced by other disorders such as attention deficit disorder, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, and dementia.

Help:

In order to effectively help someone with hoarding disorder, it is important to remember that each situation requires a specialized approach. We understand that the information included here is not comprehensive, but hopefully it gives you a place to start. It is important to try to change this behavior as soon as possible. It does tend to progress with time and without appropriate resources, people have perished in their clutter. The members of the Cass Country Hoarding Coalition want to help you or the person you are concerned about with this condition. The information on this website is not intended to be a substitute for therapy or go against any information already provided to you by your health care provider.

Factors to Consider in Helping Yourself or Someone who Hoards

Education- Learn about this condition and create a plan to decrease compulsive acquisition and hoarding behaviors. A comprehensive approach teaches the person skills to not only change the current situation, but also prevents hoarding from becoming an issue again in the future. Early intervention is best, but change can take place even when people have been struggling for decades.

Don't get discouraged/Be supportive. Treatment is not a “quick fix”, it is a process that may take a while to notice changes (especially in the clutter). The goal is to change the way a person with hoarding disorder thinks and behaves to prevent further clutter and give them skills to clear out and maintain cleared areas. Some situations require an emergency clean up. In order to maintain the cleared areas, the person with hoarding will still need to learn skills in order to not recluster their home.

Understand that this is difficult for you/them. If this was a simple behavior to fix they would have done it a long time ago. If they could “just throw something out” they would have. We would never tell someone with dyslexia to “just read”. With understanding comes more compassion and a better approach to change.

Be patient and reward progress. Each cleared area is a step toward the goal of a decluttered home. You may notice a shifting around of items before you notice cleared areas. This is called churning. Redirect them to make decisions about items rather than just labeling the item and moving it to another location. It is difficult to organize when there is no place to sort through possessions. You may first need to create a “staging area” to go through possessions. Don't give up, the behaviors and thoughts involved with hoarding can be changed.

Understand readiness for change. Not everyone wants to change their hoarding behavior. This is a very difficult realization for people who are concerned for a person who hoards. If you have a family member who hoards and they are not willing to seek help, get resources for yourself to cope. The organization, Children of Hoarders may be a good place to start www.childrenofhoarders.com. There is other information on this website to help if you are concerned about a neighbor or have a tenet with this condition. There are skills that can be used to help motivate a person to move toward changing their behavior. A therapist may be able to offer recommendations.

Use respect in emergency clean up situations. Sometimes the severity of the clutter leads to emergency interventions. This can also happen during an eviction or health crisis. The goal is to have a safe home for the individual(s) who live there. When possible, it is best to have the person struggling with hoarding to be an active participant during the clean up. Ask what items cleaners should look out for during the process. This helps decrease suspiciousness and feelings of anger. *Remember cleaning a house does not change hoarding disorder.* People who hoard need to learn the necessary skills to create long term change.

Is Hoarding Disorder Treatable?

Yes!

See our resources page to help guide you in finding additional information on what might be the best approach for your situation. If a person who hoards is willing to attend therapy, they should look for a cognitive behavioral therapist to work on learning skills to change their behavior. The skills in therapy often include techniques such as exposure and response prevention, cognitive restructuring and treatment for other conditions that may be exacerbating the hoarding behaviors (such as depression).

Exposure includes exposing the sufferer to their fears of making a mistake, discarding, and organizing by gradually putting them in these situations. It is important to start with low anxiety items or situations and gradually move toward more difficult items. The person who hoards learns that they are able to tolerate their anxiety and it eventually goes away. While this approach sounds scary at first, it is a great tool in giving people freedom from hoarding.

Response Prevention includes resisting the urge to perform the compulsion they engage in to relieve anxiety. This involves discouraging them to save everything, digging things out of the trash that they previously threw away, and acquiring items to replace the ones that were discarded. A good example of this is jumping into a cold pool. If you stay in the water for a while, your body adjusts and you are ready to enjoy the pool. If you jump right out, you never adjust to the pool water. By riding out anxiety and discomfort, the sufferer develops emotional tolerance and his or her skills improve.

Cognitive Restructuring includes helping the individual think about their possessions in a different way. This involves recognizing hoarding beliefs (I need this), challenging the belief (I already have 5 of these), and replacing old thoughts with more adaptive thoughts (I do not need this because I have 5 of them, and saving this will not help my hoarding problem).

Tips for Creating an Organizational Plan

- A. Make the commitment to spend X amount of time organizing each day. Remember that you are the change agent in your life and that you can do it. When you are overwhelmed you are setting your short term goals too high.
- B. Decide which room to start in. Focus on one room/one target area at a time. This will help decrease overwhelm and keep you on task.
- C. Get boxes and categories ready. Clearly label boxes and make sure they are easy to move.
- D. Keep categories simple and try to limit to 3-5 categories (i.e., save, donate, trash, put away)
- E. Develop a plan for the room. Start in one corner and work your way around.
- F. Try to discard as much as possible by using cognitive techniques (identifying and challenging your hoarding thoughts). “Save the best and let go of the rest.”
- G. Try to use the “10 second rule” on possessions. You may also train a helper to keep you on task and remind you to resist spending too much time on any one item. Resist distractions and avoid churning behaviors.
- H. Allow enough time and energy to bring trash out to the curb, and plan on bringing donated items to their destination in less than 2 days.
- I. When you are finished for the day, pick up last few things in target area and keep the area clean until tomorrow.
- J. The next day continue where you left off.
- K. When you get the room decluttered you may be left with several labeled boxes. If you have room to put the items away, you can sort through the boxes, or leave them *temporarily* until the other rooms are decluttered. As rooms become decluttered you will have more room to

- work and more places to put your possessions. Remember that there are likely too many belongings and this is more than just a task of organizing.
- L. Set personal goals. Think of how hoarding has caused problems in your life and has limited some of your freedoms. Remind yourself of why you want to declutter and what you will gain by letting go of excessive possessions. If compulsive shopping or acquisition is an issue, remind yourself of the time and money you will save by decreasing this compulsive activity.
 - M. It can also be helpful to find a new hobby and get reconnected with others who may have become distant. Build your life in others areas to fill the void that you were likely trying to fill by acquiring and saving possessions. This will help you feel whole and complete in a healthy way.