

HARRY BEER

Hoarding Support Specialist

Compassionate decluttering for lasting change

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THE SPACE MAN

Therapeutic Services

A message to the families and loved ones of a person who has hoarding disorder.

Hello,

You're here because you desperately want to help someone you love who's lost control of their home to mess, clutter and the assorted detritus of decades of life.

Firstly, try to remember that the hoard is a symptom. It's a response to strong negative feelings; an attempt to establish some control and autonomy but also a silent scream of frustration and fear. Hoarding Disorder (HD) is an outward reflection of how a person feels about themselves, their worth. It's a living metaphor, a mirror of the soul.

It's important to remember this hasn't just appeared out of the ether, there's a reason your person has developed this mental health condition. Many researchers believe hoarding to be an attachment wound, a legacy of inconsistent love or care or experiences of abuse. I have yet to meet a person with HD who did not have a traumatic past. They're suffering and doing their best to cope with it.

The cluttered home isn't the issue for the person who hoards, they're used to that, they've adapted, they cope with it. The issue is something much deeper and far harder to describe or deal with. Hoarding helps distract from the pain which is driving the situation. Inevitably the outward symptoms bring feelings of shame, self-loathing and worthlessness. These emotions are hard to tolerate and coping with them keeps the person trapped in a loop.

In order for lasting change to occur it has to come from within and not be imposed externally, which is why your previous attempts to help have failed. The more that family and friends try to help with the clutter, the more entrenched and defensive the person becomes.

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Genuine concern ends up being misconstrued because it's often received as threatening and belittling; the person with HD ends up feeling unheard, not cared for. Logically, under stress, your loved one will instinctively revert to their self-soothing behaviour and the hoard will continue to accumulate. It's a Catch 22. In this way things can often deteriorate as one or other party feels their only option is to withdraw out of exasperation or to attempt to safeguard whatever relationship is left.

People with HD often have a profound suspicion of, and aversion to, figures of authority, even if in the guise of a much-loved adult son or daughter. Allowing a landlord in to do a safety check can become the source of deep anxiety, panic and even ill-health as the person battles to keep their shame hidden. The involvement of statutory services such as social care or environmental health feels menacing, even terrifying. The hoard inevitably becomes the focus. Sadly, the more the attention is on the clutter, the further we all are from the cause of the pain and ultimately a path to healing and recovery. All of this simply conspires to make the person at the centre feel like the world's biggest failure.

The question remains; how can you help? That's hard, if it was easy, you wouldn't be reading this. I'm a therapist and therefore have training and a professional boundary which enable me to offer unconditional support through active listening. I don't have the personal connection or emotional investment you do so it's easier for me. Tough love doesn't work with hoarding, it can be retraumatising and lead them to push back, even if that means falling out with people they love.

It's important to try to accept the reality of the predicament; people with HD need to be heard without judgement and loved without conditions. The importance of your support is paramount. Your person feels loathsome and wretched because of this mental health disorder; it's stigmatising and awful to live with. Almost any mention of it is triggering and regardless of intention, makes them feel hurt and defensive.

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Decluttering will fail unless it's done at their behest and under their direction. It seems counter-intuitive but the way to deal with hoarding is not to deal with hoarding, it's to focus on the person at all times. Possessions can offer the person with HD the consistent, reliable, unconditional love and security which people have sometimes been unable to provide. It's literally existential, it makes them feel safe, why would they risk losing that? The hoard is the solution, not the problem.

I've worked with hundreds of people with HD since 2012, the vast majority of whom were motivated to heal and change. I may not know the person who has inspired you to read this but I am optimistic they can recover. With you on side, they will get there sooner.

With my very best wishes,

Harry

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