

HOARDING

TASK FORCE

Of Washtenaw County

Help for hoarding and clutter issues

734-340-5813

c/o Synod Community Services

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How Friends and Family Members Can Help a Loved One With Hoarding Behaviors:

In order to help your loved ones, it is important to understand the problems they face. Many hoarders struggle with:

- **Information-processing deficits:** including deficits in decision making, deficits in organizational skills and difficulties with memory functions;
- **Problems in forming emotional attachments:** Compulsive hoarders often believe that their belongings are a part of them, so discarding an item is like discarding a part of themselves.
- **Behavioral Avoidance:** The net result of poor decision making skills and the need for perfection. Compulsive hoarders often avoid not only the decision to discard the object, but also avoid the decision of what to do with the object once they have it
- **erroneous beliefs about the nature of possessions:** such as beliefs about the necessity of maintaining control over possessions, beliefs about responsibility for possessions, and beliefs about the necessity of perfection.
- **Difficulty resisting the urge to acquire objects:** For many people with hoarding problems, the urge to acquire things can be very strong, almost irresistible. Some people may feel the need to buy things to complete a collection or to pick up free things.

You can be an essential asset to your loved one in addition to their work with a therapist that is specially trained to work with compulsive hoarding problems. Here are some ways that you can help your family member as a "Coach":

- Help the person maintain focus on the task at hand. People with hoarding problems often find themselves easily distracted, especially when they are trying to reduce clutter, make decisions about possessions, or resist the urge to acquire things. Often the coach can be very helpful by politely reminding the person of what they are supposed to be doing now.
- Provide emotional support. Acting like a taskmaster or drill sergeant often makes people more anxious or angry and interferes with their ability to learn new approaches. They feel even more isolated and misunderstood. It can be helpful to be empathetic by using statements like: "I can see how hard this is for you" or "I understand that you have mixed feelings about whether to tackle this clutter."
- Help the person make decisions, but DO NOT make the decisions for them. It can be helpful during decision making to ask questions as prompts, rather than telling them what to do. Helpful questions include: "Is it useful?" "Do you need it?" "Can you do without it?" "When is the last time you used this?" "Do you have a plan to use this in the near future?"
- Be a cheerleader! It is easy to get overwhelmed when dealing with hoarding and often helpful to hear someone else notice your hard work, celebrates even small amounts of

discarding and points out positive differences (no matter how small) that are noticed in the home.

- Help with Hauling: Coaches can be very helpful by helping to remove items from the home, but the person with the hoarding problem makes the decisions and remains fully in charge of the process.
- Assist on shopping trips to help support the person in non-acquiring of new items behaviors.

Well meaning family members also use strategies that are not helpful. Here are some **Don't s**:

- Don't argue with the person about what to get rid of and what to acquire. Long debates about usefulness only produce negative reactions that do not help in the clearing process. If you feel in conflict, take a break, relax, and remind yourself how difficult this is for your loved one.
- Don't take over decision making: It would be easier and faster if the coaches took over, but making the decisions and hauling away the clutter does not teach the person how to handle this problem. The clutter will just build up again.
- Don't touch or move anything without permission. Doing this can increase anxiety and cause the trust between you and your loved one, only making the process more difficult.
- Don't tell the person how they should feel: It can be very hard to understand why someone feels so emotional about getting rid of what looks like trash to you or fearful about getting rid of something that is clearly useless, but these feelings developed for reasons even the person may not understand. Be as patient as you can.
- Don't work beyond your own tolerance level. To be a helpful coach, you have to take care of yourself first and then help your friend or family member. Feel free to set limits on how long and how much work you want to do. Give yourself credit for your help- helping someone with hoarding is hard work!

(Steketee & Frost, 2007)

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, 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.

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