



Understanding Compulsive Hoarding

We have all heard stories about compulsive hoarders. Maybe you have been to someone's house and had to navigate via "goat trails" in and out of the person's accumulated possessions. I have always thought of this as simply an eccentric behavior, but recently I read a story that caused me to think more deeply about this problem.

A man had been married to his wife for over 50 years. She was a compulsive hoarder. They had separate rooms in their home. His was meticulously clean; hers was absolutely jam-packed with junk. He took care of his wife when her health went into decline. As she was dying, her last words were not something like "I love you." Instead, her last words were "please don't touch my stuff."

Hoarding is defined as the acquisition of and inability to discard items, even though they appear to others to have no value. People with compulsive hoarding syndrome have immense difficulty throwing things away, even items of little or no value such as old newspapers, bits of string, worn-out clothes, and junk mail.

A person who is a compulsive hoarder has a variety of thoughts going through his or her mind. Items may be perceived to have sentimental value. The person may think, "If I throw it away, I am throwing away part of myself." Hoarders have a difficult time making decisions. They fear making the wrong decision, so they will save an item to avoid making a "bad choice" of getting rid of it. Hoarders may feel responsible for those around them, so they will save items "just in case I or my loved ones need them."

Hoarders also have control issues. They may feel that the moment they throw something away, they are no longer in control, and what happens to this item is in the hands of

others. Hoarders are also afraid of forgetting what something looked like, or its content, and fear that "once the item is gone, it's gone forever." There is also a fear of "letting go." For example, a hoarder may fear that once she has thrown something away, that part of her life, no matter how insignificant, is gone forever.

Hoarding creates safety issues. Excessive clutter causes fire and tripping or falling hazards. People have trapped themselves in homes and apartments, and floors have collapsed due to the weight of hoarded materials.

Hoarding also creates stress for family members, who may feel embarrassed, frustrated, or resentful of the hoarding behavior. They are ashamed of the clutter, but are forced to live amidst chaos. Family members often resort to "self-help" methods by attempting to clean or organize without the consent of the hoarder, which leads to arguments and fights.

Compulsive hoarding is considered to be a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). There are two forms of treatment: medications and behavioral techniques. People working with compulsive hoarders should encourage them to find a psychiatrist or therapist who is experienced in the treatment of OCD, who can prescribe appropriate medications and help teach the person to gradually begin to discard items.

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