

Compulsive hoarding

Compulsive hoarding is a type of behaviour characterized by the excessive acquisition of and inability or unwillingness to discard large quantities of objects that cover the living areas of the home and cause significant distress.

It is not clear whether compulsive hoarding is a separate disorder or a symptom of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Prevalence rates have been estimated at 2-5% in adults, though the condition typically manifests in childhood with symptoms worsening in advanced age.

Symptoms typically involve sufferers holding onto items that most people would not consider useful or valuable, for example: junk mail, old catalogues and newspapers, old clothes, broken items and rubbish.

Patients' homes eventually become so cluttered that many parts are inaccessible and can no longer be used for their intended purpose, for example: beds that cannot be slept in, kitchens that cannot be used for food preparation.

Hygiene is a particular problem: refrigerators filled with rotting food and filthy bathrooms and showers and sinks filled with items which can no longer be used for washing. In extreme cases, piles of human and/or faeces as well as bags of dirty nappies hoarded over the years also collect in areas of the home.

Some sufferers also hoard animals which they cannot care for properly, often leading to dead pets found under the piles of rubbish.

The clutter causes significant distress to sufferers who do not allow visitors, including family and friends, or repair and maintenance professionals because they are embarrassed by the mess. People suffering from compulsive hoarding may also keep the curtains drawn at all times to avoid people seeing into their homes.

Some of the risks associated with compulsive hoarding include sufferers' homes becoming a fire hazard or a centre for rat and cockroach infestation which may lead to eviction, as well as a serious danger of falling and injury.

Diogenes syndrome is a similar disorder, combining the compulsive hoarding of rubbish with by extreme self-neglect, domestic squalor, social withdrawal, apathy and lack of shame. Diogenes syndrome is usually caused as a reaction to stress experienced by the patient.

Dealing with diagnosed patients can be extremely difficult, because many of them deny their poor conditions and refuse to accept treatment. Patients must be treated in a way in which they can learn to trust the health care professionals.

Results after hospitalization tend to be poor. Research on the mortality rate during hospitalization has shown that approximately half the patients die while in the hospital.

A quarter of the patients are sent back home, while the other quarter is placed in long time care.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is often used for treating patients for compulsive hoarding. This kind of treatment usually involves exposure and response to situations that cause anxiety and restructuring of beliefs related to hoarding.