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# UNDERSTANDING HOARDING

When our relationship with  
possessions goes wrong

**THIS DOCUMENT IS INTENDED  
FOR PEOPLE WITH HOARDING DISORDER,  
AND THEIR FRIENDS AND FAMILIES**

People can be both attached  
to and overwhelmed by  
their belongings.



## WHAT IS HOARDING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND IT?

Hoarding is more than simply gathering too many things. It has now been recognised as a mental health issue – one which can cause significant problems for those who hoard and also for people who live with them and care about them.

Hoarding can affect anyone, and is sometimes associated with having experienced difficult life circumstances. Statistically, two to six people out of a hundred are thought to have a problem with hoarding, and both men and women are equally affected. Hoarding difficulties typically start in childhood between 10 to 13 years old. However, most people do not generally try and get help until they are in their 40s. As people get older, hoarding difficulties can be made worse by other issues, such as physical illness, memory problems, limited mobility, and bereavement.

Recognition of the very real difficulties faced by people who hoard (and their friends, relatives and neighbours) can be the beginning of change for the person. In contrast, minimising or wrongly labelling hoarding can alienate people who are struggling, often in isolation, with little or no support.

It is important that people with hoarding difficulties get access to advice and therapy that can relieve distress or disability. In addition, if a person with hoarding difficulties feels they are being heard and respected without judgement, it is more likely that advice and therapy will make a real difference.

## HOW DO WE RECOGNISE THAT SOMEONE HAS A PROBLEM WITH HOARDING?

People who hoard experience distress or difficulty living in their environment because of the following:

**The cardinal feature is a problem with getting rid of possessions;** this causes distress or is not possible, even when they no longer seem to be needed, are no longer useful or are causing real problems because of taking up too much space.

**Excessive or problematic acquiring of possessions,** this can be anything from things other people may see as rubbish, through almost any kind of physical object you can think of, to virtual things like computer files or digital photos, to other living things like plants and animals).

**Restricted use of living spaces** because they are so full of objects (for example, people who hoard may not be able to use the bathroom or sleep in their own bed because there is such an accumulation of belongings).



The key think here is that people do not always experience both distress AND difficulties. People can struggle with hoarding and have enormous difficulty living in their environment without feeling significantly distressed.

The combination of gathering more and more things and not being able to discard any of them, means that people who have problems with hoarding (and their loved ones) can find themselves living in very constricted and uncomfortable circumstances.

*The realisation that it was not just a clutter problem, it wasn't just me, was very significant. It was like an 'ah-ha' moment.*

Christine



## HOW IS HOARDING DIFFERENT FROM COLLECTING?

Well, you may say, lots of people collect things and that doesn't always create problems. And you would be right. There is good evidence that collecting is a common feature of everyday life. Estimates of the numbers of people who collect show that about one-third of the US and UK population have been collectors at some point, with collecting particularly common in children (91 per cent). For some people, their identity as a collector is very significant.

But there are some significant differences between people who identify as a 'collector' and those who have a hoarding problem.

People who collect are more likely to share their interest with others. They tend to trade items, swap, use online market places and attend specialist fairs to acquire the 'missing' item from their collection. In contrast, people who hoard are much less likely to share their interest with others.

Another significant difference is in the ability to organise possessions in and around the home. People who collect organise, clean and catalogue their things. They tend to be quite methodical in looking after their belongings. In contrast, people who have difficulties with hoarding are unlikely to be organised about sorting and cataloguing. People who hoard find it hard to solve the issue of clutter and tend to procrastinate about making a start. When they do make a start, they may lose momentum quickly when faced with the scale of the task.

*I like to see it mount up sometimes...because I think I can find another use for it.*

Danielle

## WHAT ARE THE THOUGHTS, FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOURS ASSOCIATED WITH HOARDING DIFFICULTIES?

