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What Makes A Hoarder? Psychological Issues Behind Hoarding

Picture of a Hoarder

- Bob is a single man, in his 60s, living alone who is socially isolated and has no living relatives.
- Bob is well educated, retired, very financially comfortable, living in a Melbourne inner suburb in his own home.
- Bob can no longer shut his front door as the house is virtually jam packed with his possessions.
- Bob's garden is a virtual jungle but is otherwise junk free so he has not experienced complaints from neighbours or local council intervention.

Picture of a Hoarder

- A friend of Bob's visits him occasionally and reports that the rooms cannot be used for their designated functions and there is barely room to move.
- The friend is concerned about Bob's welfare but does not know how to assist him.
- The friend has tried to help Bob dispose of items in the past but found that Bob merely refilled the cleared space.
- Bob is a skip diver and is continually adding to his stash of objects.

What is Compulsive Hoarding?

- The person accumulates and fails to get to get rid of many possessions that appear to most people to be useless or relatively worthless.
- There is so much clutter in rooms that the rooms cannot be used for their intended purpose.
- Significant distress or impairment is caused by the hoarding.

What is Compulsive Hoarding?

- The hoarding has been going on for at least 6 months
- The hoarding is not result of a recent: renovation, move, accumulation of many items due to death of a family member etc.
- The clutter and reluctance to part with items is not attributable to other mental disorders.

Hoarding and Other Disorders

Hoarding may be done by people who have

- Schizophrenia
- Organic mental disorders which decrease mental function due to medical or physical disease (e.g stroke, Prader Willi Syndrome, substance abuse) not mental illness
- Eating disorders
- Head injury
- Dementia
- OCD

Comorbidity

- Social phobia
- Depression
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Compulsive buying
- Personality traits such as perfectionism, indecisiveness, dependency and compulsive personality

Hoarding & Personality Disorders

Most hoarders have a personality disorder/s

- Paranoid (pervasive distrust & suspiciousness of others)
- Schizotypal (excessive social anxiety because of paranoid fears & reduced capacity for relationships, eccentric behaviour, odd beliefs and magical thinking)
- Avoidant (hypersensitive to negative evaluation, feelings of inadequacy)
- Obsessive compulsive personality (they regard discarding objects as wasteful, are miserly)

Commonly Hoarded Items

- Paper
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Plastic shopping bags
- Cardboard boxes
- Photos
- Food
- Clothing

The Nature of Hoarding

- Hoarding both relieves and produces anxiety.
- Generally, the more someone hoards the more protected they feel from the world.
- However, the more possessions a hoarder accumulates the more isolated they become.
- Severe hoarding is most common in adults around 50yo.

Prevalence of Hoarding

- Hoarding is thought to affect 2-5% of the population.

Profile of the Typical Hoarder

- Hoarding typically begins in childhood or adolescence.
- Hoarders tend to be single.
- Hoarding affects both men and women in equal numbers.
- Hoarders generally come to our attention when older.
- Often impaired by current physical health conditions or comorbid mental disorders.
- Hoarding may be contributing to ill health, e.g. they lose their medication, scripts, and don't eat properly.
- Hoarders are often socially isolated individuals or have poor relationships with family, landlords, neighbours.
- Hoarders are often on social security payments because of their physical ill health and/or psychological issues.

Profile of the Typical Hoarder

- Older hoarders more likely not to be comfortable/familiar with the idea of psychological treatment.
- Hoarders may have financial problems
- They may be at risk of losing their independent living status as their homes have become unsanitary, fire hazards, trip hazards etc.

Hoarding

- Hoarders do not find it easy to get rid of things they do not need and/or use.
- Hoarders have an intensive emotional attachment to their possessions.
- They may love objects the way they love people so disposing of an object may feel like losing a loved one or like part of themselves is dying.
- Objects provide comfort. Hoarders do not feel their possessions are unneeded or unnecessary.
- Hoarders find clearing their properties is a horrendous ordeal

Just Can't Let Go No Matter What

- Some hoarders would choose to: be divorced, lose contact with their children, never have friends to their house or risk their health rather than part with their possessions.

The Bobolas Case

- The Bobolas family, a mother and 2 adult daughters, in Bondi, Sydney have been forced to sell their family home by the Waverly Council.
- The property is valued at land value only.
- The Council says they have incurred approximately \$350K in costs from 15 cleanups in 17 years and wish to recoup at least half that amount of money, ie \$160K plus.
- Whoever buys the property will have clear the rubbish and deal with the Bobolas family.

Lack of Insight re Hoarding

- Some people recognize their hoarding is problematic
- Some people have limited insight and generally think their hoarding is not a problem despite evidence to the contrary
- Some hoarders have no insight at all.

