

Obsessive Compulsive Foundation, Inc.

Compulsive Hoarding Website

How Compulsive Hoarding Affects Families

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Living with someone who compulsively hoards can often be as stressful of a lifestyle as it is to actually be a compulsive hoarder. Unlike people with other OC Spectrum Disorders, hoarders are essentially unable to hide their symptomatology from others, especially family members who live in the same house. This can often make all aspects of living difficult for everyone involved and cause more extreme friction than compared to families of a person living with another OC Spectrum Disorder.

Clutter is one of the biggest contributors to family tension with regards to homes with hoarders. The loss of or elimination of functional living space as the result of clutter is one of the biggest bones of contention for families who live with hoarders. Having functional living space means that you are able to use your furniture, appliances, countertops, etc., in their intended functional manner. Living spaces filled with clutter are not functional.

Obviously, this lack of functional living space makes it impossible for families to be able to enjoy their own homes. Decreased or eliminated functional living space may mean that families are not able to use their kitchens to cook food; and may, therefore, be dependent on ordering take out regularly. This can often lead to increase financial strain and obesity, because they are spending more money and taking in more calories than they would if they were grocery shopping and cooking.

Often, families decide to acquire additional storage facilities (chests, lockers, garages, sheds, etc.) with the hope of regaining some functional living space. Ironically, what usually happens is that in the beginning those facilities are useful; but they too eventually become overrun with clutter and no longer serve their intended function.

The issues brought up so far typically result in family members feeling frustrated, overwhelmed and resentful. However, there are other effects of compulsive hoarding that can actually affect the safety and well-being of families. For instance, compulsive hoarders and their families often experience headaches, respiratory problems (asthma, etc.) and allergies, all due to having excessive clutter.

As clutter develops and is maintained, it becomes impossible to remove the accumulated dust from the spaces effected primarily because people are not able to vacuum or dust their homes, sometimes for years. Additionally, the spilling of liquids, such as, soda, juice and water are often not cleaned up and cause mildew or fungus. Combined with the high levels of dust being inhaled, this mildew and fungus can significantly complicate the health of the family of the compulsive hoarder.

Excess clutter can also cause significant safety issues. In fact, there are several safety issues that families of hoarders face every single day. First, it is fairly common to have such excessive clutter that pathways need to be constructed through the clutter in order to navigate through the home. It is also commonplace for these pathways to become obstructed by fallen clutter or new clutter, which can result in people tripping and injuring themselves. Also, if clutter is on stairwells, there is a significant risk of slipping and falling downstairs.

Clutter also causes fire hazards, including the inability to leave the home quickly in case of fire or other emergencies, the inability to locate a fire extinguisher when needed and blocked doorways. There are also fire safety issues with not being able to leave the home swiftly in the case of a fire, not being able to locate a fire extinguisher quickly and doorways blocked with clutter.

In addition, the structural integrity of the floors can be compromised by the weight of excessive clutter. Items that are commonly hoarded are written materials, including newspapers and magazines. Although a single newspaper or magazine may weigh very little, hundreds or thousands of them can weigh several hundred pounds. Other items

that are compulsively saved include clothing, boxes, additional appliances (extra televisions, stereos, etc.) and even heavy machinery. The combined weight of all the clutter plus the potential water damage from spilled liquids, broken and/or clogged pipes and appliances can put a tremendous amount of pressure on floorboards and can cause them to decay.

There are additional dangers in the homes that have pets. Sometimes cats are not able to find or enter litter boxes, or dogs are unable to "hold it" long enough for owners to maneuver through clutter. Both situations result in the animals urinating or defecating inside the home, sometimes unbeknownst to the family. This combined with the mildew and possible fungus that results from spilled liquids and possibly decaying floorboards can often attract rats, cockroaches and other uninvited guests.

Certainly, the health and safety concerns associated with clutter can have tremendous effects on families. Embarrassment, frustration, resentment and hopelessness are just some of the emotions that family members feel with regards to hoarders. Often, they feel as though their home is not really their home. They are ashamed of the clutter, but often have little control over cleaning it and are essentially forced to live amidst chaos. Commonly, family members will get so frustrated with clutter that they will attempt to clean or organize without the consent of the hoarder, which invariably results in arguments and fights.

Children are often too embarrassed to have friends come over, or are not allowed to because of the hoarder's embarrassment. This can often lead to increased social isolation and resentment of the hoarder. Spouses often consider divorce or separation because of the extreme impairment in functioning.

Spouses often wonder what their responsibilities are to the children involved. The children feel torn between the parent who is the hoarder, and the parent who is not. They tend to keep the hoarding a family secret but feel depressed and angry and do not know what to do with their emotions. If the non-hoarding parent decides to ask for a divorce, a custody battle may ensue. Often pictures of the home are taken to court to convince the court that the home environment is not suitable for bringing up a child. The sufferer of hoarding is not only embarrassed but feels tremendous resentment which usually interferes with bringing up the child jointly.

Sometimes, a neighbor who becomes aware of the home situation may call child protective services. Under these circumstances, an investigation may be started, resulting in the possible removal of the children from the home unless one of the parents makes alternative living arrangements. Whether the child lives in clutter or is removed from the home, the end result is devastating. Unfortunately given all the negative consequences of living in clutter, the hoarder is usually very reluctant to seek treatment although effective treatment strategies are available.

The following are some suggestions for family members who are trying to persuade their reluctant hoarder to enter treatment: You must make sure to reassure your family member that those clinicians who are familiar with the problem are not going to go into the house and start throwing things out. They are not going to take control of the possessions. Well-trained clinicians will teach a method and work side by side with your loved one. If the compulsive hoarder does not want the therapist to go into the house initially, that is okay. It is a very gradual process. If your family member does not want to even go for an initial consultation visit, it is suggested you go to the therapist several times to learn how to get him or her into treatment. There is hope so take advantage of it.