

CHAPTER 14

Hoarding OCD: When You Have Too Much Stuff

By perseverance, the snail reached the ark.

—Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Compulsive hoarding is a widely recognized symptom of OCD. It is defined as acquiring and failing to discard possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value (Frost and Gross 1993). While everyone is familiar with someone whom they consider a pack rat or chronic saver, people with hoarding OCD are distinguished by the sheer quantity of objects collected, and by their strong emotional attachment to items most would clearly consider useless. The objects hoarded can be almost anything, but often include such things as newspapers, clothing, foodstuffs, books, papers, junk mail, and old appliances. One person with hoarding OCD aptly described her apartment as “something between a wastebasket and a suitcase” (Greist and Jefferson 1995, 3).

People with hoarding OCD seem to overvalue these objects and therefore develop an excessive attachment to them that prevents them from discarding the objects. Often, the rationale is “What if

I need it in the future? I'd better not throw it out." Meanwhile, piles of clutter rise to the ceiling and only a little space is left for walkways. Navigating through the cluttered home of a person with hoarding OCD can be challenging.

Estimates of hoarding behaviors range from 18 to 31 percent of all people with OCD (Damecour and Charron 1998; Frost and Steketee 1998), with the onset occurring most often when people are in their early twenties (Greenberg 1987). It appears to affect both genders equally. Although many theories exist about the cause of hoarding, for years psychologists have theorized that compulsive hoarding develops from a perfectionist effort to control the environment (Salzman 1973).

People with hoarding OCD are often extremely resistant to changing this behavior. They tend to ignore the impact it has on themselves and others and see their hoarding as necessary to feel in control of their lives. When the clutter becomes intolerable or health hazards develop, family members may make an effort to remove some of the clutter. The person with hoarding OCD may react to this with intense anger and threats of violence, prompting an emergency situation. Should a move from the property become inevitable, it is likely that the hoarding will only continue in the new environment.

Five features generally characterize people with hoarding OCD: indecisiveness, categorization problems, faulty beliefs about memory, excessive emotional attachment to possessions, and excessive need to feel in control of their possessions (Frost and Steketee 1998). Let's look at how these traits tend to manifest.

Indecisiveness. The simplest decisions of everyday life, such as what to wear in the morning, what to eat for dinner, and where to take a vacation, are troublesome for compulsive hoarders. This indecisiveness appears to be related to a perfectionist fear of making mistakes. Hoarding useless objects may therefore be a means of avoiding making bad decisions or decisions that may be regretted later. By hoarding even seemingly useless objects, the person avoids any potential regrets or pain over not having these objects (Frost and Steketee 1998).

Categorization problems. People with hoarding OCD have difficulty sorting objects into categories that would determine if they're useful or not. Each object seems as important and vital as any other. A gum wrapper may have as much importance as a recent tax return. Decisions about keeping or discarding objects become exceedingly complicated by the person's inability to differentiate between what is truly valuable and what is not.

Faulty beliefs about memory. People with hoarding OCD typically display obsessional concerns about the reliability of their memory, even though there's little objective evidence of this. They fear that their "faulty" memory will prevent them from having access to all of their possessions. This lack of confidence in their memory renders compulsive hoarders reluctant to put items away and out of sight for fear they will be forgotten. Therefore, useless objects are everywhere within sight in the person's home, contributing to the extreme clutter.

Excessive emotional attachment to possessions. People with hoarding OCD regard their stuff as part of themselves. They attach much more sentiment to objects than nonhoarders do, and they find an

extreme degree of emotional comfort in their possessions (Frost and Gross 1993). Taking great delight in things also results in a marked tendency toward excessive purchasing, or shopaholic behavior.

Excessive need to feel in control of ownership. People with hoarding OCD have an exaggerated need to feel in control of their possessions to protect the items from harm or irresponsible use. Hence, they feel extreme discomfort or even feel personally violated if the objects are touched or moved by anyone else.

SELF-DIRECTED PROGRAM FOR HOARDING OCD

For some people, hoarding is the major symptom of OCD, and it can be so severe that it greatly interferes with maintaining healthy living standards. More commonly, hoarding is just one more type of OCD symptom. Either way, the self-directed program for hoarding OCD can help you break free from hoarding. Because the solution is partly logistical, there are more steps than in many of the other self-directed programs in this book, but all of the steps are straightforward:

1. Set a realistic goal that you're willing to achieve.
2. Assess your hoarding problem.
3. Put a moratorium on all accumulating.
4. Develop an organization plan for your home.
5. Decide where to start.
6. Establish a few simple rules for placing, storing, and discarding, and *stick to them*.
7. Pace yourself.
8. When an area is cleared, decide how the cleared space is to be used.

