

Appendix A1

What Is Hoarding?

This handout is a modified version of the Chapter One Introduction section from: Steketee, G., & Frost, R.O. (2007b). *Compulsive hoarding and acquiring: Workbook*. New York, NY US: Oxford University Press.

Hoarding can be defined as having **three components**:

1. **the acquiring of and/or failure to discard a large number of possessions.** Acquiring problems may be evident in behaviors such as acquiring free items, picking up things others have thrown away, and compulsive buying. Failure to discard includes difficulty parting with unneeded objects (clothing, newspapers, magazines, unsolicited mail, and so on), which leads to excessive clutter in the home.
2. **living spaces sufficiently cluttered so that spaces cannot be used as intended and designed** (e.g., one cannot cook in the kitchen because of clutter)
3. **significant impairment in functioning or distress caused by the hoarding.** Indeed, hoarding often leads to significant impairment in social, occupational, and financial functioning and can cause considerable emotional distress.

Hoarding behavior seems to fall on a continuum, and thus is a matter of degree. Some people are very high on hoarding behavior and others are the opposite. The majority of people tend to fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum (Timpano et al., 2011). Studies give a variety of estimates of the prevalence rates of hoarding disorder, ranging from 2.3% to 14%, depending on at what point of the continuum they consider an individual's hoarding behavior to be "disordered" (Timpano et al., 2011). We know that hoarding often starts in childhood and that there is a tendency for excessive saving behavior to run in families and hoarding exists in a number of different cultures. The disorder

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typically begins early in life, between the ages of 11 and 15, with reports of onset as young as age 4.

The disorder seems to have a chronic and enduring course, rarely subsiding on its own (Frost, Steketee, & Tolin, 2012; Tolin, Frost, & Steketee, 2007a). While more women ultimately present for

treatment—most commonly in middle adulthood—hoarding may actually be more common in men.

Hoarding is a multifaceted problem based on several types of deficits or conditions (Frost et al., 2012; Pertusa et al., 2010).

Hoarding has been associated with three types of problems in thinking: information-processing deficits, problems with emotional attachments to possessions, and erroneous beliefs about the nature of possessions. These problems lead to the avoidance of decision-making, discarding, organizing, and other situations that might trigger discomfort related to hoarding.

Information Processing Problems

Many people who suffer from compulsive hoarding have difficulty making decisions. From major decisions (e.g., job changes) to minor ones (e.g., ordering at a restaurant), people who have hoarding problems often agonize over what to do. These problems are especially evident in decisions about saving and organizing items.

Efficient organization of possessions requires the ability to combine like objects into meaningful categories for filing and/or storage (e.g., putting silverware together in one place, storing all tools in one section of the garage). People with a compulsive hoarding problem often have difficulty with organizing in this way, perhaps because they see each possession as complex, unique, and irreplaceable. Before discarding, individuals with hoarding often carefully consider each feature of the object, as well as estimate the likelihood of finding something this unique in the future. Attempts at organizing/discarding often involve examining an object, only to place it back in the pile of things from which it was drawn. The result is a pile of unrelated objects—both important and unimportant—that get “churned” during attempts to organize and result in “losing” important things.

Difficulties with confidence in memory may complicate the processing of information for people who hoard. They often lack confidence in their ability to remember things, and many also believe that it is important to remember everything. To avoid the possibility of forgetting information from something they have read, they may decide to keep the paper or magazine with the information. In addition, many individuals with hoarding want to keep important things in sight as reminders of their existence. To them, putting anything out of sight means they may not remember they own it. The sight of an object appears to increase its value, such that seemingly unimportant things (e.g., scraps of paper with unrecognized phone numbers) are elevated to the same status as important things (e.g., paychecks). Because those who hoard define so many things as important, nearly everything must be left in sight. At the time a possession is being used, it has a high level of “importance” and consequently gets put on top of the pile—in sight. Subsequent items take over as “important” and go on top of the previous “important” item, burying it in the pile. The pile consists of layers of once-“important” possessions.

Another complication is a problem with evaluating the costs and benefits of saving. When trying to discard or organize, the individual with hoarding tends to become preoccupied with thoughts about the cost of discarding. Little or no consideration is given to the cost of saving a possession or the benefit of getting rid of it. The same problem is evident for resisting acquiring behavior.

