



Hoarding Fact Sheet

WHAT IS HOARDING?

Hoarding is the excessive collection and retention of things or animals until they interfere with day-to-day functions such as home, health, family, work and social life. *Severe hoarding causes safety and health hazards.* The collection of newspapers, magazines, old clothes and other items may cause fires while animal hoarding can spread contagious diseases. It is estimated that older adults represent a significant number of people who hoard.

WHY DO PEOPLE HOARD?

The behavior of hoarding is seen in various illnesses. Because of that, it has been difficult to place in a diagnostic category. Time and/or age of onset are variable and the behavior differs from person to person. Frequently, older adults have been found to hoard for the following reasons:

- items are perceived as valuable
- items provide a source of security
- fear of forgetting or losing items
- constant need to collect and keep things
- obtaining love not found from people
- fear others will obtain their personal information
- physical limitations and frailty
- inability to organize
- self neglect
- stressful life events

INTERVENTION

Hoarding is recognized as both a mental health issue and a public health problem. It is typically not an immediate crisis. The hoarding behavior usually has been occurring for a long time and hasty interventions will not resolve it. In addition, interventions without the older adult's cooperation can lead to the development of dangerous behaviors. Careful assessment of the individual situation is essential for a successful outcome. Therefore, it is recommended that intervention be collaborative involving the older adult, family and other agencies, i.e. mental health, adult protective services, code enforcement,

building & safety, animal control and criminal justice.

TIPS

- 👍 DO contact the older adult face-to-face.
- 👍 DO use a soft, gentle approach and let the older adult tell his/her story.
- 👍 DO treat the older adult with respect and dignity.
- 👍 DO respect the meaning and attachment to possessions by the older adult, which may be as intense as affections to humans.
- 👍 DO remain calm and factual, but caring and supportive.
- 👍 DO evaluate for safety.
- 👍 DO refer for medical and mental health evaluation.
- 👍 DO go slowly and expect gradual changes.
- 👍 DO reassure the older adult that others will try to help and work with him/her.
- 👍 DO involve the older adult in seeking solutions.
- 👍 DO work with other agencies to maximize resources.
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- 👎 DON'T hospitalize unless there is a clear plan for what this is to accomplish.
- 👎 DON'T force interventions.
- 👎 DON'T be critical or judgmental about the older adult's environment.
- 👎 DON'T use the older adult's first name unless he/she gives permission.
- 👎 DON'T press the older adult for information that appears to make him/her uncomfortable.
- 👎 DON'T make negative, teasing or sarcastic comments.
- 👎 DON'T talk about the older adult to others as if he/she is not present.

VIGNETTES

HASTY INTERVENTION

Negative results can occur when interventions are not carefully planned with a group of professionals with hoarding knowledge. Mr. Y was an 82 year-old male widow living in his friend's home. Mr. Y began collecting and hoarding tools, parts and other equipment. The living space became so limited they slept on chairs. The family called the police for assistance. Eventually, several agencies were independently involved with the family. The lack of collaboration and lack of knowledge about hoarding led the family to order dumpsters and discard the items. After his possessions were thrown away, Mr. Y was arrested because of the rage, anxiety, and delusions he developed.

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PLANNED INTERVENTION

Ms. X was a 96 year-old female with poor vision. She lived alone with dozens of cats, dogs and parrots. In addition, some dead cats were found in the freezer. The house was filthy and foul smelling. Ms. X had several pending citations with heavy fines, eviction and faced possible jail time. A mental health assessment uncovered that Ms. X suffered from isolation, significant depression and moderate memory loss. After several weeks of building a relationship, a geriatric mental health professional, in coordination with the other agencies, developed an intervention plan. Ultimately, Ms. X received the support needed to feel safe enough to agree to have the house professionally cleaned and in keeping with laws and regulations, kept a couple of animals.

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RESOURCES

Department of Mental Health – ACCESS Center (800) 854-7771

Information & Referral to local mental health system of care, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Adult Protective Services — (877) 477-3646

Investigation & Crisis intervention for elder and dependent adult abuse including self-neglect, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Infoline — (800) 339-6993; TDD (800) 660-4026

24-hour information & referral to human service agencies.

Self-Help and Recovery — (310) 305-8878

Referrals to hoarding and other self help support groups. *May be recorded messages.*

Local Resources

WEBSITES

Randy O. Frost, **hoarding researcher** from Smith College has a site that includes an extensive bibliography of hoarding articles. <http://sophia.smith.edu/~rfrost/>

The Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation offers information and resources about **obsessive compulsive disorder and hoarding**. <http://www.OCFoundation.org>

Gary Patroneck, Director of the Center for Animals and Public Policy at Tuft University maintains an **animal-hoarding** site.

<http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding.html>

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Damecour, L. & Charron, M. "Hoarding: A Symptom, Not a Syndrome." Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 1998.

Frost, R. & Hartl, T. "A Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Compulsive Hoarding." Behavior Research and Therapy, 1996.

Patroneck, G. "Hoarding of Animals: An Under-Recognized Public Health Problem in a Difficult-to-Study Population." Public Health Reports, 1999.

Thomas, D. "Hoarding: Eccentricity or Pathology: When to Intervene?" Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 1998.

QUESTIONS & COMMENTS

You may contact the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Countywide Older Adult Programs at (213) 351-7284.

REVIEWERS

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