Step 1. Set a Realistic Goal That You're Willing to Achieve

Most often, people with hoarding OCD feel overwhelmed at the idea of getting rid of their collected stuff and therefore resist doing so. If you feel this way, instead of thinking that you must get rid of most of your possessions, start small and set more realistic goals. A good place to start is to commit to becoming less indecisive and making your living space better organized and less cluttered.

Step 2. Assess Your Hoarding Problem

The following questions (adapted from Frost and Steketee 1998) will help you gain a better understanding of your hoarding problem. You can also write your answers in your journal if you like.

How much of the house is cluttered? Which rooms?

How much discomfort does the problem cause you?

How much discomfort does it cause your family members?

How severe would you say the clutter problem is (very bad, somewhat bad, not too bad)?

What types of items do you save?

For each type of item, what are your reasons for saving it?

Do you have any form of organization for the stuff in your home? How do you decide what item goes where?

How does the problem affect your relationships with family members?

Step 3. Put a Moratorium on All Accumulating

For the duration of time you are working on the self-directed program for hoarding, temporarily suspend accumulating all but the most essential items for your household. This will help you see progress more quickly and enhance your success in gaining control over your hoarding problem.

According to psychologist April Benson (2008), most instances of compulsive shopping arise out of a need or impulse to replace uncomfortable, unwanted internal experiences such as anger, anxiety, depression, or boredom, or in response to stress, loss, or trauma. Shopping can provide a soothing sense of being in control when circumstances in life are out of control. While compulsive shopping is a complex problem with numerous factors contributing to it, the following steps can help you overcome the problem:

1. Identify the key triggers that contribute to your vulnerability to compulsive shopping. These may be situations, thoughts, or emotions.
2. Challenge the faulty beliefs that underlie your compulsive shopping.
3. Learn alternative, healthier means of handling your triggers.
4. Repeatedly practice behaviors other than shopping in response to your triggers.
5. Develop “mindful” shopping skills as an alternative to impulsive shopping.

Step 4. Develop an Organization Plan for Your Home

Using the following worksheet, make a plan for how you intend to use the space in all of the areas of your home. Use the blank rows to add any areas not listed in the worksheet. For each space, write down exactly how it is presently being used. Then estimate approximately what percent of the usable space is presently cluttered. In the fourth column, indicate how you’d like to use each space (for example, to entertain guests, watch TV, or eat meals). In the fifth column, indicate your goal for the amount of clutter allowed in that room. Be sure to include ample areas for storage in your plan.

Organizational Plan

Area of home	How is it presently used?	How cluttered? (% of usable space)	Goal for use	
			Function	% Clutter
Living room				
Kitchen				
Dining room				
Family room				
Master bedroom				
Second bedroom				
Third bedroom				
Hallway				
Closet, master bedroom				
Closet, second bedroom				
Closet, third bedroom				
Closet, hallway				
Bathroom				
Garage				

Step 5. Decide Where to Start

The decision about where to start can be hard. One of the best places to start is in an area where uncluttering will provide a high degree of satisfaction, such as the kitchen table or your entryway. This will make your initial efforts more rewarding. Another way to start is to pick a type of item that you have many of in one small area, such as books, clothing, or types of papers, and work only on that type of item first. Since it's easier to sort and store large groups of similar objects, the job will go faster and provide satisfaction more quickly.

Step 6. Establish Rules for Placing, Storing, and Discarding

Place three empty large boxes in the area you'll work on. Label one box "Store," the next box "Sell" or "Donate," and the third box "Discard." ("Store" items refers to things that you currently use.) One helpful rule for uncluttering is to only handle an item once (Frost and Steketee 1998). This means that once you've touched an item or picked it up, you can't return it to the clutter pile. It *must* be placed in one of the three boxes.

Because discarding causes the most anxiety, you may find it helpful to have a rule for what to discard. We recommend that if you don't have a specific use for the object now (including displaying it) and you don't foresee a specific use for the object in the next six months, discard it. Keep only items that you know for a fact have a distinct function within your home.

To help with the anxiety associated with getting rid of possessions, start by discarding items that provoke the least anxiety. Assign a SUDS rating (0 to 100) to your level of discomfort when you discard items in a specific area. First discard the items that provoke the lowest SUDS scores, say less than 40. Then move to more anxiety-provoking items, with SUDS levels ranging from 40 up to 80. Finally, discard items with a SUDS level higher than 80. If discarding an item is too distressing, place it in the "Store" box. But be sure to find a place to store the "Store" box!

