

**Are you a hoarder or a de-clutterer?**

I am moving house shortly, and so have 10 years' accumulation of things to sort out even though I would definitely not call myself a hoarder. Here is some information about a recognised hoarding disorder.

A hoarding disorder is where someone acquires an excessive number of items and stores them in a chaotic manner. Hoarding can start as early as the teenage years and gets more noticeable with age. Many people seem to start problematic hoarding in older age. It's estimated that between 2% and 5% of adults in the UK may have symptoms of a hoarding disorder.

It's considered to be a significant problem if:

- **the amount of clutter interferes with everyday living** – for example, the person is unable to use their kitchen or bathroom and cannot access rooms
- **the clutter is causing significant distress or negatively affecting the person's quality of life or their family's** – for example, they become upset if someone tries to clear the clutter and their relationships with others suffer

Many people who hoard don't see it as a problem, or have little awareness of how it's impacting their life or the lives of others. Many others do realise they have a problem, but are reluctant to seek help because they feel extremely ashamed, humiliated or guilty about it. They become reluctant or unable to have visitors, or even allow workmen in, which can cause isolation and loneliness, vermin infestation, accident and fire risks.

**Why someone may hoard**

The reasons why someone begins hoarding aren't fully understood. Someone with mobility problems may be physically unable to clear clutter as it builds up. People with learning disabilities or people developing dementia may be unable to categorise and dispose of items. Hoarding may be a condition in itself and is often associated with self-neglect, or it may combine with other mental health conditions. People who hoard are more likely to:

- live alone
- be unmarried
- have had a deprived childhood, with either a lack of material objects or a poor relationship with other members of their family
- have a family history of hoarding
- have grown up in a cluttered home and never learned to prioritise and sort items

Many people who hoard have strongly held beliefs related to acquiring and discarding things, such as: "*I may need this someday*" or "*If I buy this, it will make me happy*". Others may be struggling to cope with a stressful life event, such as the death of a loved one.

## What's the difference between hoarding and collecting?

Many people collect items such as books or ornaments, the difference between a "hoard" and a "collection" is how they are organised. A collection is usually well-ordered and easily accessible. A hoard is usually very disorganised, takes up a lot of room and the items are largely inaccessible.

## Signs of a hoarding disorder

Someone who has a hoarding disorder may typically:

- keep or collect items that may have little or no value, such as junk mail, carrier bags, or things they intend to reuse or repair
- find it hard to categorise or organise items
- have difficulty making decisions
- struggle to manage everyday tasks, such as cooking, cleaning and paying bills
- become extremely attached to items, refusing to let anyone touch or borrow them
- have poor relationships with family or friends

## Items people may hoard

Some people with a hoarding disorder will hoard a range of items, while others may just hoard certain types of objects such as newspapers or clothes. Some people also hoard animals, which they may not be able to look after properly. More recently, hoarding of electronic data and emails has become more common.

## How hoarding disorders are treated

Simply clearing the clutter, or worse, storing it elsewhere, will only be a temporary solution, as the root cause has not been addressed, and the clutter will build up again. It's important that the person takes responsibility themselves for clearing the clutter. GPs can refer the person to a therapist to help them to understand what makes it difficult to throw things away and the reasons why the clutter has built up. This can be combined with practical tasks and a plan to work on. Antidepressants may help some people with hoarding disorders.

Now I must get back to clearing that loft...

The information in this Paper comes from the NHS – Naomi Hancock.