

What You Need to Know...



Compulsive Hoarding

What is compulsive hoarding?

Often associated with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), hoarding occurs when a person acquires and saves possessions that have little or no value. In addition, the person has great difficulty in discarding their possessions. This usually results in clutter.

Unlike “normal” collecting, compulsive hoarders meet three criteria:

- They regularly keep a large number of possessions that most people would not consider to be very useful or valuable.
- Their home, or parts of their home, are so cluttered that they can no longer use those parts of their home for their intended purpose.
- The clutter is so bad that it causes significant distress or impairment.

Hoarding behavior can lead to other problems as well. It's common for hoarders to have interpersonal difficulties, family tension, poor self-esteem, poor social skills, weak decision-making skills, and even legal issues. There are also physical risks, such as falls and fires within the home environment.

Hoarders may collect large quantities of old newspapers and magazines, greeting cards, bottles, junk mail, plastic containers, broken appliances, old clothes, shoes, furniture, etc. They not only save broken and useless things, they also tend to save quantities of stuff that go beyond what a person could possibly ever need. This could include buying things such as soap or paper goods several cases at a time, or dozens of an item that might be on sale.

Symptoms of compulsive hoarding

Typical symptoms of compulsive hoarding could include any or several of the following:

- Saving broken, irreparable, or useless things
- Buying excessive quantities of goods beyond the amount needed
- Purchasing large amounts of useful items and storing them away for future usage
- Retrieving numerous materials from the trash on a regular basis
- Difficulty discarding anything due to a fear of accidentally throwing out something important
- Saving excessive quantities of printed matter (newspapers, magazines, junk mail)
- Keeping extensive lists of certain things, even after they are no longer needed

Hoarders have a fear that if things are thrown away, they will almost certainly be needed one day, but will be gone for good. This loss will then lead to some kind of serious hardship or deprivation. Ironically, hoarders rarely use, much less look through, the things they save.

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The cause of compulsive hoarding

The cause of compulsive hoarding is not known, but researchers think that it results from problems in one or more of these areas:

- Information processing – the person has problems categorizing or making decisions.
- Beliefs about possessions – the person has a sense of attachment to possessions, or fears of forgetting things.
- Emotional distress about discarding, which leads to avoidance of discarding

Treatment for compulsive hoarding

Treatment for compulsive hoarding is still in the experimental stage. Most medications that are useful for OCD do not appear to be as useful for compulsive hoarding. Cognitive/behavioral therapy, in which the therapist visits the person's home and helps them learn how to manage the clutter and make appropriate decisions about discarding, may be helpful.

Visit Mental Health America of Wisconsin's web site at www.mhawisconsin.org for more information, or call us at (414) 276-3122.

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