



## WORKING WITH PEOPLE WHO HOARD\*

### For the Professional Fiduciary, from a Hoarding Clear-Out Specialist (Part 1 of 2)

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If you have worked as a Fiduciary for any length of time, chances are good that you've walked into a hoarded house. Shoulder against the front door, you push hard to gain access, and once inside, as your eyes adjust to the diminished light, you greet your client with a hearty "Hello! I'm here!" and you begin your initial assessment that begins with the thought, "Oy! What a mess!"

The outgrowth and ill-effects of a hoarding disorder are not hard to miss. I've entered homes filled with newspapers piled so high and wide that only a narrow path connected the front door to the kitchen, to the bathroom, to the recliner where the client would sleep; a room filled with video cassette tapes that rise to the ceiling along with mountains of clothing, cups and books, and everything you have multiplied 500 times or more. In

addition, there's clear resistance on the client's part to talk about it, let alone make a dent in diminishing the piles.

My work with clients who hoard\* spans over a decade and I've learned a lot. As a consequence of all that knowledge(!), I present my thoughts about hoarding in two parts. Part One is mostly theoretical and includes a brief literature review of hoarding, steps taken toward the medicalization of the disorder, and the language to describe what we might see when we enter the home of a person who hoards. Part Two puts theory into practice, with steps, tips, and suggestions for creating a clear path for the overall health and well-being of our clients.

Thirteen years ago when I got into the professional organizing business, it took a year before I was introduced to George, my first client with a diagnosed hoarding disorder. I was tasked with dismantling his 10,000 sq ft warehouse filled with all the items and artifacts he needed to "make movies" (we were in Los Angeles, after all). My work with George lasted a total of 5 years and of course I could write a book about our adventures. For now, though, I'm thinking about what I learned along the way, and what may help the private professional fiduciary.

I'm an historian by training so I immersed myself in the literature of hoarding. I offer here a few nuggets from that history.

### A Brief History of Hoarding

Hoarding is the fourth circle of Hell, according to Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, an epic poem written early in the 14th century. Here we find two warring mobs crashing enormous boulders into each other, one taunting, "Why do you hoard?" while the other responds, "Why do you waste?" Dante's guide explained that these were the hoarders and wasters in life, the Avaricious and Prodigal.

Fast forward four centuries and we see reference to hoarding again in the 1842 Russian novel, Dead Souls by Nikolai Gogol. A wealthy landowner named Plyushkin who "obsessively collects and saves everything he finds. This "Plyuskin syndrome" is still used in Russian psychiatry to refer to someone with a hoarding disorder. Psychologists Gail Steketee and Randy Frost describe Charles Dickens' character Krook in Bleak House (1862), as "possessed with documents" in a shop where "Everything seems to be bought and nothing sold."

Eighty year later, in the late 1940s, the New York City newspapers were filled with stories about the Collyer brothers who died among the junk – 120 tons – in their Harlem brownstone. The Collyer brothers' story inspired several novels, among the most recent was E.L. Doctorow's Homer and Langley. Even now among New York City firemen, a hoarded home is referred to as a Collyer house.

### The Medicalization of Hoarding

In the 1980s, the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III –the official handbook for mental health profession) defined hoarding as one of the nine diagnostic criteria for obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. The first systematic study and definition of hoarding was published in 1993 by Frost and Gross. And, in 2013, Compulsive Hoarding Disorder became its own diagnosis in the DSM-V as:

- The acquiring of and failure to discard a large number of possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value;
- Living spaces sufficiently cluttered so that the clutter precludes activities for which the spaces were designed;
- Significant impairment in functioning or distress caused by the hoarding.

### Clearing the Path for Compliance and Clarity

Along the way I've learned to identify hoarding spaces using a number and color system developed two decades ago by smart professional organizers after being called in to homes by clients or well-meaning family members to "deal with" the problem of "too much stuff." Collectively, these professionals shared their experiences and in order to help first responders (and each other) and developed to the Clutter-Hoarding Scale.

First responders include fire fighters, police and safety personnel, professional organizers, and licensed private Fiduciaries. The Clutter-Hoarding Scale gives us a language to identify the mess. It is not unusual for a City Code enforcer to call about "a level 4" she wants me to check out. I carry to my various job sites the LA Fire Code Safety and Evacuation Standards which provides the back-up I often need to show clients what compliance looks like.

The history of hoarding, and backstory on how the behavior "became" a disorder helps how we process the information about the disorder. And now that we have the language to describe the hoarding, and an awareness of what City Code enforcers look for upon inspection, what comes next is infinitely more challenging to contextualize. Part Two of "Working with People Who Hoard" offers steps, tips, and suggestions for creating a clear path for the overall health and well-being of our clients.

*\* I don't use the term "hoarder" because the behavior of hoarding is a condition of a brain disorder, and not "who" one is.*

**Part 2 of this series will appear in the upcoming Spring edition of the PFAC Newsletter.**

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