

Definition of Compulsive Hoarding (Wikipedia)

Compulsive hoarding (or pathological hoarding or disposophobia) is the excessive acquisition of possessions (and failure to use or discard them), even if the items are worthless, hazardous, or unsanitary. Compulsive hoarding impairs mobility and interferes with basic activities, including cooking, cleaning, showering, and sleeping. A person who engages in compulsive hoarding is commonly said to be a "pack rat," in reference to that animal's characteristic hoarding. It's not clear whether compulsive hoarding is an isolated disorder or a symptom of another condition such as obsessive-compulsive disorder

Characteristics

There is no clear definition of compulsive hoarding in accepted diagnostic criteria (such as the current DSM), Yet, Frost and Hartl (1996) provide the following defining features:

- the acquisition of and failure to discard a large number of possessions that appear to be useless or
- of limited value
- living spaces sufficiently cluttered so as to preclude activities for which those spaces were designed
- significant distress or impairment in functioning caused by the hoarding
- reluctance or inability to return borrowed items; as boundaries blur, impulsive acquisitiveness could sometimes lead to kleptomania or stealing

In its worst forms, compulsive hoarding can cause fires, unclean conditions (e.g. rat and roach infestations) injuries from tripping on clutter and other health and safety hazards, according to Sanjaya Saxena, MD, director of the Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders Program at the University of California, San Diego.

The hoarder may mistakenly believe that the hoarded items are very valuable, or the hoarder may know that the accumulated items are useless, or may attach a strong personal value to items which they recognize would have little or no value to others. A hoarder of the first kind may show off a cutlery set claiming it to be made of silver and mother-of-pearl, disregarding the fact that the packaging clearly states the cutlery is made of steel and plastic. A hoarder of the second type may have a refrigerator filled with uneaten food items months past their expiration dates, but in some cases would vehemently resist any attempts from relatives to dispose of the unusable food. In other cases the hoarder will recognize the need to clean the refrigerator, but due (in part) to feelings that doing so would be an exercise in futility, and overwhelmed by the similar condition of the rest of their living space, fails to do so.

Levels of Hoarding

Although not commonly used by clinical psychologists, criteria for five levels of hoarding have been set forth by the [National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization \(NSGCD\)](#) entitled the NSGCD Clutter Hoarding Scale. Using the perspective of a [professional organizer](#), this scale distinguishes five levels of hoarding with Level I (Roman numeral one) being the least severe and Level V (Roman numeral 5) being the worst. Within each level there are four specific categories which define the severity of clutter and hoarding potential:

- Structure and zoning;
- Pets and rodents;
- Household functions; and
- Sanitation and cleanliness.

Level I Hoarder

Household is considered standard. No special knowledge in working with the Chronically Disorganized is necessary.

Level II Hoarder

Household requires professional organizers or related professionals to have additional knowledge and understanding of Chronic Disorganization.

Level III Hoarder

Household may require services in addition to those a professional organizer and related professional can provide. Professional organizers and related professionals working with Level III households should have significant training in Chronic Disorganization and have developed a helpful community network of resources, especially mental health providers.

Level IV Hoarder

Household needs the help of a professional organizer and a coordinated team of service providers. Psychological, medical issues or financial hardships are generally involved. Resources will be necessary to bring a household to a functional level. These services may include pest control services, "crime scene cleaners," financial counseling and licensed contractors and handy persons.

Level V Hoarder

Household will require intervention from a wide range of agencies. Professional organizers should not venture directly into working solo with this type of household. The Level V household may be under the care of a conservator or be an inherited estate of a mentally ill individual. Assistance is needed from many sources. A team needs to be assembled. Members of the team should be identified before beginning additional work. These members may include social services and psychological/mental health representative (not applicable if inherited estate), conservator/trustee, building and zoning, fire and safety, landlord, legal aid and/or legal representatives. A written strategy needs to be outlined and contractual agreements made before proceeding.

20 QUESTIONS

Assessment for Compulsive Hoarding & Cluttering

1. Are some living areas in your home cluttered?..... Y/N
2. Do you have trouble controlling urges to acquire things? Y/N
3. Does the clutter in your home prevent you from using some of your living space? Y/N
4. Do you have trouble controlling your urges to save things? Y/N
5. Do you have trouble walking through areas of your house because of clutter? Y/N
6. Do you have trouble throwing away or discarding things? Y/N
7. Do you experience distress throwing away or discarding possessions? Y/N
8. Do you feel distressed or uncomfortable when you can not acquire something you want? Y/N
9. Does the clutter in your home interfere with your social, work or everyday functioning? Y/N
10. Do you have strong urges to buy or acquire free things for which you have no immediate use? Y/N
11. Does the clutter in your home causes you distress? Y/N
12. Do you have strong urges to save things you know you may never use? Y/N
13. Do you feel upset / distressed about your acquiring habits? Y/N
14. Do you feel unable to control the clutter in your home? Y/N
15. Has compulsive buying resulted in financial difficulties? Y/N
16. Do you often avoid trying to discard possessions because it is too stressful or time consuming? ... Y/N
17. Do you often decide to keep things you do not need and have little space for? Y/N
18. Does the clutter in your home prevent you from inviting people to visit? Y/N
19. Do you often buy or acquire for free things for which you have no immediate use or need? Y/N
20. Do you often feel unable to discard a possession or possessions you would like to get rid of? Y/N

Most hoarders will answer "yes" to at least 7 of these questions.

Why do people hoard/clutter?

- Fear of letting go of the past (things hold memories/meaning)
- Fear of facing the future
- Fear of abandoning things which feel like abandoning self/others
- Tenuous sense of self
- A defense against getting close to others
- Scarcity mentality—might need this later
- An indirect cry for help/attention
- A reaction to traumatic loss
- A byproduct of shopping/shoplifting behavior
- Learned behavior
- Related to obsessive-compulsive disorder, perfectionism, procrastination

Consequences of hoarding/cluttering

- Loss of time
- Loss of space
- Loss of relationships
- Loss of health
- Loss of self-esteem
- Embarrassment of others
- Loss of focus
- Loss of reputation
- Loss of property—due to eviction
- Other legal issues
- Loss of finances

Help for hoarding/cluttering

- Read books
- Get counseling
- Medications
- Support groups
- Hire personal organizer
- Enlist family/friends' help
- Avoid places where one might accumulate more things
- Find new hobbies
- Educate self on health hazards/negative consequences
- Watch educational TV shows on hoarding