

Understanding reasons for hoarding and strategies for coping

Persons with dementia experience memory loss, mental confusion, disorientation, impaired judgment and behavioral changes. One of these changes may include “hoarding”. Hoarding behaviour may be harmless, but it can become a health and safety issue for the person with dementia. There are different types of “hoarders” based on the underlying reason for hoarding. Some of these include:

- **The Collectors:** Some people are natural “collectors” and over the years have accumulated collections of things that are important to them. They will often have difficulty discarding these items because they may have personal significance.
- **Compulsive hoarding:** This type of hoarding is a specific pattern of behaviour where the person collects many items that they are not able to discard. Over time, their living areas become unsafe, cause health risks, and economic burden.
- **Putting hoarding into the dementia context:** Hoarding for a person with dementia stems from trying to have some control in their lives. Memory loss plays a large role in their behaviour and as a result, hoarding tends to happen in the early and middle stages of dementia.

Some behaviour changes that occur:

- Rummaging or searching for items.
- Hiding items in unusual places.
- Agitation.
- Paranoia.

These behaviors can be annoying and distressing for both the person with dementia and their caregiver. Try to remember that hoarding is a behaviour caused by the dementia.

Possible causes

People with dementia may often appear driven to search for something that they believe is missing and to hoard things for safekeeping. Some causes of hoarding behaviours include:

- **Isolation** - when a person with dementia is left alone or feels neglected, they may focus completely on themselves. The need to hoard is a common response.
- **Memories of the past** - events in the present can trigger memories of the past. These events may include living with brothers and sisters who took their things, living through the Depression, memories of having collections, a war with a young family to feed, the need to stock pile, and keeping important papers in a safe place.
- **Loss** - people with dementia continually lose parts of their lives. Losing friends, family, a meaningful role in life, and income can increase a person’s need to hoard. This is because they may fear their memories will be lost without that tangible evidence of the past.
- **Fear** - a fear of being robbed is another common experience for persons with dementia. The person may hide something precious, forget where it has been hidden, and then blame someone for stealing it.
- **Loss of memory** - what looks like a messy pile of mail may be because the person has lost the capacity for sequential tasking. Stockpiling medications may happen because they forget why they are taking them, or don't remember how much to take.

Using the ABC problem solving approach

Antecedent:

Try to identify what is causing the behaviour by asking the following questions:

- What is the individual hoarding and where they are hiding it?
- Is the material perishable and dangerous?
- Is the hoarded material important to you?
- Does the hoarding occur in the same places and at certain times?
- Is it triggered by something?

Behaviour:

- Observe and listen.
- Try to name the behaviour. For example; “They are hoarding because they are afraid of being robbed.”

Consequence:

- Remember: How you handle the issue may determine whether the outcome will be positive.
- Try to remove the trigger and/or change your response to the behaviour.
- Once you have an idea on the trigger or cause you may better understand the underlying feelings for the behaviour.

It takes patience and creative thinking to diffuse distressing behaviours that result from hoarding.

What to try:

- Try to address the underlying feelings by saying things like, “I can see that you are upset. Let me help you.”
- Use distraction. Redirect their attention to something pleasurable.
- Be reassuring: Many times, hoarding demonstrates a need for comfort because of deep fears and anxiety.
- Don't try to use logic because it will not be effective.

- Be compassionate, understand that the hoarding is a response to the dementia. It's their way to cope with changing memory and confusion, and is not something they can control.
- If the behaviour seems out of control, seek medical advice as there could be an underlying health reason.

It is difficult to prevent hoarding from happening. Often, the best you can do is minimize the consequences and focus on maintaining safety in their surroundings.

How to prevent:

- **Remove or store** valuable objects and documents in a secure or locked location.
- **Keep duplicates** of important items such as glasses, hearing aids, keys, etc. as back-up. Have the doctor's name on hand if duplicate prescriptions need to be filled.
- **Minimize** the number of closets and drawers available to the hoarder.
- **Label** clothes or other personal items.
- **Decrease clutter** by removing non-essentials (e.g. out of season clothing).
- **Find hiding places.**
- **Understand this may be a coping mechanism.** Perhaps have the person with dementia keep their belongings out in the open so they do not forget where they have placed them. Or use large signs or labels such as "Socks" or "Blouses" to help them find their possessions.
- **Provide interesting and distracting activities** to help curb the hoarding habit such as helping you label old photographs.
- **Provide a rummaging box** so that the individual can store a limited number of desired items and spend time rummaging through it.

Communication strategies that may help:

- Stay calm and speak in a calm voice
- Avoid arguing.
- Refer to *“Paranoia/Delusions Fact Sheet”* for more communication tips.

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Things to keep in mind:

- Hoarding behaviour for the person with dementia may be harmless. Try to determine the reason for this behaviour and then provide some alternatives.
- For those who need to “look for things”, a Rummage Box might be a good alternative.
- For those who hoard because they are afraid, worried about losing control, or have forgotten how to do things, the best approach is reassurance and compassion. With their loss of memory, you will probably be dealing with hoarding issues repeatedly.

Remember, you are not alone. Reach out for help and support through your local Alzheimer Society.

This Fact Sheet is provided courtesy of the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew County

Further information on this topic

Visit the following website:

- <http://cornellaging.org/gem/hoa>

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