

What is compulsive hoarding?

Compulsive hoarding is defined as the acquisition of and failure to discard items that appear to be useless or of little value. Three features define compulsive hoarding: (1) the accumulation and failure to discard a large number of possessions that appear to most people to be useless or of limited value, (2) excessive clutter in living spaces that precludes activities for which the rooms were designed, and (3) significant distress or impairment in functioning caused by the hoarding (Frost & Hartl, 1996). This definition distinguishes hoarding from collecting, in which individuals maintain collections of objects that are generally considered interesting and valuable (Steketee & Frost, 2007).

What are the signs of compulsive hoarding?

- Difficulty discarding or getting rid of items
- A large amount of clutter in the office, at home, in the car, or in other spaces (i.e. storage units) that makes it difficult to use furniture or appliances or move around easily
- Losing important items like money or bills in the clutter
- Feeling overwhelmed by the volume of possessions that have ‘taken over’ the house or workspace
- Acquiring free items, such as advertising flyers or sugar packets from restaurants, compulsively
- Purchasing objects because they are a “bargain” or to “stock up” at home
- Avoidance of inviting family or friends into the home due to shame or embarrassment
- Refusal to let workmen into the home to make repairs

What are the characteristics of hoarding?

- Difficulty organizing possessions
- Unusually strong positive feelings (joy, delight) when acquiring items
- Strong negative feelings (guilt, fear, anger) when considering discarding items
- Strong beliefs that items are “valuable” or “useful”, even when other people do not want them
- Feeling responsible for objects and sometimes thinking of inanimate objects as having feelings
- Denial of a problem even when the clutter or acquiring clearly interferes with a person’s life

Who struggles with hoarding behavior?

Hoarding behaviors can begin as early as the teenage years, although the average age of a person seeking treatment for hoarding is about 50. Hoarders often endure a lifelong struggle with hoarding. They tend to live alone and may have a family member with the problem. It seems likely that serious hoarding problems are present in 2 to 5% of the population.

Are hoarding and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) related?

Compulsive hoarding was commonly considered to be a type of obsessive compulsive disorder. Some estimate that 19 to 25% of people with OCD also have compulsive hoarding. Recent research suggests that 17% of people with compulsive hoarding have non-hoarding OCD symptoms. Compulsive hoarding is also considered a feature of obsessive compulsive personality disorder and may develop along with other mental illnesses, such as dementia and schizophrenia.

What kinds of things do people hoard?

Most often, people hoard common possessions, such as paper (e.g., mail, newspapers), books, clothing and containers (e.g., boxes, paper and plastic bags). Some individuals hoard garbage or rotten food. More rarely, people hoard animals or human waste products. Often the items collected are valuable but far in excess of what can reasonably be used.

What are the effects of hoarding?

- Severe clutter threaten the health and safety of those living in or near the home, causing health problems, structural damage, fire, and even death
- Expensive and emotionally devastating evictions or other court actions, hospitalizations and homelessness
- Conflict with family members and friends who are frustrated and concerned about the state of the home and/or excessive acquiring

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Is compulsive hoarding caused by some sort of deprivation?

People who hoard may characterize themselves as “thrifty” and attribute their behavior to having lived through a period of poverty or deprivation during their lives. Research to date has not supported this idea. However, experiencing a traumatic event or serious loss, such as the death of a spouse or parent, may lead to a worsening of hoarding behavior.

Can compulsive hoarding be treated?

Yes, compulsive hoarding can be treated. Unfortunately it has not responded well to traditional treatments that work for OCD. Strategies to treat hoarding include:

- Challenging thoughts and beliefs about the need to keep items and about collecting new things
- Curbing acquisition by practicing restraint with non-shopping and non-acquiring excursions
- Discarding and recycling clutter: practicing the removal of clutter, first with the help of a clinician or coach and then independently
- Finding and joining a support group or teaming up with a coach to sort and reduce clutter
- Understanding that relapses can occur and developing strategies to prevent future acquisition and clutter

How can I help a hoarding friend or family member de-clutter?

Attempts by family and friends to help with de-cluttering may not be well received by the person who hoards. It is helpful to keep in mind:

- Until the person is internally motivated to change they may not accept your offer to help.
- Motivation cannot be imposed.
- Everyone, including people who hoard, has a right to make choices about their objects and how they live.
- People who hoard are often ambivalent about accepting help and discarding objects.

Can't compulsive hoarding be solved by simply cleaning out the home?

Attempts to “clean out” the homes of people who hoard without treating the underlying problem usually fail. Families and community agencies may spend many hours and thousands of dollars clearing a home only to find that the problem recurs, often within just a few months. People with hoarding whose homes are cleared without their consent often experience extreme distress and may become further attached to their possessions. This may lead to a strong reluctance to let others help them in the future.

How do I have a conversation with my friend or family member who is ready to talk about hoarding?

When a person shows willingness to talk about a hoarding problem, consider the following guidelines:

- Respect. Acknowledge that the person has a right to make their own decisions at their own pace.
- Empathize. Understand that everyone has a degree of attachment to their belongings. Try to understand the importance of their items to them.
- Encourage. Help generate ideas to make their home safer, such as moving clutter from doorways and halls.
- Collaborate. Don't argue about whether to keep or discard an item; instead, find out what will help motivate the person to discard or organize.
- Reflect. Help the person to recognize that hoarding interferes with the goals or values the person may hold. For example, by de-cluttering the home, a person may host social gatherings and establish a richer social life.
- Ask. To establish and nurture trust, never throw anything away without asking permission.

Are there medications that can help reduce hoarding?

Medication alone does not appear to alleviate hoarding behavior although it may help reduce the symptoms. Medication can be used to treat conditions that may exacerbate hoarding, such as depression and anxiety.

Where can I find further information and help?

Obsessive Compulsive Foundation (www.ocfoundation.org)

Boston University School of Social Work (www.bu.edu/ssw/research/hoarding)

San Francisco Mental Health Association (www.mha-sf.org/programs/ichc.cfm)

Smith College Department of Psychology (www.science.smith.edu/departments/PSYCH/rfrost)

The Institute of Living /Hartford Hospital (www.harthosp.org/InstituteOfLiving/AnxietyDisordersCenter)