We all have a personal way of valuing our possessions, whether because of:

**Intrinsic value** – valuable in and of itself, such as precious stones or foreign currency

**Instrumental value** – valuable because of a future use, such as old car parts which can be used to repair other cars

**Sentimental value** – valuable because it is associated with feelings and personal memories, such as old photos or diaries.

In addition to this, there are cultural beliefs and social norms which contribute to how we treat our possessions. For instance, in some cultures owning possessions is a sign of wealth and status; and in some societies, there is a focus on re-using things and not wasting.

When people have problems with hoarding, this relationship we all have with possessions shifts and becomes a problem.

People may be attached to possessions that have personal meaning.



## THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIOUR ASSOCIATED WITH HOARDING DIFFICULTIES

The kinds of thoughts which trigger hoarding difficulties and keep them going once they have begun are not always easily recognised by the person who hoards. Sometimes, for instance, the person may believe they have a collection which has simply outgrown the space available.

In contrast to some other mental health difficulties where people may have upsetting or worrying thoughts, some of the thoughts relating to hoarding may seem reasonable and appropriate. Examples might include: 'I just need more storage space' or 'throwing things away is bad for the environment'. Many people with hoarding problems are committed to repairing, re-using and recycling things.

There may also be more debatable thoughts which the person themselves questions, such as 'I must remember everything' or 'if I throw it away I might regret it', or 'I need to organise it perfectly or not bother at all'. Research shows that people who hoard are more likely than other people to have low

confidence in their memory and to assume that the consequences of forgetting could be catastrophic.

It is important to recognise these kinds of thoughts as 'negative automatic thoughts' which drive the problem. Recognising the thoughts is a first step to learning to think about thoughts and coming up with alternatives.

In some cases, it is not so much the kinds of thoughts we mention above that cause the problems, but the fact that people who hoard can be inflexible in their viewpoints. For instance, they may continue to believe that they could sell things, in the face of the fact that in 20 years they never actually have. Learning to recognise when the thoughts are helpful to you, or continue to drive the difficulties, will help in addressing the problem.

The behaviour of those that hoard will also contribute to the problems continuing. The most important one to address is the on-going accumulation of things. This may include taking items from other people, that they want to get rid of, or 'rescuing' things from skips. Some people may have a greater difficulty with buying things, either in shops, or online.



If you have problems with hoarding, you may spend money on things that you don't wear or use, or later be unable to find due to the amount of things you have. If you find yourself unable to say no when offered other's things, or great difficulty in walking past a shop without buying something you don't really need - you will need to change this behaviour first.

Avoidance is another thing that causes great difficulty. People who hoard often find it hard to dispose of anything. This is called avoidance, and the longer it goes on the harder it can be to restart doing things like putting the

rubbish out. Some people notice they are actually avoiding a lot of things, like inviting people into their home, or opening post, or sorting and making decisions about anything. This will make the difficulty even worse.

However some people with a hoarding problem describe being quite busy with sorting and attempting to organise their things. If you find yourself moving things from one place to another but not actually getting rid of anything, this is called churning. It can also keep the difficulty going because despite lots of effort, there is little change to the amount being kept.

## FEELINGS

While research has shown that emotional attachment to objects is an important part of hoarding, it also shows that people who hoard can have difficulties forming close emotional attachments to other people. It's not clear whether this comes before the hoarding difficulty, or whether this happens afterwards as a way of coping with the shame and worry about what other people might say about their behaviour or their living circumstances. Whichever way around this is, it is clear that this is an important part that we need to understand when we try and deal with our own or other people's hoarding difficulties.

Many people who hoard have strong emotional attachment to the objects they hoard. In addition, for many people, acquiring things may bring positive feelings and not discarding things protects against negative feelings. This becomes a vicious cycle, encouraging the continuation of hoarding.

All of these thoughts, feelings and behaviour can keep the hoarding difficulty going. This is called a perpetuating cycle or vicious circle. Addressing the thoughts and behaviours can help break the pattern and support change.

