

## **Compulsive Hoarding.**

### **What is it?**

- The acquisition of, and failure to discard, possessions which are, or appear to be, of limited use or value.
- Living spaces sufficiently cluttered so as to preclude activities for which they were designed.
- Significant distress or impairment caused by the hoarding.

### **Who?**

- Problematic hoarders can be of any age, sex or socio-economic group. Current research would suggest that 1 in 25 people could be seriously affected.
- They often, but not always, live alone, and lead isolated lives, although some have partners and/or children, who can also be adversely affected.
- They are often unwilling/unable to acknowledge the difficulties for themselves or those around them.

### **Items often hoarded: -**

Papers, packaging, films, clothing, furniture and crockery, electrical items, tools, new items, animals, human waste and anything else.

### **Results: -**

- Living spaces so cluttered that they are impossible to maintain, causing danger or squalor.
- Important items cannot be found when required.
- Storage can spill over into public areas, causing a nuisance, hostility or violence.
- Stale food can cause vermin infestation, bad smells or food poisoning.
- Social isolation on the part of the sufferers or family members because of embarrassment.
- Behaviour problems in children, e.g. isolation, withdrawal, truancy, or bullying.
- Perceived importance of possessions can lead to the desire for further acquisition, e.g. 'retail therapy', shoplifting.
- Homelessness.

### **Possible Reasons: -**

- Fear of not having, or being able to replace, something.
- Lack of ability to discriminate, prioritise, organise or make decisions.
- Associations with the past, particular situations or people.
- Fear of change.
- Not being able to resist a 'bargain.'
- Compensation for feelings of insecurity or low self-esteem.
- A genuine desire not to waste.

### **How can it get out of control?**

- Awareness of the problems does not reach those who need to know, e.g. GP.
- The problems are not taken seriously until it is much too late.
- Communication and coordination between agencies is often ineffective.
- Human rights legislation can prevent the authorities from stepping in until it is already well out of control.
- Increasing physical infirmity or lack of transport can make it difficult to remove large or bulky items.

- Sufferers are often extreme perfectionists, so they focus on one small task to the exclusion of everything else. They often prefer to do tasks themselves rather than trust anyone else, even if they do not have the necessary time, expertise or equipment.
- Fear of change or breaking links with the past can cause inaction.
- Procrastination and excuses can delay action, even if the logic is flawed.
- It can be easier for carers to give in rather than fighting.

### **Emotional toll**

Frustration, shame, anger, anxiety, depression, sadness, impatience, helplessness, embarrassment, bewilderment, aggression, desperation, feeling overwhelmed and misunderstood.

### **Financial toll**

- Environmental Health intervention, and clearing of premises, often repeatedly.
- Police Intervention because of neighbourhood nuisance, harassment or domestic violence, possibly use of ASBOs or court cases.
- Primary and/or secondary Mental Health and Social Care services, including for carers.
- Special Educational Needs.
- Ongoing monitoring and support.
- Housing if a sufferer has become homeless.
- Risk if fire etc. caused by lack of maintenance e.g. gas/electric supplies.

### **Why do carers often find it difficult to get help?**

- The impact of the problems is often not fully understood or taken seriously.
- Professionals are sometimes unwilling to discuss the problems because of patient confidentiality, especially if the sufferer is not prepared to acknowledge the difficulties.
- Problems related to the hoarding are sometimes managed out of context, e.g. educational difficulties, anxiety or depression in carers, problems with neighbours, squalid or insanitary living conditions.
- Management and support is very expensive, and is not perceived to be the responsibility of any particular agency.

### **If you have concerns, ask yourself: -**

- Is it really a problem? For whom? The person (him) herself, a partner, children or neighbours.
- How long has it been a problem? Have circumstances changed, e.g. physical impairment, bereavement, lack of transport.
- What is being stored? Papers, films, clothing, packaging, food, electrical items, tools, animals, human waste, new items, items connected with people or situations from the past.
- Where is it being stored? Inside or outside the property?
- Is it safe for the person to continue living in these conditions? Fire risk? Vermin infestation? Condition of the premises? Inaccessibility for maintenance?
- Is the accumulation continuing? From charity shops, markets, or skips?
- Do a lot of goods come by mail order? What happens to them?
- Is the person isolated? Are there ever visitors?
- Does the person ever go out? If so, how does (s)he dress or move?
- Are there signs of self-neglect?

- What do you think that (s)he believes about it? Does (s)he deny the existence of the problem, or make excuses? Do you have reason to believe that (s)he is depressed, or overwhelmed?
- Who knows, or needs to know? What could you do about it without being unnecessarily intrusive?

**What might you be able to do if the problem exists within your family?**

- Challenge the problem, not the person.
- Avoid the emotional roundabout, blackmail, excuses and procrastination.
- Discuss it on neutral ground, possibly with someone independent present.
- If you cannot express yourself face to face, write a letter.
- Take responsibility, and encourage the sufferer to do so.
- Only take action openly to avoid mistrust. Explain clearly beforehand what you plan to do, and why.
- Take the lead from the sufferer, and capitalise on any opportunity to make progress.
- Persevere, set reasonable targets, and acknowledge progress.
- Ask the sufferer to help you because you have a problem.
- Find out about local services and sources of support.
- Use your own coping strategies. Keep mentally and physically fit.
- Set good examples yourself.

**What might you be able to do if you think that a neighbour might have a problem with hoarding?**

- Find a reason to make a neighbourly call, and see what the response is.
- Drop a note through the door politely expressing your concerns, and asking if help is needed. It could either be accepted or refused.
- Find out if any organisation in your area might be able to offer help and support if it is accepted.
- Talk to a family member about your concerns.
- Offer transport or other practical assistance.
- Suggest that the person contacts the local council to assist with the removal of large items.
- Suggest a free Fire Safety check.
- In extreme cases, tell an Environmental Health Officer or Social Services of your concerns.