



Digging Out: Helping with Hoarding & Clutter

Session #6

Creating a Harm Reduction Plan

Checking In: Digging Out Group Page

<https://www.southshorecrc.org/ssphc-diggingout-2026>

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Digging Out

Helping with Hoarding and Clutter ~ Online Discussion Group

Sponsored By: South Shore Public Health Collaborative

March 25 - June 10, 2026

Click below to view and download session-by-session materials:

Book: [Digging Out - Helping Your Loved One Manage Clutter, Hoarding & Compulsive Acquiring](#) (Tomkins & Hart, 2009)

Session #1 : Introduction & What is Compulsive Hoarding?

Handout
Slides

Session #2 : Harm Reduction

Handout
Slides

Session #3 : Setting the Stage for Harm Reduction

Handout
Slides

Session #4 : Helping Them Accept Help

Handout
Slides

Session #5 : Assessing Harm Potential

Handout
Slides

Session #6 : Creating a Harm Reduction Plan

Handout

Session #7 : Keeping the Harm Reduction Targets Clear

Handout

Resource List

Assessment Tools

- [HOMESB Multi-Disciplinary Hoarding Risk Assessment \(Ratbotis, 2009\)](#)
- [Home Assessment Tools for Professionals and Individuals](#)

Hoarding Resources

[Mass Housing Hoarding Resources](#)

Events

[Knights of Columbus - Get Rid of Your Stuff](#)

Checking In:

- Thoughts about Week 5 material, *Creating a Harm Reduction Plan*, and discussion?
- As we approach the halfway point of our 12-week group, share a takeaway from *Digging Out* or our group discussion that may be helpful on your helping journey.

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Lessons learned in chapter 6, Creating a Harm Reduction Plan

- General features of a harm reduction plan, including **realistic harm reduction goals** and a variety of **harm reduction strategies**.
- Putting together an **effective harm reduction team** that's committed to helping your person over the long term.
- How to create a **harm reduction contract** to guide you and other team members through ups and downs of managing your person's hoarding problem.

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 112)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Features of Harm Reduction Plan

- **Group of people** dedicated to working with your loved one.
- **Clear, realistic and measurable** harm reduction goals and **method for monitoring** progress towards the goals. It must be realistic as Harm Reduction assumes limited insight from the person who hoards.
- **Flexible** and includes any **strategies that help!**
- A Harm Reduction contract that **clearly spells out goals, targets, and agreements**. The contract may change over time. The agreement formalizes the agreements between you and your person and focuses future discussion on how well or poorly the plan is working.

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 95-96)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Putting the Team Together

Look for people with certain qualities:

- Patience
- Stakeholder in the process
- Time available
- No current or ongoing conflicts with person
- Useful skills (negotiation, organizing, problem solving)
- Professionals (when needed or required)

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 96-99)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Professionals

- Anyone with certain **skills** who can provide specific services or has access to **resources** and can help you manage your person's hoarding problem.
- Example: One repair person vs. many repair people in/out of the home. A **consistent person** will help create **trust**.
- Other **helping professionals**: therapist, physician, prescriber (to monitor comorbid conditions).
- May be required ...

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 98-99)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Instances When a Professional is **Required**

- May occur when a hoarding situation becomes public or there is concern it will become so if you can't ensure your person will be safe in their home.
- Ask professional to join your Harm Reduction team. Your person may resist strongly (see Chapter 4: Helping Them Accept Help.)
- It is better to have an ally vs. adversary when managing a serious hoarding problem.
- Professionals who can provide needed pressure to convince your person to accept help with their hoarding problem: adult protective case worker, fire chief, or code enforcement officer.
- Generally, fire personnel are more accepted (as they are perceived by people as protecting their safety) vs. case workers or code enforcement who may be perceived as threatening housing.

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 99)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Setting Goals ... Together

- You may have goals for your person and others may come with **different** ones.
- Your job: Work with the team to **create common goals** that anyone on the team can support.
- Creating **shared goals** can help team members and the person feel like they're **part of the solution** to the hoarding problem and will **boost buy-in** to Harm Reduction plan.

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 100-101)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Agree to **Realistic** Harm Reduction Goals

- Concrete and specific
- Doable
- Quickly monitored and measured
- Focus on safety first
- Prioritized ...

