

Hoarding – The Basics

I've always had trouble throwing things away. Magazines, newspapers, old clothes... What if I need them one day? I don't want to risk throwing something out that might be valuable. The large piles of stuff in our house keep growing so it's difficult to move around and sit or eat together as a family.

My husband is upset and embarrassed, and we get into horrible fights. I'm scared when he threatens to leave me. My children won't invite friends over, and I feel guilty that the clutter makes them cry. But I get so anxious when I try to throw anything away. I don't know what's wrong with me, and I don't know what to do.

This example is typical of someone who suffers from hoarding. Read on to learn more, including the differences between hoarding and collecting.

Understanding Hoarding

Hoarding is the persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value. The behavior usually has deleterious effects—emotional, physical, social, financial, and even legal—for a hoarder and family members.

For those who hoard, the quantity of their collected items sets them apart from other people. Commonly hoarded items may be newspapers, magazines, paper and plastic bags, cardboard boxes, photographs, household supplies, food, and clothing.

Hoarding can be related to compulsive buying (such as never passing up a bargain), the compulsive acquisition of free items (such as collecting flyers), or the compulsive search for perfect or unique items (which may not appear to others as unique, such as an old container).

Symptoms and Behavior

Someone who hoards may exhibit the following:

- Inability to throw away possessions
- Severe anxiety when attempting to discard items
- Great difficulty categorizing or organizing possessions
- Indecision about what to keep or where to put things
- Distress, such as feeling overwhelmed or embarrassed by possessions
- Suspicion of other people touching items
- Obsessive thoughts and actions: fear of running out of an item or of needing it in the future; checking the trash for accidentally discarded objects
- Functional impairments, including loss of living space, social isolation, family or marital discord, financial difficulties, health hazards

Reasons for Hoarding

People hoard because they believe that an item will be useful or valuable in the future. Or they feel it has sentimental value, is unique and irreplaceable, or too big a bargain to throw away. They may also consider an item a reminder that will jog their memory, thinking that without it they won't remember an important person or event. Or because they can't decide where something belongs, it's better just to keep it.

Hoarding is a disorder that may be present on its own or as a symptom of another disorder. Those most often associated with hoarding are obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and depression.

Although less often, hoarding may be associated with an eating disorder, pica (eating non-food materials), Prader-Willi syndrome (a genetic disorder), psychosis, or dementia.

Diminished Quality of Life

A lack of functional living space is common among hoarders, who may also live in unhealthy or dangerous conditions. Hoarders often live with broken appliances and without heat or other necessary comforts. They cope with malfunctioning systems rather than allow a qualified person into their home to fix a problem.

Hoarding also causes anger, resentment, and depression among family members, and it can affect the social development of children. Unlivable conditions may lead to separation or divorce, eviction, and even loss of child custody. Hoarding may lead to serious financial problems, as well.

Hoarding vs. Collecting

Hoarding is not the same as collecting. In general, collectors have a sense of pride about their possessions and they experience joy in displaying and talking about them. They usually keep their collection organized, feel satisfaction when adding to it, and budget their time and money.

Those who hoard usually experience embarrassment about their possessions and feel uncomfortable when others see them. They have clutter, often at the expense of livable space, feel sad or ashamed after acquiring additional items, and they are often in debt.

** Content from the Anxiety & Depression Association of America*