

65 Ways To Start the Conversation About Hoarding

by Catherine MacDonald, author of *How to Help a Hoarder*

Introduction:

Having a family member or close friend who hoards is a tough thing to deal with. Most people experience so many conflicting emotions about their Loved One Who Hoards (I'll call this person the LOWH for short). You may feel a combination of any or all of these emotions: fear, worry, guilt, shame, anger, sadness and frustration. This is completely, absolutely normal.

Dealing with your LOWH may very well be a lifelong process. You may have already been through the experience of spending days and weeks cleaning out the hoarded home for your loved one, only to see it return to just as bad or worse than ever within a few short months. Most LOWHs are legally competent, which means that it is very difficult to force them to change the hoarding situation. Experts agree that the hoarding behavior can only truly change when the LOWH wants it to change. Until the LOWH truly commits to change, everything else we as friends and family members can do are simply harm reduction initiatives.

That said, starting the conversation about hoarding with the LOWH is a critical first step to evaluating the hoarding situation and determining how best we can offer help. This report is dedicated to helping you find the best way to approach the situation for you, your family, and your loved one who hoards.

This free report is a work in progress, and I welcome your feedback, ideas and experiences. Please write to me at catherine@howtohelpahoarder.com .

Approach the loved one who hoards, and the issue of hoarding, with respect and empathy:

Approaching your LOWH is really hard! Friends and families of hoarders can often -- quite naturally -- have very strong emotions of fear, worry, guilt, shame, anger, sadness and frustration about the hoarding behavior and the LOWH. However, if you approach the situation and the LOWH with sensitivity and empathy, you may be able to avoid some defensiveness and resistance to change.

1. Talk about the stuff itself and what it represents to the LOWH, as well as inviting the hoarder to acknowledge how the stuff is getting in the way of his or her life. Respect the LOWH's autonomy. Remember, most likely you are dealing with an adult who has freedom of choice about his or her own possessions.
2. Try to engage your loved one in a discussion (rather than an argument) about the home and his or her behavior. Ask your loved one what he or she wants to do, rather than just telling him or her what you want. Don't argue. The harder you argue, the more the person is likely to argue back.
3. Talk about the hoarded stuff, but try to avoid emotionally loaded words like junk, clutter, trash or garbage.
4. Match the person's language. Listen for the individual's manner of referring to his/her possessions (e.g., "my things", "my collections") and use the same language (i.e., "your things", "your collections").
5. Ask: What do you think you would like to do about the volume of things in the home?
6. Ask: How do you suggest we proceed?
7. Ask, in a spirit of respect and curiosity: What makes this or that item important to you?

8. Perhaps the kitchen is cluttered to the point that it cannot be used. Observe this and ask the LOWH whether they are able to cook or would like to cook.
9. Perhaps the dining room table is too cluttered to use for eating. Gently point this out and ask whether the LOWH would like to be able to eat at the table.
10. Perhaps the sofas are piled up and can't be used. Ask the LOWH whether they would like to be able to have friends or family in to visit and sit with them to chat.
11. Genuinely praise the small steps that the hoarder takes on his or her own.
12. Show empathy. Showing empathy doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with everything the person says. But it does mean you are willing to listen and to try to see things from the other person's perspective.
13. Help the LOWH to recognize that her actions are inconsistent with her greater goals or values. Ask the person about her goals and values. What's really important to you in life? How would you like your life to be five years from now? What are your hopes and goals in life?
14. Discuss whether or not the person's acquiring or difficulty organizing or getting rid of things fit with those goals and values. This is most effective if you ask, rather than tell. How does the condition of your home fit with your desire to be a good grandmother? You've told me that friendships are very important to you; how well can you pursue that goal, given the way things are right now?

15. Highlight strengths. All people have strengths, positive aspects of themselves, their behavior, or even their homes. A friend or family member's ability to notice these strengths help pave the way for resolving the hoarding problem (e.g., I see that you can easily access your bathroom sink and shower. Or, I can see how much you care about your cat.)

