



Hoarders need to clear clutter for own safety

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In November, the A&E television network began running its second season of "Hoarders," a one-hour program that looks into the lives of people who can't part with their possessions.

Hoarding is as much a local issue in our own community as it is a national issue.

Hoarders are individuals who acquire items and then have extreme difficulty throwing them away. Their homes are full of stuff that the rest of us would call junk or trash. Where most of us see something that is soiled, dirty, broken and out-of-date, hoarders see treasure.

Hoarders' home are overwhelmed with things they must have. Beds become so covered up that there is no room to sleep. Bathtubs overflow with books, clothing and toys, leaving owner with no option but sponge baths. Kitchen counters become so cluttered that they can't prepare meals. It's impossible to use many areas of the house for their original purpose.

Instead of sorting and pitching, hoarders move things from one place to the other in a vain effort to manage the mess.

Hoarders have to learn to tolerate the anxiety of not adding new treasures to their collections. They have to stop buying and scavenging. They have to learn how to cancel catalogs, miss a yard sale, avoid clearance aisles in stores, and pitch circulars and want ads and begin shopping only for today's essentials.

Treatment starts by assessing how much of the home is under clutter and

can't be used. It is helpful for individuals to take pictures of areas of the room they are going to work on so that they can see progress even when they are working on small areas.

Clutterers have to learn to realistically assess how much stuff they can store and actually use. They must learn how to quickly sort items and how to decide on the item's usefulness. They have to practice making decisions and then living with the anxiety of not making perfect decisions. They feel that if an item isn't out for them to see, that it is gone and can't be retrieved. They have to learn to tolerate the emotions that come along with putting items away into closets, drawers, and boxes.

There are four beliefs that interfere with a hoarder discarding items:

- Things provide emotional comfort and are important to self-image.
- Possessions are needed reminders of past events, experiences and emotions.
- Others should not touch, borrow or move my things.
- I am ultimately responsible for what happens to my things.

Knowing what drives the hoarding behavior is a powerful tool.

Hoarders have to be the ones to make the decisions about their items. Help from others is tricky. The helper can't be critical of the mess, can't suggest how to sort or organize, and can't belittle the efforts of the hoarder.

If the family member can be supportive and is willing to do a few things at the direction of the hoarder, then it can work.

Usually it is best for the helper not to be involved in the actual sorting process, but can help with cleanup. Family members can carry out trash or take bags to Goodwill that have been approved by the hoarder for discarding.

It is important, though, to address all the problems overwhelming clutter can bring to an individual's life.

Medical problems come with hoarding, such as depression, anxiety and illnesses from living with items that may be moldy, dusty and dirty. Relationships become distant, divorces occur and loneliness increases.

There are dangers associated with falls or getting trapped if there are fires.

And it is expensive to hoard. If the hoarder cannot understand the risks that he may be causing himself and others, he may need to seek additional help to work through underlying reasons why he may be holding on to their possessions.

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