

Are You a Hoarder?

Objective

To help you assess whether you have a problem with hoarding, or excessively collecting and keeping objects, and learn initial strategies for cutting back on acquiring things.

You Should Know

Many people collect objects or items that have sentimental value or are objects they imagine they might use in the future. But some people who collect objects do so to excess. Their living or working space might be overwhelmed with possessions and, even as they keep acquiring more, they feel distress at the thought of “decluttering,” or letting go, or getting rid of their possessions. This can represent a serious psychological problem called Hoarding Disorder (HD).

Sometimes people with HD live in a space where things are so cluttered that there is little room to move around, or there might be sanitation concerns such as rodents or insect infestation, or a risk of fire. Sometimes people with HD are threatened with eviction. HD can interfere with daily tasks such as cooking, sleeping, and bathing.

The good news is that help is available. Specific treatments, including cognitive-behavioral therapy and exposure therapy, have been proven highly successful in cases of HD. In this worksheet, you will assess your symptoms and then practiced an “exposure therapy” exercise to learn how to restrict your acquiring behaviors. In another worksheet, “Gaining Control Over Your Hoarding Behavior,” you can learn additional organizing and problem-solving skills and strategies.

What to Do

Review the list below and put a checkmark next to the items that describe you and your situation, then describe your current experience in the lines below each item, if relevant.

___ I collect and keep a lot of items, even things that appear useless or of little value to most people.

___ These items clutter my living spaces and keep me from using the rooms as they were intended.

___ These items cause distress or problems in day-to-day activities.

___ I have difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value.

___ I feel I need to save the items and I experience distress associated with discarding them.

___ The difficulty discarding possessions has resulted in the accumulation of possessions that congest and clutter active living areas and substantially compromises their intended use. If my living areas are uncluttered, it is only because of the interventions of third parties (e.g., family members, cleaners, authorities).

___ My hoarding causes me significant distress in my social life, my job, or my family life.

When did you first start hoarding? When did it seem to become a problem for you?

Describe the positive gains of hoarding for you, that is, what do you “get out of it”?

Describe the negative consequences of hoarding for you?

Describe your level of motivation to make some changes regarding your hoarding behavior as of today? 0 = not motivated, 1 = somewhat motivated, 2 = moderately motivated, 3 = highly motivated

Below is some information about steps you can take, ideally with professional help, to reduce your “acquiring” behaviors, that is, learn to stop collecting or accumulating new objects or items.

What objects do you typically accumulate?

Where do you typically acquire these objects (make a list of stores or locations)?

How frequently are you shopping or acquiring objects?

In order to reduce your excessive acquisition, you can (with the help of a therapist or loved one, if you wish) learn how to control your urges through what is called “exposure therapy.” Record your thoughts and feelings on the lines below each item. It is natural to expect to feel some anxiety but think of it as a wave in the ocean, approaching the shore. The urge will peak, but eventually it will diminish.

For each item below, note your level of distress or anxiety, 0 = none, 1 = mild, 2 = moderate, 3 = serious, 4 = severe. When you do the activity and are able to score from 0 to 3, then move on to the next one, where the stakes are a little higher. This is a form of exposure therapy, where you “expose” yourself to the very conditions that cause you distress and learn to sit with the distress.

1. First, drive to a store and do not go in.

2. After you have succeeded at this step over time, go into the store, but do not touch anything. Then leave and record your experience.

3. When you are ready, go to the store, go in, touch and examine your favored items, but do not buy anything.

4. Choose an easy store for this three-step process in order to master the skill. Then choose increasingly more difficult or challenging locations.

Reflections on This Exercise

1. What did you learn from this exercise that you did not know before?

2. How motivated are you now to work on your hoarding problem?

3. Whom can you ask for help in doing further exposure therapy exercises and beginning to organize and tackle the accumulated possessions in your living space?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
