



The Horror and Heartbreak of Hoarding – 10 Facts to Know

Hoarding is a mental health condition that’s gaining awareness among the general population thanks to TV shows like A&E’s *Hoarders* and TLC’s *Hoarding: Buried Alive*. We are fascinated, yet repulsed, by the sight of homes overrun by impassable mountains of junk and trash, the sufferers’ stories, and the spectacle of seeing what happens when friends or family try to help the person clear the clutter to regain control of their lives.

Hoarders aren’t simply messy or disorganized—there is a serious psychological component involved that can’t be ignored. So what makes someone a hoarder versus a collector or a “pack rat”? Here are ten facts about hoarding that highlight the differences:

- 1. *Hoarding behavior can range from mild to severe***, with some sufferers developing unusually strong emotional attachments to their possessions, no matter how trivial.
- 2. *Objects collected by hoarders are usually unneeded, and have little or no use or monetary value***. Surprisingly, some compulsively collect items like hair, nail clippings, or leaves.



Photo: A&E’s *Hoarders*



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- 3. *Hoarders are perfectionists and procrastinators***. They don’t want to make a choice that may be wrong, so they delay making decisions about discarding things they think they may need later.
- 4. *Hoarding shares characteristics with other obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) behaviors***. Collecting items reduces anxiety, which manifests itself as a relentless need. When a hoarder’s anxiety builds to an unbearable level, acquiring an item temporarily provides relief and comfort.
- 5. *Stressful life events, especially those involving loss, often trigger or intensify hoarding behaviors***. By holding on to objects, hoarders are comforted and reminded of happier times with beloved people or pets.
- 6. *Most hoarders become particularly stressed at the thought of someone touching or removing their collected objects***. For some people, throwing away any item is so traumatic, they can’t do it even when faced with dire consequences, such as eviction, divorces, loss of children, or death.

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- 7. People who hoard often don't think they have a problem,** and don't understand why family, friends, or neighbors are so upset by their living conditions.
- 8. Some hoarders compulsively collect animals.** The Human Society of the United States estimates that a quarter million animals are "collected" by hoarders each year.



Photo: TLC's *Hoarding: Buried Alive*

- 9. Hoarders are often socially withdrawn and isolated;** however, some people turn to hoarding behavior because they are lonely.
- 10. Hoarding tends to run in families.** According to research by the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at John Hopkins University, 84% of hoarders have a close relative who also exhibits hoarding behaviors. Symptoms often start around age 12, but can begin even earlier in childhood.

There is no easy solution for helping a compulsive hoarder restore his or her home to a livable condition. The behaviors are often so entrenched, significant psychological trauma can result at the suggestion of parting with collected items, so psychological counseling is typically required to help a hoarder cope with the de-cluttering process. Continued therapy can help get to the root of the anxieties that drive the compulsion to hoard, and can increase the chances of long-term success.

If you suspect someone is suffering from a hoarding disorder, contact a qualified mental health professional for advice; if the person's living conditions pose a significant risk to their welfare or the safety of others, contact the appropriate local authorities.

For help with home organization issues, contact us today for more information.


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