

## Clutter and Hoarding

### **Why do we keep so many things?**

- I don't want to waste it
- It is too good to throw out
- I know I will need it eventually
- I can't decide what to get rid of
- I can't decide who to give it to
- I plan to move to a bigger place one day and will need it
- It is worth more than I could sell it for right now
- My granddaughter made that for me and I can never throw it out
- It reminds me of a special place or time I don't want to forget

There are many reasons why we keep things, but there is a point at which the home becomes cluttered. Recent media focus has been on hoarding, but the term "hoarder" is frequently being used incorrectly to describe someone who has a problem with clutter in their home. This article hopes to address the differences in the two terms and identify the risks that each pose to older adults and people with disabilities.

### **Clutter**

Everyone accumulates possessions over the years and keeps a certain amount of these items around, because of value, usefulness, or sentimental reasons. These items over time accumulate to become "clutter" in the home and yard, which can be problematic for older adults or people with disabilities. They may have mobility issues to safely navigate through the clutter causing tripping hazards and barriers, and may not have the physical ability to organize and remove the excess items. It may innocently be a result of moving to a smaller home or apartment in an attempt to downsize, but quickly find themselves in a cluttered new home with too many possessions and furniture. It may be the result of increased limited strength and mobility to take newspapers, junk mail, and trash out of the home. Reaching top

shelves in closets to put items away or bending over to pick up items may be challenging resulting in items being piled up on more accessible furniture, or collecting on the floor. The threat of identity theft has made many people wary of throwing any identifying information into the garbage, which can collect rapidly given the number of solicitations and personal mail one receives.

Millions of Americans are guilty of clutter in our homes, and the de-cluttering process can be easily accomplished given the time and physical assistance necessary to organize and remove items. Whether it is family, friends, or a professional organizing service that is hired to help, the problem can be easily corrected. Many items of value can be given to family and friends, donated or taken to a consignment shop to sell. Some organizations will pick up items at home if needed. While it is possible to sell items on the internet, caution should be used depending on the individual and circumstances. Important paperwork should be kept and filed appropriately to avoid identity theft, and other identifying paperwork should be shredded.

Clutter does not usually debilitate a person's health, comfort, or ability to live independently. A person who has clutter in their home can make decisions to clear away the clutter given available assistance. When the accumulation of items begins to threaten a person's health and safety, and the person is unable to rationally make decisions on items of value or usefulness, then it becomes more of a hoarding disorder requiring professional assistance.

## **Hoarding**

Hoarding is the excessive acquisition of items (many without value or usefulness), compounded with a cognitive inability to throw away items, and is a real threat to a person's well-being. Their ability to perform daily activities and their quality of life is compromised, in addition to posing health and safety risks. Hoarding of animals has also increased in recent years, which poses another set of welfare concerns not only for the individual but for the animals as well.

The reasons behind hoarding can vary with the individual and there continues to be new research on this topic, that has not been yet been fully understood. For some individuals, it is the inability to organize, or make decisions, or more of a control issue and/or inability to let go. Life trauma sometimes plays a vital role in hoarding with some individuals. Hoarding is considered a disorder, that sometimes has co-

occurring disorders, such as depression, dementia, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) needing professional attention.

Hoarding increases the risk of injury and illness, in addition to unhealthy living conditions for anyone living or visiting the home, including pets. These health risks increase with a hoarder's age or increased disability and can be a sign of self-neglect impacting their ability to remain living independently. Hoarding introduces an increase in safety, health and fire hazards into a home.

- Fall risk increases due to limited mobility (caused by reduced or absent pathways through the home and stairways)
- Risk of falling items from high piles could injure a person
- Risk of getting needed medical help is increased when there is no clear path to a phone, a door, a window, or a fire escape to get help
- Risk of sleeping problems as the result of too many items on the bed in order to comfortably sleep
- Sanitation conditions are at risk with expired food, unwashed kitchen utensils, appliances, dishes, etc. with the risk of food poisoning, air quality, not to mention increase of bugs and rodents in the home
- Personal hygiene is at risk when the bathtub and sinks are filled with items leaving no room for bathing and washing, or when bathrooms are not cleaned properly, or when laundry can no longer be accomplished within or outside the home
- Reduced cleaning ability can worsen existing allergies and breathing problems
- No clear path to the stove and fridge may mean lack of nutritious/well-balanced meals
- Fire hazards are increased in a hoarders home, and may also cause problems for rescue workers to access the home with blocked doors, or being able to find the individual once entering the home
- Financial risks of not paying bills from being lost in the piles of paperwork
- Health and safety issues for animals living within the home

Over time, hoarding usually causes a detrimental impact on a person's overall physical, social, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Many hoarders do not see their living conditions as limiting or distressful on the surface. Others recognize the problem but are overwhelmed by the physical work and cognitive skills needed to correct the problem. Family and friends may have abandoned the person or visit infrequently after numerous failed attempts to help the individual. There can be

anger and resentment within the family unit in addition to other contributing factors. The person's self-esteem may suffer as a result of feeling shame, socially isolated, unable to make decisions, depressed, and confused. For individuals that are renting, there is the added risk of being evicted from their home, and then not having another place to go.

The good news is that there is hope and help available. Hoarding can be treated but requires willing participants in the effort to improve their own living conditions. For the majority of hoarders, they will not be able to find a solution to their problem without the guidance of professionals who can provide the proper level of support and treatment needed.

It is advised not to attempt to help a person with hoarding issues, and instead contact a medical or mental health professional who can help. Here is the link for a list of the local Virginia [Department of Social Services](#)' offices.

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