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 100-103)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Prioritizing Harm Reduction Goals

- **Essential** = immediate safety/health risks (fire, fall, medication, mold, spoiled food). Prioritize one or two essential goals first.
- **Doable** = tasks that take 90 minutes or less or can be repeated weekly. Avoid “all at once transformations”
- **Desired** = goals that improve quality of life but can wait until essential risks are reduced.
- Consider using **SMART** format for goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Agreeing to a Plan for **Monitoring**

- Minimum of **1x per month** home visit. More frequent, better - but avoid overly obtrusive.
- Clearly specify target areas (tape to mark space, dates on food)
 - Keep Harm Reduction areas clear over time
 - Identify food to discard/consume
 - Spaces to use for other harm reduction activities (i.e., recycle bin)
 - Unsafe areas

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 103)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Agreeing to a **Harm Reduction Strategies**

- Reducing **Financial Risk**
- Improving **Living Situation**
- Assisting with **Saving and Organizing**
- Examples?

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 104-106)

Digging Out Reading for Week 6:

Create the Formalized Harm Reduction Contract

- Agreement
- Targets:
 - Safety
 - Health and Comfort
 - Accommodations and Support
- Do's and Don'ts

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 106-112)

Digging Out Skill Building:

Principles of Motivational Interviewing

Use a collaborative, nonconfrontational style to reduce resistance and help the person move toward small, self-directed change.

Digging Out Skill Building:

Motivational Interviewing (MI) in Hoarding Situation

- Express **empathy**: Listen actively, reflect feelings, and validate the person's experience (e.g., "It sounds like these items help you feel safe.")
- Develop **discrepancy**: Gently highlight the differences between their values/goals and current risks (e.g., "You want to live independently, and some changes might make that easier.")
- Roll with **resistance**: Avoid arguing, when met with pushback, reflect and explore rather than countering.
- Support **self-efficacy**: emphasize past successes and strengths, and frame change as possible with next steps.

Digging Out Skill Building:

Concrete MI Steps to Use in a Visit

1. Build **Rapport** (5-10 minutes): Open with neutral, nonjudgmental questions about daily life and what matters to your person. Use affirmations of strengths (e.g., "You've kept this home for years - that shows commitment.")
2. Ask **Permission** Before Intervening: "Would it be okay if I share a safety idea" reduces threat and increases cooperation.
3. Use **Open Questions and Reflections**: "What concerns do you have about your living space" and reflect back ("You're worried about losing things but also about the smell.")
4. Elicit **Change Talk**: Prompt their own reasoning for change with questions like, "IF a small change helped you feel safer at home, what would that look like?" Reinforce any language favoring change.
5. Set Small, Client-Led **Goals**: Co-create one tiny, specific, time-limited task (e.g., "Can we clear a 2-foot path to the door this week?") Use scaling questions ("On a 0-10 scale, how confident are you?") to plan supports.

Digging Out Skill Building:

Concrete MI Steps to Use in a Visit (continued ...)

6. Offer **Options and Choices**: Present discrete, reversible actions (e.g., "We could move broken glass now or sort one small box together - which do you prefer?").
7. Use **Affirmations and Summarize**: Reinforce effort ("You agreed to try that - good step") and summarize progress and next steps to consolidate motivation.
8. Plan **Follow-Ups and Supports**: Schedule a next visit, identify who will help, and agree on monitoring for safety risks.

Digging Out Skill Building:

MI Tactics for Common Challenges

1. High **Shame**: Use reflective statements and normalize ambivalence; avoid judging.
2. Strong **Attachment** to Items. Focus on safety items and conserved keepsake rules (e.g., on small box of treasured items) so the person feels agency.
3. Acute **Risk** of Incapacity: Prioritize immediate safety actions but still use brief permission-based MI language (e.g., "I need to act to keep you safe - can I explain what I'm going to do?")

Digging Out Skill Building:

MI Brief Phrasing Examples

1. **Open:** "What worries you most about your home right now?"
2. **Reflection:** "You feel overwhelmed but want to stay here."
3. **Elicit Change Talk:** "How might your life be different if one hazard were fixed?"
4. **Scaling:** "How confident are you from 0-10 that you can try this one step?"
5. **Affirmation:** "You took a hard step agreeing to this - that shows strength."

Digging Out Preview of Week 7:

Keeping the Harm Reduction Targets Clear (Ch. 7)

- Reading: Chapter 7
- Attachments to Review:
 - Do's and Don'ts of Forming a Contract
 - Harm Reduction Plan Worksheet
 - Example of Harm Reduction Plan



Questions or
comments?

