



Collecting or Hoarding?

“One man’s garbage is another man’s treasure.” This is a saying that I have heard most of my life. I always believed that it was similar to the saying, “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.” I now have a different interpretation.

Since I joined the Orange County Task Force on Hoarding (formed to create a collaborative effort to help hoarders and to learn how this disorder differs from other related conditions), this once innocuous quote has taken on a whole new meaning. Many of us see traces of hoarding in ourselves. Getting a little disorganized or becoming a bit sentimental with some of our things is a far cry from pathological hoarding, which inhibits health, safety and quality of life. Nonetheless, after each meeting I walk into my home and start looking at what I don’t need and begin making mental notes of what can be donated and what should just be tossed.

Very little is understood about classic hoarders. In many cases it is characterized as an Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder. However, other causes can be severe depression, dementia or physical issues that allowed a bad situation to become an out of control condition. Until recently, hoarding was an issue of City Code Enforcement departments and each city handles Code Enforcement differently. Some can only cite a person for the condition of the outside of their property and don’t deal with the interior, while others address the issue as a whole. In any event, hoarders can be cited, fined or jailed for non-compliance.

Many times a medical emergency happens and the responding agency is so focused on stabilizing the individual that they don’t really look at the environment. So unless the hoarding environment was the direct cause of the medical crisis, nothing is said or done about the home condition. With increased awareness of the issue, this perception is changing.

Case study

A few years ago, prior to understanding the issue of hoarding, I was in the home of a client who was on hospice. Her husband let me into the house and there was just a narrow path from the door to the kitchen and another to the hall that led to the bedrooms. Furniture was piled throughout the living room with dozens of stacks magazines and newspapers taking up every available surface. A birdcage perched atop the refrigerator because there was simply no other place to put it. While the kitchen table had room for two place settings, virtually every other surface in the house had something on it. The home was liveably clean although a long way from really clean. There were no dirty dishes or dirty counters and all the appliances and plumbing were in working order. Classic hoarders often live in an environment without working plumbing and/or major appliances. In some cases, the environment is unsanitary or worse.

Hoarders don’t just save stuff - they accumulate new stuff to such a degree that it interferes with their quality of life and safety. Yet most don’t want to change or, more perhaps more realistically, can’t change. In the past, intervention meant bringing in dumpsters and tossing and organizing a hoarder’s belongings. What we found is that within a few years, the situation is back to being what it was prior to the “intervention” because only the “symptom,” rather than the core of the problem, was treated.

This is due to the fact that hoarders apply emotion to inanimate objects. Hoarders have an emotional attachment to their “stuff” - where we see an empty toilet paper roll, they see a valuable art supply. Hoarders tend to have high levels of anxiety and depression. Surprisingly, most are articulate, intelligent and well-educated. Many have sophisticated reasons for acquiring and saving. They are adept at rationalizing their behavior and yet they deny that they have a problem.

Problem solving

The City of Buena Park has created a collaborative program to address hoarding issues, which involves several city agencies including the Social Worker from the Senior Center. The goal is to problem solve, bring the property up to neighborhood standards and help the hoarder maintain a healthy environment by treating the hoarder and the hoarding holistically.

If you have a friend or a relative who never allows people to come to their home, this may be a major red flag that there is a hoarding issue of some degree. If someone you care about seems to find personal meaning in all of his possessions without regard to need or usefulness of those possessions, consider whether they are at risk of hoarding.

If after reading this, you feel you’d like to make some changes in your living style, here are a few “first steps.” When you buy that new pair of shoes, donate two old pairs to a thrift store within a week. When you purchase a new book, donate the ones you’ve read to your local library. If you have clothes in your closet that don’t fit, put them in with the shoes and donate them to a charity.

You may find that you have a parent who has “over collected.” Many of our parents lived through the Great Depression and fear not having enough. They may not be advanced stage hoarders, but their lives could have more quality and safety with less “stuff” in it. If borderline hoarding is an issue, then it is time to meet with a Geriatric Care Manager who can help your parents address the issue. You wouldn’t leave your children’s wellbeing to chance - don’t leave your parents’.

For more information, call LivHome at (949) 794-9470 to speak with a professional. **HB**