

Looking at Compulsive Acquiring & Hoarding from a Peer Support Perspective

Halina Shannan

Peer Supporter and Trainer

Mental Health Support Project – The Link

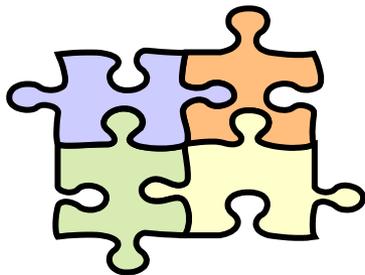
Smiths Falls, ON

October 2017



MHSP – The Link

The Link is a consumer run drop in centre. We promote wellness and healthy living in a safe and respectful environment. There are a lot of choices for activities both recreational and educational. Anyone can join. No referrals are required, no diagnosis and no wait lists. We offer peer support groups and one on one support.



The object of this workshop is to look at options based in peer support values that best support a peer who is having issues with hoarding behaviour and how to offer support for their family and friends.

There are several treatment methods offered for hoarding behaviour but my interest here is to just provide some basic background information and mainly to look at supports that can be helpful both to the person with hoarding behaviour and to their families.

As anyone who has tried to provide support around this issue knows, it can be difficult and frustrating to assist and to remain patient with a situation that seems so unfixable. There is a need to support, inform and to listen to family members. There is often a lot of negative judgement interfering with supporting someone.

Becoming aware of the extent of the difficulties experienced with hoarding behaviour allows peers to better able to support someone and to also keep themselves safe and well.

But first let's look at some definitions of hoarding behaviour from a variety of sources:

An uncontrollable acquiring of items whether they are seen as needed or useful. Having so many things that they get in your way, make your space unusable and/or create health and safety concerns for yourself and others.

The excessive accumulation of items, regardless of actual value. These could be newspapers, clothes, expired food items, old containers or broken items that might become "useful" in the future. (We will not be looking at animal hoarding at this time.)

A persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions. Having an intense attachments to things; just the thought of getting rid of them causes extreme distress.

Living spaces can become congested, unusable and unsafe. Piles of belongings can become hazards that can fall and injure or trap someone.

Mold can accumulate on dishes, garbage, sinks or food items and present a health risk.

Space can become infested with rodents and other “critters”.

Left for a long time damage can occur to the structure of the building. As you look at the following it is a chance to identify your own judgements and to become aware how you may need to deal with your own attitudes.



These photos show the effects of hoarding. There are health and safety issues, the space is unusable and the items themselves are also at risk of being lost and damaged. Excessive acquiring can lead to financial risks including the loss of home, etc. Fines might be levied against the homeowner or tenant until the space is cleared, especially for fire risk. Eviction can be a risk as well.



This room is no longer functional as a kitchen. It is not safe and there are likely many health issues as well. Trying to walk through this space is risky too; a bad fall could result. There are also many risks for any pets in the home. Pointing out the risk to pets can be a motivating factor in starting the process.



There can be serious health and safety concerns for the person living with a hoarding disorder, for their family and quite possibly for any person who might help with cleanup.

As mentioned there can be mold, rodent feces, spoiled food, animal feces, excessive ammonia fumes from cat urine, dead critters, piles of belongings that can fall down, dangerous electrical connections, piles of debris covering broken glass or other hazards, and structure damage happening to the home. There is a strong element of shame whether with family or friends. It can be hard to remain respectful .



There is no income level that is associated with hoarding, it can affect both rich and poor. It is more prevalent than we know.

In the home of two very wealthy brothers there were 170 tons of debris that had to be cleared from their large home.

Only 3 rooms of their 28 room mansion were somewhat useable. Among all the piles there were also 14 grand pianos.

Police were called when no one had heard from the brothers in days. It took them 18 days to find the bodies in the mess.

Piles had fallen and trapped the one brother who then died, the other brother died a little later because he was no longer being looked after by his trapped brother.

Peer Support:

There are a number of things that peers can do to support someone coping with hoarding behaviour.

Not everyone who hoards is interested in fixing things. Not all recognize that there is a problem. Lack of awareness of the degree of mess is part of the issue.

There is no point arguing with the person, experience shows this is more likely to entrench them in their behaviour. However for family members this has often ended up being the approach taken. It is very frustrating to see someone's living situation deteriorate.

It can be hard to maintain a respectful and understanding attitude. Peer support is good for increasing awareness of the problem for both the person and their family or friends.