Problems with Emotional Attachments to Possessions

People with hoarding difficulties demonstrate emotional attachments to possessions that are different from, or at least more extreme than, how individuals without hoarding problems view objects. They often show excessive sentimental attachments to seemingly meaningless objects. These objects are sometimes reminders of important past events, and sometimes they are things the person feels are a part of them. Throwing them away is like losing a part of themselves. Sometimes, individuals with

hoarding equate having possessions with safety and comfort. Possessions seem to provide some sense of continuity or familiarity, and they therefore have a comforting quality. People with hoarding experience a sense of loss when discarding possessions that may be similar to the experience of losing a loved one.

Beliefs About Possessions/Reasons for Saving

Several beliefs about the role and meaning of possessions are common among people who save compulsively. These beliefs may be important in maintaining the behavior.

1) Emotional comfort

Possessions provide emotional comfort or safety and are kept to avoid anxiety or discomfort the person fears will not be tolerable. Examples include the following:

“Without this, I’ll feel vulnerable.”

“I can’t tolerate getting rid of this.”

“I feel comfortable around my stuff; I feel better.”

“I sat down and built a little fortress around myself. I think I needed it.”

2) Loss and mistakes

Getting rid of possessions represents a loss of opportunity or information and seems like an irreparable mistake. The person may believe that mistakes are equivalent to failure. Examples include the following:

“Getting rid of this will mean losing information that might be important.”

“Throwing something out and finding I needed it later would be a disaster.”

3) Value

Possessions have special value and need to be saved. Even unimportant things like old receipts or bottle tops seem very important. Any item that might have value must be saved, and other items cannot substitute for them. Examples include the following:

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“If an object has any potential value, I must save it.”

“This is so unique that there is nothing else like it in the world.”

“If I can imagine a use for something, then it must be worth saving.”

“If I think I might need something, it’s more likely that I will really need it.”

“If I don’t keep/get this information now, I won’t be able to get it again.”

“I could only give this to a worthy person who would appreciate it properly.”

4) Identity

Possessions represent personal worth and identity. Examples include the following:

“This possession represents who I am.”

“Part of my thing is sharing. I like to redistribute things.”

“Throwing away this possession is like throwing away a part of me.”

“Getting rid of this is sort of like burying someone.”

5) Responsibility

Having a possession carries with it a responsibility for not wasting it. “Should” statements are often associated with responsibility concerns. Examples include the following:

“I’m responsible for not wasting this.”

“Throwing something away might be wasting a valuable opportunity.”

“I should find a use for these things.”

“I am responsible for the well-being of my possessions; so, I should take care of them.”

“If I have something that someone else might want, I should save it for them.”

6) Memory

Items are kept (preferably in sight) to avoid forgetting important things. People with this problem often think their memories are poor and that they need to keep objects as memory aids. Examples include the following:

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“Saving things means I don’t have to rely on my memory.”

“My memory is so bad I need to keep things in sight or I’ll forget about them.”

“If I put things into a filing system, I’ll forget about them.”

“In my life, the past has been very important to me—so I try to hold on to it.”

7) *Control*

Allowing others to touch or use possessions ruins or changes them. People with this belief usually refuse to share possessions or permit others to handle them. Examples include the following:

“If someone touches my things, I’ll lose them or lose track of them.”

“People who use my things will wreck them.”

“When I put things away, I have this feeling I don’t know where anything is.”

8) *Perfectionism*

Beliefs that perfection is possible and that mistakes are terrible. Examples include the following:

“I have to read and understand every article before I can discard the newspaper.”

“I must organize everything exactly right.”

Behavioral Avoidance

The result of the thinking problems described earlier is avoidance behavior, and hoarding behavior is associated with many different types of avoidance. Saving and putting things in a pile in the middle of the room allows the person to avoid making decisions about what to save and how to organize it. The person can also avoid emotional upset or discomfort associated with discarding a cherished possession or wasting something of value. Acquiring something they cannot afford enables the person to avoid dealing with unpleasant feelings of not having the prized possession.