

CLUTTER OR SOMETHING MORE SERIOUS

A lot of us like to save important papers; and items with nostalgic value. Our homes may be cluttered with knick-knacks, souvenirs from travel, photos of our kids and grandkids, and clothes that are one size too big or small. We mean to get the photos into albums or discard last Sunday's newspaper. On some days our home may seem cluttered, but perfectly functional. We are capable of organizing and throwing away unneeded or unwanted items. Having a mess is different from compulsive hoarding.

Hoarders don't just save; they continue to acquire additional objects (or animals) to a degree where it interferes with their health and safety. We are all familiar with the headlines reporting a "reclusive person trapped by their own accumulations in rooms made unlivable by floor to ceiling heaps of newspapers, books and saved objects from twist ties to grand pianos." (N.Y. Times 12/31/03) These persons can no longer use the living spaces for their intended purpose. For the elderly, decades of hoarding may finally catch the attention of family, neighbors or public health officials. Years of compulsively filling up the house often results in plumbing or appliances that are unusable; resulting in an increased risk of fire, self-neglect, accidents (falling) and health problems due to unsanitary conditions.

Skeketee and Frost, researchers at Boston University and Smith College respectively, found that hoarding is a debilitating disorder, often associated with high levels of anxiety, depression and perfectionism. In the elderly, it is seen primarily in unmarried or divorced women who tend to be articulate and well-educated and who may have relatives who hoard. Unlike people with OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder), hoarders do not seem to be distressed by their behavior.

Hoarders tend to have little insight into their problematic behavior. Traditional treatment with medications and psychotherapy tends to be ineffective. Some cities and towns, like Newton, have developed a multi-disciplinary Hoarding Task Force. Research has shown that hoarders find comfort in their things. "I've had people tell me, 'If I throw too much away, there'll be nothing left of me', said Frost. Thus, in approaching a hoarder, one can't just throw things away. First the hoarder needs to tell their story, to be understood, and involved in any plan for change. To be effective, treatment requires modifying faulty beliefs, helping with organization, and examining the meaning of these behaviors.

For additional information or assistance: Newton Hoarder's Task Force, 617-796-1420; www.clutterersanonymous.net (meetings in Cambridge twice a month); or call the Department of Senior Services (617-796-1660) and ask for Ana or Kathy.