

Hoarding

By Cindie Smith, Caregiver Support Coordinator
Northern & Eastern Mainland Region

Hoarding, in its extreme form, is not a result of being messy or careless with belongings. It is not evidence of being a bad housekeeper. Neither is it a form of collecting—collections are displayed in a place of honour or are carefully stored.

Hoarders feel a strong compulsion to acquire items that may be of little or no value. They may, for example, hoard clothing, paper, pets, or even garbage. Hoarders experience great distress at the thought of parting with these items. Often starting in childhood, hoarding rarely becomes evident before adulthood. We now know that such behaviour is likely to be a sign of an anxiety disorder, and it is often accompanied by other mental health issues.

What causes behaviour such as this that can be so upsetting both to the hoarder and to family members and friends? It is strongly suspected that there is a physiological basis for severe cases of hoarding. There seems, for example, to be a genetic component to this disorder. “Studies have found that the frontal lobe within the brain of someone who hoards tends to work differently ... this region is crucial for weighing options and thinking rationally. As a result, their priorities are different from those of non-hoarders ...”¹

It is difficult to determine exactly how many people are pathological hoarders, as the negative reaction from others often drives the hoarder underground; fearing criticism, the hoarder denies other people entrance to the home. It is, however, estimated that hoarding affects approximately 2.5% of the population. To put this into perspective, 1% of the population experiences schizophrenia and 2.3% obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).



Hoarding can damage relationships. The child of a hoarder, for example, may suffer embarrassment by the condition of the home and by being unable to invite friends over. The spouse or adult child of a hoarder may experience growing anxiety, fearing the harm that can come to the hoarder or others who live in the house.

Safety, understandably, is a huge concern. Hoarding can increase the risk of fires (from hoarded items covering electrical outlets or appliance cords, from heat ducts that cannot cool off, from careless smoking around flammable items), infestations of insects and rodents, blocking evacuation routes in case of emergency, mould and air quality issues, or, injury or death when mounds of material fall are all inherent dangers.

Forcibly cleaning out the home can be emotionally devastating to the hoarder and may, in fact, trigger accelerated acquiring. Blaming, shaming, or calling-out the hoarder has no demonstrable success. There are recommended treatments, however, including cognitive-behavioural therapy, medication, or a combination of both.

Family and friend caregivers can receive help in understanding this devastating disorder by contacting local mental health services or by accessing the following resources.

thecaregivernetwork.ca/event/help-family-member-hoarder

ementalhealth.ca/NovaScotia/Hoarding/index.php?m=article&ID=13330

psychcentral.com/lib/10-things-you-should-know-about-compulsive-hoarding

bridgewaterpolice.ca/files/hoarding/HoardingandFireSafety.pdf
(Photo credited to this link.)

¹ webmd.com/mental-health/features/harmless-pack-rat-or-compulsive-hoarder