

How Older Adults Can Overcome Hoarding Disorder

Feeling too embarrassed to invite people over. Having only a narrow pathway—through mounds of accumulated stuff—to walk through each room. Being unable to cook a meal. Feeling isolated and lonely. Perhaps facing the threat of eviction.

That's what life can be like for anyone who hoards, a disorder that affects people of all ages but is more common among older adults. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), people age 60 and older are more susceptible than others to hoarding disorder, as are people who have anxiety or depression. The APA also says, "The prevalence and features of hoarding appear to be similar across countries and cultures," and that it happens in men and women equally.

The Risks of Hoarding Disorder in Seniors

On top of the anxiety, strained relationships, and loneliness that people with hoarding disorder experience, a home packed full can cause:

- ▶ **Health hazards: Increased exposure to dust, mold, pests, and poor sanitation.** Randy Frost, Ph.D., M.A., professor emeritus of psychology at Smith College in Massachusetts, notes another category of health hazard. "The inability to manage their medication, ... with the chaos involved in having so many possessions, becomes exacerbated," he says.
- ▶ **Safety risks: Fire hazards, tripping dangers, and blocked exits.** An article on BBC.com reported that "up to 30% of fire deaths across the UK



are attributed to homes of hoarders." Sarah Ellis, a safeguarding officer in Yorkshire, explains in the article that hoarding-related fires happen "not just because of the higher volume of flammable materials, but because doors are often unable to close due to the number of items blocking them."

- ▶ **Structural damage: Overloaded spaces can lead to damage in homes or buildings.** "I have no money to get repairs done," said one person on a hoarding support online bulletin board. "In any case, workmen couldn't get in past all the junk."

The Origins of Hoarding Disorder

Hoarding disorder is complex, and its origins are still not fully understood, but research suggests that it may be triggered by:

- ▶ Genetics and life experiences.
- ▶ Differences in brain activity, particularly in areas responsible for decision-making and emotional regulation.
- ▶ Traumatic life events, such as the loss of a loved one, financial struggles, or a sudden change in health.

Older adults are particularly vulnerable due to a lifetime of accumulated possessions and the emotional attachments formed over decades.

How Seniors Can Stop Hoarding

A combination of professional help, practical interventions, and social support can help an older adult manage their condition.

1. Therapy and counseling

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for hoarding disorder. The therapist will help the senior identify and challenge the thoughts and beliefs that drive their hoarding behaviors. The process helps them develop new organizational skills, address emotional attachments to items, and gradually declutter their living spaces.

“In therapy, I practiced disposing of low-stakes items,” wrote Alexandra Berrie in an article for HuffPost.com. “Once you get practice in letting go of things you are only somewhat attached to, it becomes easier and easier to let go of things you care about more.”

In some cases, medication may be prescribed to address underlying conditions such as anxiety or depression, which can contribute to hoarding behavior.

2. Support groups

Support groups, both in person and online, offer a safe space for seniors with hoarding disorder to share their experiences and get encouragement from others who understand their struggles. Groups like Clutterers Anonymous provide peer support and practical advice for tackling clutter step by step. Hoarders.com offers a 24-hour helpline at 1-800-HOARDERS (800-462-7337).

3. Professional organizers

Professional organizers can help a senior with hoarding disorder sort and organize their possessions while respecting the individual’s emotional connection to their belongings.

4. Virtual reality tools

Virtual reality (VR) is showing promise in treating hoarding disorder. In one study, people aged 55 and older with diagnosed hoarding disorder used VR to practice sorting items from their homes into recycling, donation, or trash bins. The virtual experience can serve as “a kind of stepping stone,” a less intense version of real-life discarding, said the study leader.

5. Mindfulness and stress reduction

Hoarding behaviors are often linked to emotional distress. Mindfulness practices, such as meditation or breathing exercises, can help older adults manage stress and develop healthier coping mechanisms.

Breaking Free

While recovery from hoarding disorder requires effort and persistence, many seniors have successfully regained control of their lives and homes. The APA emphasizes that the person who has hoarding disorder must be involved in creating the solution: “Because there are strong attachments to the clutter, and the clutter is a result of a disorder which causes excessive acquisition and decisions to save possessions, simply removing the clutter may not help. Only changing the amount of acquisitions and decisions to save will keep the clutter manageable.”

Breaking free from hoarding disorder is not just about clutter—it’s about reclaiming well-being and restoring relationships, one step at a time.