What can be helpful is learning to understand the complicated nature of hoarding behaviour. There are no quick fixes. It is a serious “disorder” that can reduce the quality of life and lead to financial risk and relationship ruptures.

It is best never to get talked into going in and throwing a person’s stuff out.

This process is very distressing for the person who values what they have, even if you see it as junk.

There seems to be no lasting effect of a forced clean up. People can feel that they have lost control of their space and belongings and feel that they can’t trust anyone to help. Hoarding will resume and resentments will build up.

1 Listen & understand:

Any support you can offer requires respectfully discussing the issue with the person and outlining some helpful simple things to do that can be fairly non intrusive to start. It is essential to start by building trust.

2. Safety: If someone requests or needs help with managing their space a good beginning step is to ask if you can use masking tape to indicate paths through the belongings. This creates safer paths for access to rooms in the home. Decisions to sort items need not be made at this time. This is just a start towards increasing safety and can help to build trust with the supporter.

3. Motivation: Beginning discussions around the persons hopes and wishes in accessing their space more is also a good way to increase motivation. Perhaps they would like family members to visit occasionally . Very often families have given up coming by as the space is so congested. These conversations can be the start of someone considering that there might be some value in the hard work of sorting their belongings.

Sometimes the need to clean up presents as a crisis situation as when a landlord or social worker identifies health and safety risks in the home. This presents a challenge as the impulse is to go in and start the sorting process without adequately consulting the person whose living space this is.

Forcing someone to clear their space is not a supportive thing to do. It creates a great deal of stress, and does not provide any long term solution. There are some more helpful ways to deal with this crisis situation.

For instance you might have someone speak to the fire department or landlord and explain that some measures will be started, supports will be provided and that safety issues will be paramount. Changes will be made. This might extend any timelines given by authorities and provide a chance to work with the person.

One way of starting this process is to use a hula hoop to cover a small area of a room and asking the person if they can start sorting in this small space to begin with and that is all at one time. They are in charge, but support can be offered if wanted.

Sorting can involve having a pile of “to keep” “to donate or chuck” and a pile of “don’t know.” This can be a more manageable way to comply with a health and safety risk.

Support can also include offering to take things away to donate or chuck. The emotional support of a group can be important in this process.

Looking at some unhelpful beliefs of the person can also open a discussion. Some of these beliefs are very strong and intense. A person might feel that there is risk associated with getting rid of things: “I might need this” at some time; “I might fix this and sell it” at some time; “what if I regret throwing something out, I might make a mistake. I can’t risk that.” There is often a very emotional attachment to things.

Looking at these points is helpful in understanding where a person is at and the extent of their concerns in dealing with the problem. It opens the possibility of increasing awareness of the situation on all parties involved. And offers venues to support.

Another issue to deal with can be complete avoidance, as sorting and clearing causes such distressing feelings and can be so overwhelming. It can seem daunting.

As mentioned, clearing others stuff is extremely distressing for the hoarder. This is not a preferred option although there are circumstances where this might become necessary – i.e. health and safety issues, fire risk, local bylaws, rodents, refusal of hospital to send patient home until home is safe and clean. Even then this needs to be Cautiously and respectfully done. It is unlikely to be a permanent fix; the piles of stuff usually accumulate once again and the process will be extremely distressing for the person.



Our best approach as peers is to be available to listen and to support the person.

Be a motivational cheerleader, encourage small steps, become informed, be patient, don't throw things out, be respectful.

Help to organize Peer groups. Support for the person and for their families. Don't tell the person how they should feel. They can be experiencing shame, fear, loss of control, being overwhelmed, angry, resentful.

Help the person to focus on the task. Provide emotional support, do not make decisions for the person, help with hauling if possible, don't argue. Don't move things without permission.

As a beginning step encourage sorting small areas at a time – try marking off a path through the space to make for safer passing. Keep the path clear.

Peer supporter's safety:

If you will be supporting someone with hoarding behaviour it is vital that you keep yourself safe.

Identify your boundaries of what you are willing to do, be aware of safety hazards: moulds, smells, rodent feces, ammonia from pet urine, broken items, falling items. Have equipment that you need – masks, gloves, good shoes, bags, boxes and anything else you feel necessary. Do not enter a space where you feel unsafe.

Respect your own distress and consider limiting the time you have to assist the person. For family members patience may be at a premium as a history of this behaviour can be very frustrating.

Don't work beyond your own tolerance level.

If you have a partner who has hoarding behaviour it is important to clearly state your boundaries and identify your space that you need kept clear.

