

FOCUS



# Hoarding hazards

Hoarding is the act of collecting items of any description

BY ROBERT HOLBROOK

in an obsessive manner. Hoarders may collect newspaper clippings or notes they've written to the point where their condo unit becomes completely stacked with paper to the ceiling. They might collect items they find on the street and in garbage cans. The difference between hoarding and being a collector, such as a stamp collector, is that hoarding is compulsive, has a negative impact on the quality of life of the person who is engaged in the behavior, and may cause serious harm to others.

The danger of hoarding stems from the impact storing large quantities of material has on a residential living environment. Items that are hoarded can be mixed with rotten food items and often become infested with rodents and insects. Rodent feces spread disease and become dry, causing particles to float in the air; stored materials can also absorb moisture and become a perfect breeding ground for mold. Ultimately, hoarding may lead to a malodorous and toxic living environment. In a multi-dwelling environment, these problems may impact other residents, as well as make it difficult or impossible for maintenance workers to perform routine checks on HVAC and other important systems.

One of the most serious concerns associated with hoarding is the fire risk and access problems in the event of a fire. Flammable items may be stacked

close to electric heaters and piled high in the kitchen next to the stove. If a unit catches fire, it can become extremely hot due to the amount of fuel that is available to burn. A hoarding fire is a challenge to put out, and the smoke highly toxic.

Read on for an overview of what causes hoarding, how it can be identified in a condominium and how to approach the safety concern with sensitivity to the individual's underlying mental illness.

## Moving past misconceptions

When one witnesses a hoarding situation, that person may ask "Why would someone live this way?" or think "they must be too lazy to clean" or "I know if I junked all this stuff this he or she would be relieved." The first thought labels the person in a negative light, and this only adds insult to injury. Acting on the second thought could be

dangerous and send the hoarder into an emotional tailspin – possibly leading to suicide or hospitalization. It's very important to move past judgment and labeling. The success of intervention depends on a different approach.

One must try to understand that the hoarders don't choose to live the way they do, much like a diabetic does not choose to have a pancreas that doesn't produce insulin. The behaviour of hoarding is driven by a very real anxiety disorder. This does not mean the person is "weak" – rather, he or she has a clinical illness that can be treated and eventually corrected. A person who hoards does so to avoid extreme anxiety that occurs when he or she even thinks about discarding an item. Parents might experience the same level of anxiety if they think they've lost their child in a public space. In the case of hoarding, the anxiety disappears when the item is



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safely stored. Thus the cycle goes: The hoarder picks up an item, has a panic attack when he or she thinks about getting rid of it, and the anxiety disappears when the item is saved.

There are other conditions that cause people to live in extremely filthy and garbage-filled environments. Depression, disability and addiction issues can disable a person to the point where they simply don't clean their home environment for years. People who suffer from these conditions do not collect items in a purposeful manner. They simply do not have the energy and motivation to clean at all.

### Detecting hoarding

Hoarding is normally a hidden problem because hoarders are often reluctant to allow strangers to enter their living environment. In residential detached homes, hoarding can go on for decades without detection, only being discovered when the hoarder passes away.

In multi-dwelling environments the problem is more easily exposed. A hoarding problem can be discovered when fluid from the hoarding mess starts dripping through the floor to the unit below. This messy problem will, of course, cause a unit owner to complain about the unit above. The stench of a hoarded unit can cause complaints from residents on the same floor. (The smell of garbage is a tell-tale sign of a hoarded home.) Insect and/or rodent infestations are another sign of hoarding. Pests don't stay in one place and will cause complaints when they move to neighbouring units.

Hoarding is also discovered in multi-dwelling environments when service

people must enter the unit to do work, such as installing windows or completing HVAC maintenance/repairs. When a service company enters the unit, it will complain about the work environment – especially if it’s impossible to complete the work because of the mess.

**Addressing a sensitive issue**

It becomes the condominium manager’s responsibility to deal with a hoarding situation once it’s discovered. This is because hoarding puts the health and safety of all the residents in a multi-dwelling environment at risk. It becomes a liability issue.

The condominium manager will need to consult with his or her legal department for advice. The lawyer will advise the condominium manager on exactly what to say to the unit owner who is hoarding. The lawyer will write letters to the hoarder to advise him or her of the problem and that the situation needs to be remediated.

If there is a fire safety risk, the condominium manager can contact the fire department to have the unit investigated. If necessary, the fire marshal will order the hoarder to resolve the problem or face a fine. Eventually, if the hoarder ignores the warning letters, the condominium manager will have the right under the Condominium Act to bring a third party in to resolve the hoarding issue.

There is no easy way to deal with a hoarding situation, but it’s a problem that shouldn’t be ignored. It’s important to remain professional and sensitive to the fact that the hoarder is dealing with a form of illness. □

*Robert Holbrook, MSW, RSW, is the owner of Toronto Hoarding Services. He has more than 15 years of experience providing mental health therapy services in the outpatient mental health departments of three major hospitals in Toronto. He specializes in helping condominium managers remediate hoarding situations. For more information, call 416-569-0846 or visit [www.torontohoardingservices.ca](http://www.torontohoardingservices.ca).*

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