Hoarders Lack Insight

- A study of complaints made to health depts re hoarding found that less 1/3rd of hoarders willingly cooperated with health dept officials and only 1/2 of the hoarders believed their houses were not clean

Acquiring

- Often hoarders are compulsive shoppers and or acquire free things (e.g. newspapers, brochures) or things from hard rubbish collections.
- Some hoarders may even be stealing items.
- Acquiring can be enjoyable for the hoarder
- However acquiring may also be done to make people feel better when they are experiencing a negative mood

Difficulty Throwing Objects Away

- Hoarders have difficulty throwing things away even though others would consider these objects to be worthless/ worn out/broken etc
- Objects may be considered to :
 1. have sentimental value
 2. be useful
 3. be things of beauty
- Hoarders may be able to dispose of some times but it takes them a long time so the number of new items exceeds the number of disposed of items

Clutter

- Hoarders are usually not good at organizing their possessions.
- Clutter prevents rooms being used appropriately and can cause trip hazards, fire hazards, sanitation issues, health problems

Hoarding

- Hoarding is a chronic condition
- Hoarding may have genetic component.

Animal Hoarders

- Animal hoarders keep more animals than they can adequately look after.
- The animals are being neglected
- The number of animals alone is not the determinative factor in identifying hoarding. The key issues are the owner's inability to provide adequate care for the animals and the owner's refusal to acknowledge that both the animals condition and the household are deteriorating.

Animal Hoarders

- Commonly report dysfunctional childhoods, e.g. abuse, neglect etc
- A dysfunctional childhood is correlated with an impaired attachment style such as compulsive caregiving as an adult.
- Animal hoarding is more frequent in older, isolated, low socioeconomic status women.

Animal Hoarders

- Animal hoarding is often triggered by: loss of a significant relationship, major health issues, trauma or financial stress.
- Animal hoarding is also associated with borderline personality disorder.

CBT Model of Compulsive Hoarding

Problems with acquiring, saving and cluttering of possessions are the result of :

- Personal & family vulnerabilities
- Information processing problems
- The meaning given to possessions, thoughts, beliefs and attachments to objects
- Emotional reactions
- Learning processes

Personal & Family Vulnerabilities

- Family history of hoarding (hereditary?)
- Comorbid problems (e.g. depression, social anxiety)
- Parental values & behaviour (e.g. values about waste, sentimentality)
- Physical limitations (ill health, lack of time & space)
- Traumatic life events (e.g. deprivation, moving, losing a parent)

Information Processing Problems

- Attention deficits- can't sustain focus on a difficult task
- Categorization- difficulty grouping & organizing items
- Memory- poor memory
- Perception- visually very attracted to objects or fail to notice clutter
- Association- creative, can think of lots of uses for objects
- Complex thinking- gets stuck on non essential details
- Decision making problems- fear of making mistakes

The Meaning of Possessions

- Beauty
- Memory- memories attached to objects
- Opportunities- “What I could do with this...”
- Sentimental
- Emotional comfort
- Safety
- Identity
- Control- fear people will control one’s possessions or behaviour

The Meaning of Possessions

- Mistakes- worrying about making mistakes re discarding, re the condition of objects etc
- Responsibility/waste- concern about the environment, not wasting things
- Completeness-postponing action till it feels “right”
- Objects validate the person’s worth
- Buying or collecting items provides social interaction

Emotions Associated with Hoarding

- Hoarders can get positive emotions from their possessions such as comfort, pleasure in acquiring and pride in what they have accumulated
- Disposing of possessions may trigger negative emotions such as: grief, anger, anxiety, fear and guilt.
- Hoarders may be acquiring items to soothe negative emotions

Learning Processes in Hoarding

- Hoarding gets +ve reinforcement from positive emotions produced by saving and acquiring.
- Hoarding gets –ve reinforcement- if the sufferer does not discard items they can avoid negative emotions.
- Hoarding prevents the opportunity to test beliefs.
- Hoarding deprives the sufferer of the opportunity to develop new alternative beliefs.

Discarding Items is Distressing

- The ordeal of throwing out a Christmas card from mother.
- 1. “I’ll waste it”. GUILT
- 2. “This card represents my mother”.
AMBIVALENCE/GUILT
- 3. “This poor Christmas card” EMPATHY FOR
OBJECT

CBT for Hoarding

- Education and formulating an explanatory model of the individual client's hoarding.
- Identifying the clients values and goals.
- Enhancing the client's motivation to tackle the clutter and stop acquiring new items.
- Training in: problem solving, organizing, decision making.
- Practising discarding items and practising not purchasing and/or acquiring more items.

CBT for Hoarding

- Maintaining new behaviours

Hoarding May Improve

- Hoarders can access 10 individual sessions and 10 group sessions per year under Medicare
- Hoarders need to go to their general practitioner and do a mental health care plan so they can get the Medicare rebate for treatment and a referral letter to a psychologist
- The Australian Psychological Society has a referral service which can direct people to nearby psychologists who treat hoarding.
- Hoarders may benefit from medication for severe depression or attention deficit symptoms.

Help For Hoarders

ARCVIC Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria

9830 0533

Hoarding Support Group

Swinburne Psychology Clinic

Compulsive Hoarding & Acquiring Group Therapy

Note: fees apply

Contact The Psychology Clinic at
psychprojects@swin.edu.au