

When Your Possessions Control Who You Are

Treatment of compulsive hoarding may involve working with a mental health expert | Science in the News

From VOA Learning English, this is Science in the News.

I'm Mario Ritter.

And I'm Faith Lapidus.

Today we tell about compulsive hoarding syndrome, also known as Hoarding Disorder. It is both a mental disorder and a public safety issue.

Many people in the United States are looking forward to the return of spring. At this time of year, millions of Americans do what is known as "spring cleaning." Many open windows in their homes to let in fresh air. Others use cleaning products that make their homes smell nice. And some organize their belongings.

Many Americans have a strong desire to clean up their homes. This can also be called "removing clutter."

Clutter can be described as “a disorganized collection of things.” To remove clutter means to throw away the things you do not want. Then, you organize the things you have decided to keep. In recent years, it has become easy to find information on how to attack clutter. There are books, websites and even television programs on the subject. Specialty stores sell containers and boxes for storing things around the house.

Some Americans pay people to come to their homes to remove clutter. These professional organizers offer advice on what to keep and what to throw away. They also help with organizing things. However, the services of a professional organizer can be costly. They can cost up to \$200 an hour.

Some people have serious problems with clutter. They have what experts call hoarding disorder. Hoarders continually gather objects until there is no space or room for everything. American experts estimate that hoarding disorder affects between two and five percent of the population.

Hoarding had been linked to Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, also known as OCD. People who suffer from OCD have ideas that interfere with their daily activities. But they recognize they have a

problem. Some hoarders do not realize they have a mental health disorder. Hoarding can also result from other disorders.

In 2013, the American Psychological Association included hoarding in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Medical health experts often turn to the manual for guidance.

People with hoarding disorder continue to gather and save things. Most people say the objects hoarders keep are useless or worthless. However, hoarders believe the objects could be useful someday. They may even develop an emotional connection to such things or feel safer when surrounded by their growing possessions.

Hoarders are afraid to throw away things. At the same time, they continue to bring more and more things into their homes. They may save objects such as newspapers, clothing, and even old food.

Hoarders live with so much clutter that it may affect their physical health. Dirt, insects and bacteria that form over time can cause sickness.

Safety experts say the homes of hoarders often are unsafe. A room filled with newspapers, for example, can cause floor supports to break down. In many cases, a room is filled from top to bottom with useless things. There is only a small space to walk from one end of the room to the other.

As a result, a fire could spread quickly if it were to start in the home of a hoarder. Household clutter could delay efforts by firefighters to rescue people living in the home.

Recently, a woman suffered major burns from a house fire in the American state of Maryland. Her household clutter made it difficult for firefighters to rescue her. Hoarding can become not only a safety problem for the person with the disorder, but also for those who may be attempting to help the individual.

One of the most famous hoarding cases involved two brothers in New York City. Homer and Langley Collyer were found dead in their home in 1947. Langley Collyer was buried under what appeared to be a mountain of old newspapers. The weight of the newspapers crushed him. Langley was Homer's caretaker. Medical examiners believed Langley had been dead for several days before his brother Homer died of starvation.

Police found the home filled with thousands of unread books, pieces of wood, and skins from large fruits and vegetables. The brothers also saved pipes and large automobile parts.

Hoarding disorder can have a severe effect on a family. Family members who share a home with a hoarder cannot understand why their loved one keeps so many useless and sometimes dangerous things. It prevents the family from enjoying their home.

Experts say the hoarder should make a greater effort to keep the home clean and organized. However, it is not that simple.

Randy Frost has studied hoarding. Professor Frost is a psychologist at Smith College in Massachusetts. He says hoarding is more than a mental disorder. He says it is also an issue of public health.

Severe health risks can result from saving waste, food or materials that can cause fires. In the United States, hoarding can violate laws that were created to protect public safety and property. Some cities have formed groups to deal with the

problems caused by hoarding. Each group usually has representatives from one or more government agencies.

Agency officials say they often hear about hoarders from people who live near someone affected with the disorder. Those people no longer want to see broken household equipment or other things lying on property near their homes.

Individuals suffering from hoarding disorder do not only collect objects. Some keep a large number of cats, dogs, birds, snakes or other animals. Most animal hoarders believe they are rescuing the animals to care for them. But unlike most pet owners, hoarders do not realize when they have too many animals. They are really doing more harm than good. They may not be able to provide health care for the animals. Some animals may not be washed or fed.

Officials have been shocked at the condition of the homes of animal hoarders. Floors were covered with animal wastes. Infectious diseases were a problem. Some animals were found starving, while others had died.

Earlier this year, police in California arrested a school teacher for hoarding 400 snakes. The man's neighbors reported that his home had a very bad smell coming from it. When police arrived, they found the home filled with snakes in small plastic containers. Some of the snakes were dead, but others were alive. Other containers also had rats and mice.

A few years ago, a grand jury in New York charged a man and his wife with hoarding hundreds of cats. The cats clearly had not received good care. Investigators said some of the animals were missing teeth or eyes. Others were suffering from many insect bites and dehydration -- a lack of needed fluids in the body. The owners were charged with torturing and injuring animals.

Americans have shown deep interest in the strange behavior of animal hoarders like the people in New York. Several television stations show reality programs about hoarders. Reality programs present events as they happen, such as the rescue of animals from hoarders' homes.

Television cameras capture the sadness of the owners as animal police take away their pets. And the cameras show the struggles of the hoarders and the efforts of people who want to help them.

Gregory Chasson is a mental health expert. He teaches at Towson University in Maryland. He says the public's interest in hoarding programs comes from most people's desire to save things.

He says that for most people, this simply means behavior like keeping too many papers or having a little clutter. But he says hoarding becomes a mental health problem when it interferes with normal life.

Mr. Chasson says hoarding is extremely difficult to treat. He says hoarders are less likely than others to recognize that they have a problem. But he suggests that cognitive-behavioral therapy can help. In this method, hoarders work with an expert to understand why they gather and save so many things.

When reasons are found for the hoarding, he says, people can develop a plan for organization. They can learn how to decide what to throw away. They can learn to resist the urge to bring home more things.

Some hoarders improve by meeting with others and talking about their struggles. These group therapy meetings can take place in the hoarders' homes.

But the therapy does not always happen in direct meetings. Some meetings for hoarders are held online, through the Internet. And, some hoarders use their computers to communicate with a supportive person.

A method as easy as taking a picture of the area to be organized before and after the work is done can give hoarders a feeling of progress. With improved decision-making skills and ways of thinking, it is possible for a hoarder to become a former hoarder.

This Science in the News was written by Kim Varzi.

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Join us again next week at this time for more news about science on the Voice of America.



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