

# HOARDING - ONE PERSON'S TRASH ANOTHER PERSON'S TREASURE

"It is quite tricky to let go of some stuff" says David Ward. He is a "collector". Over 15,000 books, magazines, DVDs are stacked around him in his small bungalow. He is being helped to slowly rid himself of the excess and finds it quite anxiety provoking. Hoarding has recently been classified as a medical disorder by the World Health Organization.

Isn't this just a collection? Many people collect items such as books and it's not a problem. The difference between a "hoard" and a "collection" is how items are kept. A collection is well ordered and accessible. A hoard is very disorganized, takes up a lot of room, and items are largely inaccessible. Someone who collects newspaper reviews may cut out the reviews and organize them in a catalogue or scrapbook. A hoarder keeps large stacks of newspapers that clutter their entire house and it's impossible to reach the reviews they wanted to keep.

Hoarding is the acquisition of excessive numbers of items stored chaotically, resulting in unmanageable amounts of clutter. The items may have little or no monetary value.

Hoarding is a significant problem if:

- the amount of clutter interferes with everyday living - for example, the person is unable to use their kitchen or bathroom and cannot access rooms
- clutter is causing significant distress or negatively affecting quality of life of the person or family. They become upset if someone tries to clear clutter and their

relationship suffers

Hoarding looks weird or disgusting to those who enter homes of severe hoarders. I recall being in a home where there were boxes and stacks of everything from clothing, to food, to hairnets, to papers piled from floor to ceiling in every room and only a very narrow path to navigate from one part of the house to another. It was a true fire hazard. Hoarding is parodied on TV, where shows suggest the solution is simply to chuck stuff out. But for experts working with people who hoard, it's clear this doesn't work and can have tragic results. Hoarders have committed suicide when stripped of their possessions. It's a bit like trying to help someone with depression by telling them to smile and get better.

Hoarding disorders are challenging to treat because many people may not see it as a problem, or have little awareness of how it's affecting their life or the lives of others.

Those who realize they have a problem are reluctant to seek help because they feel ashamed, humiliated or guilty.

Why do people hoard? Hoarding may be the result of medical issues that cause people to be unable to physically clear out their living spaces. It is difficult for mentally challenged people to organize and understand when to dispose of things. Hoarding may be a feature of mental health issues such as severe depression, schizophrenia, and OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder).

Sometimes hoarding is a condition related to self-

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neglect. These people often:

- live alone
- are unmarried
- had deprived childhoods with a lack of material objects or poor family relationships
- have a family history of hoarding
- grew up in cluttered homes and never learned to prioritize and sort items

Hoarding is a difficult problem to treat. Finding motivation for change is key. Therapies for people with depression, schizophrenia and OCD are effective. Specially trained in home teams work with individuals to declutter their space. Because hoarding is often a response to anxiety, trauma, and a need to feel safe, it is important to help the person in their environment to learn to feel secure and comfortable making decisions about and living without all of their possessions. It may take months or years to help people let go of their things. Because possessions can take the place of being social and having a life outside the house these skills need to be developed. Group therapy is effective in offering support and inspiration.

At ACS, therapists have extensive training in the treatment of depression, OCD, and other mental illness. Why not make that first step from "packrat" to "minimalist" (or maybe just a little cluttered!).