Fighting usually makes it worse and causes resistance in the behaviour. State your needs calmly and firmly and give a reasonable timeline for your parts of the space to be respected.

Talk about acquiring, how to slow it down; encourage person to get help. Without it the situation tends to get worse, it does not resolve itself.

Know local recycling depots, second hand stores, reuse stores, charity organizations to help with sorting.

Quotes from people who have hoarding behaviour.

“ I seem to get overwhelmed. Things just pile up. I don't intend to keep things but I don't get around to getting rid of them. At least two rooms in my house are unusable, piled several feet high. Clearing them seems impossible. I just can't carry that much stuff down the stairs or out of the house.

I keep adding to the mess because I don't know what to do with the new stuff. I need to stop getting more, but getting things makes me feel good . I've tried getting rid of a bag at a time, but it is such a big job that I get stuck. I hate making the decisions to keep or chuck things, it's painful.”

The insights gained from listening to a person are key to finding areas to discuss, to help raise awareness and to find possible reasons to stimulate motivation.

Getting a person ready to deal with their stuff is a very long process involving understanding the perceived value of the items, what they represent to the person, and getting to control the new stuff coming into the space and motivation. This does require professional treatment.

Learning to understand the complicated relationship that people with hoarding behaviour have towards their belongings or other items that they keep is vital in becoming able to support them.

Frequently much needed support needs to be provided to family members and friends. Hoarding behaviour can often cause painful issues in families.

There may be long standing arguments and ruptures in relationships that make dealing with this behaviour very difficult. Often a family member is not a good fit as a supporter because of the complicated history they may have on this topic.

Issues often arise when family members become upset at the condition of a loved ones space and want to see change. Most people are impatient with the rate of accomplishing any change at all and can become very frustrated. Resentments are felt and intrude on relationships.

It bears repeating that without an appreciation of the complicated relationship that the person has with their belongings it is hard to maintain patience with the situation. Learning to understand the difficulties in overcoming this behaviour is vital. A person who hoards cannot be successfully forced to clean up despite the urging of family or friends.

Not all people who hoard recognize that there is a problem. This also causes conflict in a family.

Look into local programs at mental health facilities to treat people with hoarding behaviour.

Making these changes is a long process, it can take 2 years before the person might be ready to begin sorting.

Help the person to consider accessing the help available and support them in starting this process.

Patience, education, understanding, respect and everyone's safety are paramount.



More quotes:

“ I will buy things on sale, lots and lots of them, more than I need and chances are the food items I buy will expire before I can use them. I can't stop this. I also buy clothes – on line, on sale or at second hand shops. I cannot wear them all, most just settle onto the floor where they stay.

I spend a lot of money, I can't afford to keep this up, but I can't stop either. It's a problem for my husband and children. Buying online has become a real problem for me, because I can do it at anytime, especially when I can't sleep.”

“I'm not really wanting to stop but I see it's a problem for my family. It's also expensive.”

These quotes show opportunities for supporters to ask questions, learn more and to ask the person how they feel and what they might want done, or not.

“I don’t want anyone coming to the house, my family won’t come because it’s too bad for them. They try to give me ultimatums. It doesn’t work. I feel sad, I miss them. The shame is bad. But I can’t change.”

“I don’t want to be manipulated.”



“I have a lot of shame when I get new things. I hide them from my partner. He is usually amazingly patient with this behaviour, but it is getting crowded in the house and I spend a lot of money. I don't know another way that helps my anxiety and also feels good – for awhile at least.”

“This has become my dirty little secret. From the outside my home looks ok. Nobody gets in.”

“I'm getting in debt, it's frightening; I'm out of control.”



“If I can’t find something in my house, I just buy another one. It’s too hard to go through my stuff looking.”

“ I don’t think this is as bad as my family thinks. It’s my life, my stuff and I don’t want anyone interfering.”

“It’s too overwhelming to even start. I want a bigger space, then it could be better.”

“I guess I’m paying rent on space I can’t use. I don’t see what choice do I have.”



For a peer supporter these quotes offer much to start a conversation with. They are openings to see the situation from different viewpoints.

In conclusion there is much to learn about hoarding behaviour. Informed, respectful and encouraging peer support is a vital part of dealing with this behaviour; whether it is one on one or in groups; for the individual and/or for their families. Finding professional resources is also necessary. Peer support is an important and fundamental contribution to recovery. There are many resources in books and online.

“Compulsive Hoarding & the Meaning of Things.” R Frost, G Steketee

“Buried in Treasure.” D Tolin, R Frost, G Steketee

Mayo Clinic/Hoarding.