Address safety issues:

16. Point out safety issues and suggest very focused clutter clearing to eliminate the problem.

17. Are there combustible materials near stove, radiators, heating vents, electrical outlets, extension cords or lamps? Suggest clearing the areas immediately around these fire risks.

18. Are exits blocked? Discuss clearing room in case emergency personnel need to enter the home or in case the LOWH needs to exit the home in a fire or other emergency.

19. Is the clutter causing a risk of falls? You can talk about the cluttered pathways, which are particularly risky for elderly people and anyone who uses a cane or a walker.

20. If there are high piles, someone could actually be injured from falling items.

21. Discuss any home maintenance issues such as plumbing issues (many hoarders have out-of-order toilets or other plumbing problems), loss of heating or cooling systems, lack of refrigeration, or non-working smoke alarms.

22. Are there signs of structural damage from the excess weight of large amounts of clutter? You could raise this issue with the LOWH.

23. If the LOWH rents, there may be a very real risk of eviction and homelessness. You could raise this issue with him or her.

Articles to Share:

24. The Hoarding Syndrome -- When Clutter Goes Out of Control (Reader's Digest): <http://www.rd.com/living-healthy/the-hoarding-syndrome--when-clutter-goes-out-of-control/article34091.html>

25. Buried Alive:
http://www.boston.com/news/globe/health_science/articles/2007/04/02/buried_alive/?page=1

Books to Share:

26. *Buried in Treasures: Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding* by David F. Tolin.

27. *Clutter Busting* by Brooks Palmer.

Websites To Share:

28. FlyLady.com : Some people find this an excellent motivator to start dealing with the clutter (<http://www.flylady.com>).

29. Squalor Survivors : Hoarders tell their own stories of the challenges of and recovery from hoarding (<http://squalorsurvivors.com>).

30. Clutter Busting Blog : Brooks Palmer, author of the excellent book *Clutter Busting* (see above) blogs about his Clutter Busting experiences.

31. Messies Anonymous: Another popular self-help approach for people who have clutter and mess issues (<http://www.messies.com/>).

32. Obsessive Compulsive Organization Hoarding Website: <http://www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding/> .

Literature to Print and Share:

33. Clutter Hoarding Scale:
http://www.nsgcd.org/resources/clutterhoardingscale/nsgcd_clutterhoardingscale.pdf

34. What to Do When All the Stuff You're Keeping Starts to Keep You: <http://www.ccchd.com/pdfs/hoarding.pdf>

35. Fact Sheet -- Are You Chronically Disorganized?:
<http://www.nsgcd.org/resources/factsheets/fs001.pdf>

36. Fact Sheet -- Are You Situationally Disorganized?:
<http://www.nsgcd.org/resources/factsheets/fs002.pdf>

37. Tips for Overcoming Procrastination:
<http://www.nsgcd.org/resources/factsheets/fs006.pdf>

Enlisting Help:

38. You may wish to ask someone else your LOWH respects and trusts -- a neighbor or minister, perhaps -- to come with you to talk to the hoarder.

39. Consider taking pictures of the hoarded home and showing them to a healthcare provider who is treating the LOWH so that the provider can discuss the issue with your loved one.

40. You can offer assistance to seek professionals who have experience in hoarding, and then help the hoarder get to appointments regularly and on time.

41. A growing number of jurisdictions have Hoarding Task Forces. You could check to see if there is one in your area.

42. When a hoarder resists the idea of getting help, a therapist may be able to help arrange a family intervention. Details of an intervention can vary: the consulting professional may or may not be present; it may take place in an office or a home; and the hoarder may or may not be made aware of the upcoming event. The goal of those at an intervention is to have the hoarder make one visit to an experienced therapist. Ideally the session immediately follows the intervention.

Starting the Dehoarding Process:

43. At some point, your LOWH may become open to the idea of beginning the decluttering process. Do not be disheartened if your LOWH remains resistant to the idea of decluttering, because change takes time. But if he or she can be persuaded to allow you to help with gradual decluttering at this point (and if you wish to help, because you must remember that you do not have this obligation) here are some helpful approaches to take and questions to ask.