*Can't have anyone over syndrome – CHAOS.  
I wonder if part of me doesn't want to have anyone over.*

Harry

*'My wife would say: I'm going to throw it all out.'  
No! No! No! I need it.*

Anon

## HOW DOES HOARDING AFFECT PEOPLE'S LIVES?

People with severe hoarding difficulties can be at risk of neglecting their own health needs. On top of that, people with problems with hoarding tend to withdraw, so they do not always make use of their local medical practice and the local GP may not know about them and the problems they are experiencing. This adds to the possibility that physical health may suffer alongside on-going difficulty with hoarding.

When people are unable to access hot water or a bathroom or simply the sink, they may find it difficult to wash clothes, or keep clean.

In some cases, this leads to increasingly avoiding contact with people, making isolation even worse.

Difficulties getting into the kitchen may lead to problems such as being unable to heat any food up, being unable to keep anything used for eating clean, or storing food in unusual places. The situation may deteriorate to the point where food is forgotten in inappropriate places or eaten when well past its best.

Because hoarding is located in the home, it can be a hidden problem.



## FAMILIES

Families of those who hoard may experience embarrassment, shame and worry linked to the hoarding, and, because there is a tendency for hoarding to run in families, they may struggle with hoarding difficulties themselves.

Relatives can feel a sense of loss because 'normal' family life becomes more and more difficult. Adult children of hoarders explain that it feels as if they have lost the safe environment that once was their childhood home.

For those who do not share hoarding difficulties, the strong wish for change can lead to feelings of anger and frustration which can result in family conflict and even the complete breakdown of relationships.

Caring for children and young people in the home of someone who hoards can be a real problem. Their living circumstances may cause them embarrassment and they may be unwilling to bring friends home. There may be no space to play, do homework or even sleep and eat properly. In the most extreme situations, children may need to be cared for away from their home and parent(s).

*My daughters would not have friends in and things because of the way the house was. It affected life in a big way.*

Anon

In addition, people living in severely cluttered homes are particularly vulnerable in cases of emergency if the ambulance or fire service can't get easily into the home.



Family relationships can be put under strain by hoarding behaviour.

## HOUSING

Difficulties with organisational things, such as paying bills, can lead to services being removed, increasing the risk that the home cannot be heated or that the phone is disconnected.

It is important to understand that many housing associations require reasonable access to their property. If landlords cannot get in to maintain utility services they may feel they need to evict the tenants.

## ACCIDENTS

Hoarding leaves a person (and their relatives) at high risk of accidents. Piles of belongings can become unstable and slide or fall on to people, or put strain on the physical structure of the property with disastrous results – ceilings can collapse as a result of the weight of stored possessions, doorways can be damaged and walls weakened. In some cases, an environmental health officer may be called in by concerned neighbours because of problems with access, clutter, animals or safety.

## FINANCIAL ISSUES

If people are living with a huge amount of possessions, they may not be able to access their financial paperwork. They may not be working, but also may not be claiming benefits to which they are entitled.

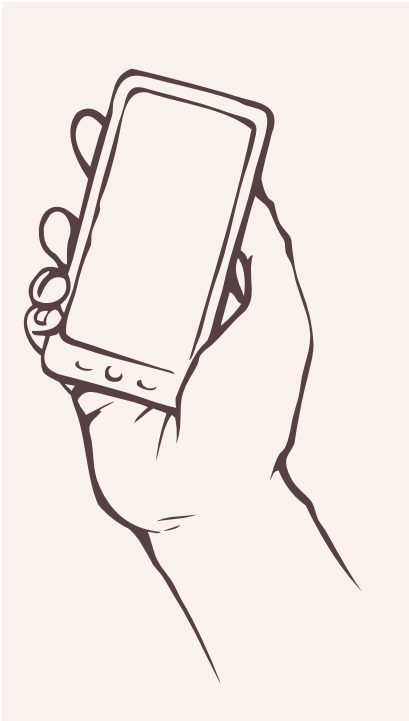
Holding down a job can be really challenging for people with hoarding difficulties. Some research suggests that people who hoard missed up to seven working days in a month. This places them at higher risk of losing their jobs, and thus potentially increasing their financial difficulties and isolation. In addition, losing a job may have significant impact on their sense of identity.



