



Digging Out: Helping with Hoarding & Clutter

Session #5

Assessing Harm Potential

Checking In: Digging Out Group Page

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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 4 material, *Helping Them Accept Help*, and discussion?
- Based on what you've learned about harm reduction targets, share an example of one that you're aware of in your person's environment.

Digging Out Reading for Week 5:

Lessons learned in chapter 5, Assessing Harm Potential

- How to **conduct a home assessment** to gather information you'll need to design a harm reduction plan.
- Strategies to **evaluate your person's harm potential**, focusing on safety, comfort, level of support, insight, and motivation to work on the hoarding problem.
- How to **identify potential harm reduction targets** that will be the basis of your person's harm reduction plan.

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 94)

Digging Out Reading for Week 5:

Assessing Harm Potential

- No two **situations** are the same.
- Every harm reduction plan will be **slightly different**.
- Goal: Focus on **managing the potential harm** your person faces each day they live with a hoarding problem.

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 94)

Digging Out Reading for Week 5:

Identifying Harm Reduction Targets & Harm Potential Assessment Form

- **Questions** to Identify Harm Reduction Targets (pg. 93)
- Conditions of the Living Situation that Affect **Safety** (pg. 75)
- Conditions of the Living Situation that Affect **Health and Comfort** (pg. 76-77)
- **Activities** Affected by Clutter or Hoarding Problem (pg. 77-78)

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 75-78)

Digging Out Reading for Week 5:

Additional Assessments

- Assessing Level of **Support** (pg. 80-81)
- Assessing **Insight** and **Motivation** (pg. 82-83)
- Assessing **Other Conditions** (pg. 85)
 - Medical Problems
 - Physical Limitations
 - Sensory Limitations
 - Other Psychiatric or Psychological Conditions
 - Other Factors
- Assessing **Acquisition** Factors (pg. 85-86)

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 75-86)

Digging Out Reading for Week 5:

Harm Reduction Planning Worksheet

- **Safety** Targets (pg. 87-88)
- **Health** Targets (pg. 88)
- **Comfort** Targets (pg. 89)
- **Medical, Physical, Memory, and Sensory** Limitation Targets (pg. 90)
- **Accommodation** Targets (pg. 91)
- **Financial Harm** Targets (pg. 92)

(Tomkins & Hartl, p. 75-86)

Digging Out Practice Scenario #1:

An elderly woman named Rosa lives alone in a small two-bedroom apartment stacked floor-to-ceiling with newspapers, clothing, and unopened food containers; though she insists the items are “useful,” her kitchen sink is clogged, a narrow path through the living room barely allows access to the bed, and smoke detectors are obscured—neighbors report a persistent smell and missed mail, and Rosa has begun refusing visitors, anxious about losing possessions ...

Digging Out Practice Scenario #1 Response:

1. Immediate safety fixes: Clear a 1-2 ft path to exits, expose smoke detectors, unplug overloaded cords to reduce fire and evacuation risks.
2. Sanitation support: Arrange professional cleaning and pest-control to remove spoiled food and biohazards - lowers infection and odor hazards.
3. Essential utilities check: Ensure water, heat, and electricity are functioning and safe; repair clogged plumbing - prevents service failures and health risks.
4. Food security & meals: Provide regular meal delivery or grocery assistance- ensures nutrition without increasing clutter.
5. Low-pressure decluttering: Offer sorting help where Rosa keeps a small set of trusted items and discards only clearly hazardous trash first - preserves autonomy and reduces immediate risks.

Digging Out Practice Scenario #1 Response:

6. Gradual timeline: Set small, achievable goals (i.e., one box per week) to avoid overwhelm and resistance.
7. In-home support schedule: Arrange regular visits from a trusted cleaner or support worker to maintain progress and monitor risks.
8. Nonjudgmental engagement: Use motivational interviewing and validate feelings to reduce shame and build trust.
9. Mental health care: Connect to counseling for anxiety/trauma and if appropriate, assess for hoarding disorder and comorbidities.
10. Peer support: Link to local online support groups to share strategies and reduce isolation.

Digging Out Practice Scenario #1 Response:

11. Legal & tenancy considerations: Inform about tenant rights and coordinate with housing services to prevent sudden eviction while addressing hazards.
12. Care coordination: Involve primary care, social services, and community agencies to create a sustainable plan.
13. Advance planning & consent: Document Rosa's preferences, obtain consent for interventions, and involve a trusted proxy if decision-making capacity is impaired.
14. Emergency plan: Establish a simple evacuation and emergency contact plan shared with neighbors and responders.
15. Harm-monitoring: Regular reviews to track safety issues, adjust supports, and celebrate progress.

Digging Out Practice Scenario #2:

An elderly man named Harold lives alone in a single-story house where stacks of cardboard boxes, old electronics, and pet supplies block most walkways; he sleeps in a recliner because the bedroom is inaccessible, has multiple unpaid utility bills leading to threat of shutoffs, and his small dog is malnourished with soiled bedding attracting pests—Harold says he "can't throw anything away" and is defensive about outsiders entering.

Digging Out Practice Scenario #2 Response:

1. Animal welfare: vet checking and feeding - protects the pet and reduces health risks from neglect.
2. Safe pathways: Clear 2-3 ft to exits/bathroom - reduces fall and evacuation risk.
3. Utilities advocacy: Negotiate payment plans - prevents service loss that worsens health and sanitation.
4. Targeted biohazard removal: Remove spoiled food, mold, and soiled bedding - lowers infection and pest risk.
5. Regular in-home support: Scheduled visits for cleaning/monitoring - maintains safety gains and builds routine.

Digging Out Practice Scenario #2 Response:

6. Hazard-first decluttering: Remove broken glass, exposed wiring, and mold before sentimental sorting - addresses highest risks quickly.
7. Small goals: One small area or box at a time - reduces overwhelm and increases compliance.
8. Nonjudgmental engagement: Motivational interviewing and offering choices - reduces shame and resistance.
9. Mental health connection: Counseling and assessment - addresses underlying anxiety or comorbid disorders.
10. Peer support: Group connection - reduces isolation and shares practical strategies.

Digging Out Practice Scenario #2 Response:

11. Care coordination: Involve primary care and social services - creates integrated, sustainable support.
12. Consent & preferences: Document choices and involve trusted contacts - respects autonomy and guides interventions.
13. Emergency & animal plan: Evacuation procedures and shelter arrangement - protects Harold and his pet in crises.

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 6:

Creating a Harm Reduction Plan (Ch. 6)

- Reading: Chapter 6
- Attachments to Review:
 - Motivational Interviewing Handout



Questions or
comments?