44. Avoid touching the person's belongings without explicit permission. Those who hoard often have strong feelings and beliefs about their possessions and often find it upsetting when another person touches their things.

45. Initially focus on safety and organization of possessions and later work on discarding. Discussion of the fate of the person's possessions will be necessary at some point, but it typically works out better if this discussion follows work on safety and organization.

46. Make suggestions that break down larger tasks into manageable small areas.
47. Try asking questions that invite the LOWH to reevaluate the worth of an item. For example, what's the worst thing that could happen if you got rid of this?
48. For clothes: Does it fit? Do you have occasions to wear it? When was the last you wore it?
49. When was the last time you used this item?
50. Does it work? If not, do you intend to fix it? If so, when?
51. If you got rid of it and discovered that you needed or wanted it later, could you replace it?
52. Perhaps the LOWH could be invited to preside over the distribution all his extra possessions among family members (useful when downsizing into an apartment or retirement home). Later, family members could donate or dispose of many of these gifts.

When your LOWH has problems with shopping or scrounging free stuff:

53. You are not likely to dissuade the LOWH from acquiring any given item if he or she is in the middle of the acquisition -- this can be nearly impossible as we know! But a gentle dialog or questioning can introduce him or her to the idea that there are constructive ways to interrupt the impulse to acquire things.
54. Is this item truly useful to you? How will you use it?
55. Does the LOWH have a similar object already?

56. Is there enough space to store this object? If not, is the LOWH able to make space for it by giving something else away or throwing something else away?

Staying Anonymous:

57. Sometimes we are cut off from the hoarder or we just are not able or willing to get directly involved, and yet we have very real concerns about the physical health and welfare of our LOWH and the people who may be living with them. There are still ways to raise the issue and try to help.

58. Set up an alternate/anonymous email address and forward them sites about hoarding and support.

59. Print out some fact sheets or articles and mail to the LOWH.

60. If the LOWH is a tenant, you could discuss the problem with the landlord or housing authority.

61. If clutter is so extreme that it is blocking exits or access to the home or causes a fire risk, you can try contacting the fire department or fire inspector to ask for a site evaluation.

62. Are there health issues like insect or rodent infestation, pet or vermin feces, mold or mildew? You can contact the local board of health. Be aware that many families of people who hoard are not able to persuade the health department or other agencies to take action, but it is worth a try.

63. If animal hoarding is part of the problem, you can report the LOWH to the SPCA.

64. If the LOWH is elderly and may not be legally competent, or if there are elderly people in the home who may not be getting appropriate care, there may be a governmental office in charge of care and abuse/neglect issues for the elderly. You can explore the possibility of filing a report.

65. If there are children whom you are afraid are being neglected or endangered by the mess, consider reporting the issue to your local Department of Social Services. Social workers often demand cleanups of hoarded houses in order to permit children to remain at home.

Conclusion:

Dealing with the practical and emotional issues that are brought about by a loved one's hoarding behaviors is likely to be one of the most difficult things you will face in your life. You will probably approach the problem of your loved one's hoarding behavior many times and in many different ways, and eventually something may click. But hoarding tends to be a lifelong behavior and problem, and sometimes harm reduction is a more practical or realistic approach than continuing to fight for true change in the LOWH -- after all, for change to occur, the LOWH must be fully committed to the change. Backsliding, sadly, is common.

The bottom line is that you have to remember that the hoarding is not your fault. You cannot hold yourself responsible for the conditions in which your LOWH chooses to live, because you cannot control your LOWH's behavior. The hoarding situation is nothing to be ashamed of. You may decide that sharing your worries and concern with people in your community and your LOWH's community who could help is the most you can feasibly do. If this is the case, please do not beat yourself up. It's worth repeating -- you cannot be responsible for something you cannot control.

I would invite you to freely share this report with anyone you think would be interested in reading it. If you have anything you would like to share with me, or if you have feedback or comments about this report, please email me at catherine@howtohelpahoarder.com . Thank you for reading this report.