## DIGITAL POSSESSIONS

As we move further towards a digital world, hoarding is also being seen with electronic information. As with physical objects, what may start as normal behaviour can develop to the point of major difficulties. People might find storage on hard drives begins to run out and buy large amounts of online storage or physical hard drives. This can lead to difficulties finding information, or reduce the ability of the computer to function, leading to the purchase of another one.

Similar difficulties can also apply to mobile 'phones – for instance, avoiding deleting apps from a smart phone can lead to the phone becoming slow and unresponsive. It seems that, as with difficulties with physical objects, the point at which this becomes a real problem is when the person becomes unable to use their phone, or find their photos or information as a result of the overwhelming amount stored or the need to keep perfect records of everything.



## WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW HAS DIFFICULTIES WITH HOARDING?

If you recognise yourself or someone you know in what you have read so far you will find practical advice and information here.

### **The first and most important thing to do is to talk to your GP.**

When you or the person you know are ready to make changes, there are other things which can help.

### **HELP AND SUPPORT**

If you have online access, you will find websites which point you in the direction of help and support groups.

There are a growing number of self-help groups around the country. Self-help groups can provide a supportive environment and help someone who is struggling with hoarding issues to develop strategies which can help, like the one which Harry describes below.

*What helped was admitting I had a problem.*

Martin

*We are extremely lucky that we have a group and a group that is set up in a very supportive way. How many people have that?*

Christine

*I have found the group beneficial as it has provided a non-confrontational place to learn and face this problem.*

Danielle

'I found the following helpful in sorting out a kitchen cupboard and the garden shed.

Completely empty the space and pile the contents elsewhere, clean it and leave to dry out.

Return items that 'should be there' in an ordered way.

**Discard** useless items **off the premises** asap.

Return remaining items to where they belong, if possible, or box up and store them for later organising.

Work on a discrete, limited area; end the session with as little extra 'mess' as practical.

**Accept** that it will be disruptive, hard work and you will take time to get used to the new system; do only as many areas as feels comfortable in a short period. I find that it is easier to do a bit, then keep it going, then do another bit, and so on.

These are habits that I've had for most of my life; changing them for better ones will be hard.'

**Harry**

## LARGE CLEAR-OUT SESSIONS

At first, the idea of a big clear-out may seem like a sensible option, and people struggling with hoarding problems have often already had experience of major clear-outs. Because these are often thrust upon them, rather than being something they have chosen

to undertake, this will increase their fears about getting help and reduce their motivation to make changes.

Forced clearance may change a person's living environment temporarily but is unlikely to lead to lasting change. In fact, some



respected researchers specifically warn against this strategy, and stress that it may be traumatic for the person. This is even more the case when something has gone wrong – for instance, when somebody is admitted to hospital and the opportunity is then taken for a big clear-out.

## USING SUPPORT OFFERED FROM FRIENDS OR FAMILY

If someone is offering to lend a hand, decide first what type of help you need. It may be having someone come with you to meetings with professionals, or help you access psychological intervention. If they are offering practical help, it can be helpful to identify rules for sorting or disposing. These can then be shared with friends or others. It's important that you feel in control of the process, and can go at a pace that suits you. This can be very difficult if you have other agencies involved because of concerns about risks. A friend can be helpful in this situation in clarifying what exactly needs to change, and help with prioritising where to put your efforts.

## WORKING WITH A PRACTITIONER PSYCHOLOGIST

Although it may sound a bit scary at first, talking to a practitioner psychologist can be really helpful in working out ways to deal with hoarding difficulties. They are trained in a range of therapy approaches including cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT). There is some research showing that CBT can be helpful for hoarding difficulties. CBT is a collaborative non-judgemental therapy that pays attention to negative automatic thoughts (NATs), and behaviours that are driving the problem. Taking part in this kind of therapy is hard work and will involve doing work between sessions that you have agreed to, as well as trying out new ways of doing things. Not only are practitioner psychologists trained in CBT but they can also provide information and support in dealing with other agencies, such as your landlord or social worker.

