



BELL CENTER FOR ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Tips for Family Members of Individuals with Hoarding Behaviors

A collection of recommendations from professionals trained to work with people with hoarding behaviors

1. Hoarding is an illness that resembles an addiction. Know that hoarding is a mental health condition that cannot be “fixed.”
2. There is treatment available to help manage the hoarding behaviors, but there is not a “cure.”
3. Educate yourself about hoarding behavior by reading books, researching its history, attending seminars and talking to others.
4. Take care of yourself by seeking support from those who can listen without being judgmental, (close friends, in a support group or with a mental health professional), rather than by venting your frustrations to the person who hoards.
5. Don't take it personally by attaching your concerns and priorities directly to the person that hoards. Accusing and blaming your loved one strains your relationship and makes it harder to address the clutter. To help avoid conflict and maintain a positive relationship, it may be better to remove yourself from the situation and to have someone else help clean up the space.
6. Focus on the person, not on the stuff. Remember that you care about a person who hoards. They are *that* loved one first and a person with hoarding behaviors second.
7. Try not to get too angry or emotional at the person. Be upset with the hoarding.
8. Be gentle and patient with the people you care about - the person with the hoarding behaviors and yourself.
9. Do not clean up - offer to help clean up. You are the person or people that want a relationship with the person that hoards and the process may get adversarial and unresolvable. There is a greater likelihood of success if the process is done by an objective person such as a trained professional with experience, not family members or close friends.
10. Build a positive relationship with your family member beyond the hoarding. It will take time and commitment on your part. You are the healthy one.
11. It is *your* need to clean up their space *no* theirs. The individual person who hoards must decide to make a change him or herself. It must come from them.
12. Express your feelings in concrete terms by stating your desire to spend time together, your concern for their safety and their good health.
13. Express your unconditional love over and over. We all need to hear that.
14. Share that help is out there. *Ask* if they would like a phone number to call. (Offer numbers of local mental health professionals and professional organizers specializing in hoarding.)
15. Do not threaten the person that hoards. They already feel frightened, embarrassed, unloved, depressed, and ashamed. Fear of punishment is not an effective motivator for long-term change.

16. Do not reinforce hoarding behavior by contributing or accepting items unless they are for a specific occasion such as a birthday or holiday. Be consistent. Instead of physical items, emphasize activities and spending time together.
17. Do not remove items from your family member's home unless requested or sincerely invited to do so. The possible ramifications could make an already difficult situation much worse.
18. Offer to take photos of cherished items and put them in a scrapbook.
19. Consciously and consistently be positive around your family member in order to build their confidence and trust.
20. Use a diary to put down how your family member makes you feel. There is no benefit to expressing your feelings to them repeatedly.
21. Accept your family member for who they are and that you alone cannot change their behavior. It will take their by in and a team of professionals able to work with them over a long period of time.
22. Remember, hoarding is a complicated and is a mental health condition.
23. Identify what is contributing to the hoarding behavior. If you are part of it, reduce your participation a little at a time.
24. You are allowed to feel frustrated as a result of the hoarding. Talk about it with others, not necessarily the person that hoards, and take steps to take care of yourself.
25. List the losses you have experienced as a result of the hoarding behavior, (such as limited interaction, visits, and conversations that don't have anything to do with their behavior).
26. Visit regularly. Over the telephone or in person at their home or yours, a restaurant or a movie. Go on a short vacation. Use today's array of technology to visit, (email, Skype, twitter etc.)
27. Coach and encourage, but do not try to convince or push to throw items away. They need to make their own argument for change.
28. Avoid conflict and maintain a positive relationship.
29. Understand that many people who hoard experience a low self-confidence.
30. People that hoard may also have a problem with decision-making and/or may have trouble sustaining their attention to stay on task or topic.
31. Work hard to be patient with yourself and your family member.
32. Acknowledge that this is difficult.
33. Do not blame yourself.
34. Be empathetic and understanding toward your family member's feelings about their belongings. Think about specific items that you treasure and how you would feel if someone tampered with them or discarded them.