Perhaps you feel paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake. You may feel that you will mistakenly discard something you could use later. Ask yourself, "What's the worst that could happen if I never saw this object again?" Chances are, after some initial discomfort you'll forget you discarded it. It's helpful to make a distinction between what you feel you'd use and what you know for a fact will be used for a distinct purpose within the next six months. Basing your decision on what you feel you may use someday will only perpetuate your hoarding problem; in most cases, "someday" never comes. A helpful change would be to base your decision on the facts only, and to keep this saying in mind: When in doubt, throw it out!

Remember, your goal is to create usable living space, not a museum of past memories. If you have a particular attachment to an item that takes up too much space or that you can't find a place for, consider selling or donating it. Donating it will give you the satisfaction of knowing that someone else can enjoy it as you have. If the item is useless to everyone but you, remember that letting go of it doesn't erase it from memory. The memory will always be there. The clutter resulting from that item (and all the other items) is something you truly don't need.

Step 7. Pace Yourself

Don't overdo it. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Don't wear yourself out. Try the "30-30 system": First, identify a small area that you would like to work on—for instance, the sofa seats, the corner of a room, or the kitchen table. Set a kitchen timer for thirty minutes, and then work on the area for that period of time. At the end of the thirty minutes, do something fun or relaxing for the next thirty minutes. Play games on the computer, cross-stitch, play with your children, or enjoy a cup of coffee and read a magazine.

Then set your timer and continue uncluttering for another thirty minutes. Continue in this way until the area is uncluttered. Your on again, off again time frame need not be 30-30, but any ratio that works well for you. You might unclutter for fifteen minutes then take a five-minute break, unclutter for five minutes and take a five-minute break, or even unclutter for just five minutes before taking a thirty-minute break. Work at it daily, but plan to take a day off every few days so you have a break to look forward to. Reward yourself when you get over a big hurdle—but be sure that the reward doesn't involve obtaining a new possession!

Step 8. When an Area Is Cleared, Decide How the Space Is to Be Used

Once you've cleared an area, use the plan you developed in step 4 to decide the best use for the space. Is it to be used for work? Relaxation? Sleep? Entertainment? Storage? Decoration? Then set up the area for its intended use. If you can't decide how to use it, it's fine to delay the decision until you know how you'd like to use it. But be sure to not clutter the area again! Establish a "no clutter" rule for this space in case you're tempted to clutter the area again, and stick to it!

Keys to Breaking Free from Hoarding

- During each uncluttering session, stay focused on one small area. Don't move into another area until you've completed the area you started. This way, you're more likely to see the positive effects of your efforts.
- If it isn't overly distracting, you can play soothing background music while uncluttering. This can make the job seem to go faster.
- Severe hoarding behavior is associated with a number of neurological and psychiatric disorders in addition to OCD (Damecour and Charron 1998). If you don't make progress with the self-directed program, obtain a thorough evaluation from a qualified neurologist or psychiatrist. Based on the results, a treatment program tailored to your specific hoarding problem can be developed.

UNCLUTTERING WILL HELP YOU MAXIMIZE USABLE LIVING SPACE

Set realistic goals, and then challenge yourself to go a step further each day. Discarding items will cause anxiety, but you'll find that the anxiety and distress will decrease a great deal over time. In the unlikely event that you find you need an item you've discarded, you'll probably discover that it can easily be replaced. This will increase your confidence. As you make progress in overcoming your hoarding, you'll be rewarded with more space where you can enjoy living. You may even be rewarded by knowing that others are now using things you only kept on a pile on the floor.

HELP FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

All decisions about saving, discarding, and organizing are to be made only by the person with the hoarding problem. You will be most helpful if you let your loved one make these decisions. Family members should involve themselves only to the extent that they are invited to do so by the person with the hoarding problem.

You will probably be frustrated at the pace and sometimes find it difficult to understand why it's so hard to discard seemingly meaningless items. Remember that there are many times when your loved one also doesn't understand the mysterious nature of hoarding OCD. Think of it as a battle you're fighting together. Your loved one is on the front lines and you're standing by, ready to provide support when asked to do so. Be ready to help with sorting, calling the thrift store, holding a garage sale, laughing, or crying—but only when called upon. This is a much more difficult task than stepping in and doing the sorting and discarding yourself. However, this way is less likely to cause tensions between you and your loved one that could interfere with slow, steady progress.