The first port of call for getting this kind of help is your local GP, who will be able to give advice about accessing NHS services.

## FINDING REASONS TO CHANGE

People often feel in two minds about making changes: on the one hand, they want to change; on the other, they are afraid that if they try and it turns into an unsuccessful struggle to 'get on top of it' this saps their confidence that change is possible. This struggle with believing that they can make positive changes, makes it look as if they are not really motivated.

In actual fact, the real issue is that they need to develop confidence that their attempts to organise will work. Looking at it this way may mean that people can successfully change their view of their current situation rather than continuing (and failing) to change their behaviour.

*Others mean well but just cannot understand your difficulties. 'Just pull yourself together', 'Keep smiling' as a friend says to me...I am trying hard but need a hand up, not lecturing.*

Harry

*It was necessary to make a firm decision to change, stop acquiring unnecessary possessions, and declutter my mind.*

Danielle

## UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF HOARDING PROBLEMS

A practitioner psychologist can work with families, providing help and advice so that they can understand what contributes to the hoarding difficulty. The practitioner psychologist will try and make it possible for family members or significant others to be included in therapy as well as making sure that these people are also getting the support they need.

## SELF-HELP

With the kind of support outlined in the previous pages, it becomes much more possible for people to start to make progress on changing their hoarding behaviours. The following tips from people who have been in similar circumstances may also help.

TOP TIPS

Make the decision to do something about it.

Enlist help.

Put a stop to 'acquiring' things first.

Practice disposing or 'setting free'.

Make some decisions: Do I have enough time to review/use/read? Would I buy it again if I didn't already own it?

Give yourself a time limit for making decisions and stick with it.

Do small jobs daily.

Choose one place to work on and stick with it.

If you find yourself becoming anxious, take a break: physical exercise helps. Or do relaxation exercises.

Celebrate successes and let go of setbacks.

Most importantly – don't try and do it alone. With support, change is possible.

There is hope for change.



## FIND OUT MORE...

The NHS website has information and advice:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/hoarding/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

OCD-UK supports those struggling with obsessive-compulsive disorder and more information on hoarding can be found here:

<http://ocduk.org/hoarding>

Help for people with hoarding disorder and their families is available at this website set up by Jasmine Harman who has a mother with hoarding difficulties: [www.helpforhoarders.co.uk](http://www.helpforhoarders.co.uk)

The British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP) is the lead organisation for CBT and has more information on it's website: <http://www.babcp.com/Public/What-is-CBT.aspx>

Support for children of hoarders: [www.childrenofhoarders.com](http://www.childrenofhoarders.com).

**Scan the QR code for BPS online resources**



## FURTHER READING

British Psychological Society (2024). *A Psychological Perspective on Hoarding* (2nd edn). Leicester: Author.

### Books to support treatment but with useful ideas:

Tolin, D., Frost, R.O. & Steketee, G. (2014). *Buried in treasures: Help for compulsive hoarding* (2nd edn). New York: Oxford University Press.

Steketee, G. & Frost, R. (2014). *Treatment for hoarding disorder workbook* (2nd edn). New York: Oxford University Press.

Cooke, J. (2017). *Understanding hoarding*. London: Sheldon Press.

Tolin, D., Frost, R.O. & Steketee, G. (2014). *Buried in treasures: Help for compulsive hoarding* (2nd edn). New York: Oxford University Press.

Singh, S., Hooper, M., Jones, C. (2015). *Overcoming hoarding: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques*. London: Overcoming books.

Steketee, G. & Bratiotis, C. (2020). *Hoarding – What everyone needs to know*. Oxford: OUP.

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