

Task force helps compulsive hoarders

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This is Part 1 of a two-part series on the Butte County Multidisciplinary Team Hoarding Task Force and the problem of compulsive hoarding.

There is a county task force dedicated to helping compulsive hoarders, and recently they discussed the problem of excessive hoarding and ways to help hoarders improve their quality of life.

Compulsive hoarding is largely recognized as an "Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)", explained Task Force member and Clinical Supervisor Tim Quinn of Behavioral Health.

A large number of people--about 1 to 2 percent of the population--have an extremely difficult time managing their possessions.

If your home is filled to capacity with items many people would find useless and unnecessary and you cannot resist the urge to acquire more, then you may be suffering from a condition known as compulsive hoarding.

Compulsive hoarders have difficulty discarding items; they acquire clutter in their homes that pose health risks and greatly diminish their quality of life, according to Public Health Nursing Supervisor Carla Velador, who also works on the task force. "The clutter can be so severe that it prevents or seriously limits living space to be used for its intended purpose," she said.

Clutter is found stacked in living rooms, bedrooms, dining rooms, and even bathrooms. Some compulsive hoarders will even store items in their showers and bathtubs.

Velador recommended a book on compulsive hoarding published this year by Oxford University Press entitled, "Buried in Treasures: Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding by David F. Tolin, Randy O. Frost, and Fani Steketee. It is a "self-help" book with questionnaires designed to help people make assessments concerning their hoarding practices.

"These living areas (in the home of compulsive hoarders) have been converted into makeshift storage areas, and the house has become, in the words of comedian George Carlin, "just a pile of stuff with a cover on it." (Buried in Treasures, 13.)

Compulsive hoarders come from all walks of life and can be very well-educated people and nicely dressed, but they often live in isolation because they do not want others to see how they live, Velador said.

Also, there are people who have lots of "clutter" in their homes that are not considered Obsessive Compulsive Hoarders.

"Some are overwhelmed caregivers who have been so busy they haven't yet had time to clean up," said Deputy Director Craig Erickson of Environmental Health. "These are not compulsive hoarders and do not have a huge anxiety to give up things.

"And, usually when they finally get some time, these people will get the clutter cleaned up. One woman had five cats who had litters of kittens, so then she had 25 cats, and she was an overwhelmed caregiver. She had no problem giving the cats up for adoption. So, she is not considered a compulsive hoarder."

Code Enforcement Officer David Goyer of the Oroville Police Department has seen many homes with clutter and he is also on the task force to help hoarders.

"We work with people and give them time to correct code violations," Goyer said. But even after a landlord gave a tenant a few months to clean up the clutter, the hoarder still wasn't able to comply," Goyer said.

Some people try to explain hoarding by referring to history, such as saying, "My mom came through the Great Depression where they saved everything, so she has a hard time letting things go." And, other hoarders do not even recognize any problem at all and claim, "I don't need any help" and yet, they have books and papers and other debris stacked floor to ceiling.

"Does it (the hoarding) cause difficulty in everyday life? If it does, then that is a sign you have a problem with hoarding," said Social Work Supervisor Bill Miller of Adult Protective Services.

Compulsive hoarders collect all kinds of different things, such as newspapers, magazines, styrofoam cups and plates, clothing, children's toys, books, and even garbage.

"It depends on what they get attached to," Quinn said. "Some hoarders have an emotional attachment to items, like when they save old, cracked picture frames and feel a sense of anxiety to throw it away. One hoarder had five microwaves in their living room."

Compulsive animal hoarding is another kind of hoarding problem where people have 30, 80, even 100 cats or dogs living with them. And, the health and safety of the animals and owners can be seriously threatened, Quinn said.

The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) was formed in the late 1990s to increase awareness and research this problem. Animal hoarders can identify themselves as an animal lover and have intense emotional attachment to the animals and might not see the neglectful, abusiveness conditions. The HARC provide four features of compulsive animal hoarding,

- Failure to provide minimal standards of sanitation, space, nutrition, and veterinary care for the animals.
- Inability to recognize the effects of this failure on the welfare of the animals, human members of the household, and the environment.
- Obsessive attempts to accumulate or maintain a collection of animals in the face of deteriorating conditions.
- Denial of severity of problems and living conditions.

The task force seeks to help people who have become victims of their own clutter, and these hoarders may have a neurological or genetic link to their compulsion to acquire and retain so many possessions.

According to a task force brochure, when a house is full of belongings, a person is at a higher risk of falls and injuries; loss of friends; isolation; emotional distress; health safety is at risk; and eviction from landlord.

Several agencies are collaborating with the task force members to help compulsive hoarders, including Cal Fire/Butte County Fire, Paradise Northwest Recycling and Waste Service, and Code Enforcement.

Butte County Public Health's Nursing Supervisor Alice Kienzle is the chairman of the Butte County Multidisciplinary Team: Hoarding Task Force.

Some scientific evidence suggests there may be a genetic component to hoarding, but the task force wants the public to know regardless of physical or genetic qualities that may be related to hoarding, you can learn to overcome it. "Biology is not destiny," according to the book "Buried in Treasures."

The task force says the first and most important step is asking for help. "Change is possible," Velador said. "And, well-intentioned people will try to help hoarders by helping them clean house, but the clutter will be back in six months unless the underlying issues are addressed."

For more information, see <http://www.ocfoundation.org> or <http://www.buttecounty.net/publichealth> or call the Butte County Department of Behavioral Health at 1-800-334-6622 or 538-7705. You can also call Passages Adult Resource Center at: 530-898-5923.

Part 2 of this two-part series will focus on available treatments, resources, and recommendations offered to help compulsive hoarders improve their quality of life.