

## **HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR LOVED ONE WHO HOARDS?**

### **Fact File for Family and Friends – Helping Others with Motivation**

It's hard to know what to do when our loved one seems less motivated than you are to work on the problem. Often, it's tempting to start arguing with the person, trying to persuade him or her to see things the way you do: "Why can't you see it my way, just for a minute?" "One of these days, they're going to find your dead body under a pile of trash!" "Can't you see what this is doing to your family?"

The problem is that this kind of direct confrontation rarely works. Perhaps you have already noticed this, that the harder you argue, the more your loved one argues back, makes excuses, ignores you, or avoids working on the clutter. So you try arguing even harder, being even more persuasive. And then your loved one argues back even harder, ignores you even more, and so on. If this pattern sounds familiar to you, the confrontational approach simply is not working and it's time to try something else.

In our work with lots of people who hoard, you might be surprised to learn that we almost never tell them what to do. We don't tell them to throw things away, nor do we tell them not to acquire things. Why? Because it doesn't work. Instead, we find that the best way to help people increase their motivation to work on the problem is to use principles developed by Drs. William Miller and Steven Rollnick for helping people make decisions about major behavioural changes.

There are three key assumptions we'd like you to keep in mind:

1. **Ambivalence is normal.** It's very rare for someone to want anything 100%, with no hesitation. Especially when people are trying to decide whether or not to make a dramatic lifestyle change, it is perfectly normal for them to have mixed feeling and thoughts. Part of them wants to change, and part of them doesn't want to change. The person feels conflicted and seems to "flip-flop" from one moment to the next. The important thing is to remember that this is normal and healthy.
2. **People have a right to make their own choices.** There are, of course, some exceptions to this, such as minors or adults who have been found legally not competent to look after their own affairs, and who have a legally appointed guardian. For the most part however, we should and must respect people's freedom of choice.
3. **Nothing will happen until the person is ready to change.** You can't rush it. If the person's "balance of change" (see earlier in this chapter) is still tipped toward not changing or she is not going to sustain the level of effort and interest that it takes to change. The key therefore, is to help the person understand and weigh all the factors so he or she can make an informed choice. You can't argue him or her into it.

"OK," you might be thinking, "I understand that the confrontational approach won't work, and that nothing's going to change until the person is ready. But how can I help my loved one get ready? It's not going to happen spontaneously!" We agree: people with longstanding behaviour problems such as hoarding rarely just decide to change out of the blue. So you should definitely talk about the problem with your loved one, just in a different way. Here are some general principles to guide your conversations.

### **Show Empathy**

Showing empathy doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with everything the person says, but it does mean you are willing to listen and to try to see things from the other person's perspective. Empathy must come from the heart-be sure you are not being patronizing. A good rule is that if you don't truly mean what you're about to say, don't say it. Here are some good ways to show empathy.

- Ask open-ended questions – that is, questions that can't be answered with a simple "yes: or "no". It might be particularly useful to ask some questions that will help you understand what your loved one finds rewarding

about the possessions: “What are some things you like about these items?” “What does it feel like when you pick something up?” “How are you feeling right now?”

- Summarize your understanding of what your loved one says: “I think I hear you saying that right now cleaning up the clutter is not a high priority for you, do I have that right?”
- Make statements about what your loved one seems to be feeling, so he or she knows you’re paying attention: “It looks like you’re feeling anxious right now.” Your voice sounds kind of sad; do you want to talk about that?”
- Use compliments and statements of appreciation and understanding: “You’re really being brave right now.” “I know how hard this is, and I appreciate the fact you’re willing to work on it.”

## Don’t Argue

**Ever.** There is simply no point in arguing about hoarding. The harder you argue, the more the person is likely to argue back. This is more than just a waste of time: it’s a well-known fact that the more we say something, the more we tend to believe it. So when you engage your loved one in an argument about hoarding, you are essentially putting him or her in a position to make the argument for NOT changing, again and again and again. And the more he or she make that argument, the more believable it will seem. The solution is to get out of the argument. Watch out for:

- Ordering, directing or commanding
- Warning or threatening
- Persuading with logic, arguing or lecturing
- Moralizing, preaching or telling your loved one what he or she “should” do
- Judging, criticizing or blaming

## Respect Autonomy

Remember, most of you are dealing with an adult who has freedom of choice about his or her own possessions. You do not have to like the condition of his or her home, nor do you have to be happy about his or her behaviour. If the person with the hoarding problem is your spouse and lives with you, or if the hoarding behaviour infringes on your personal living space, you do have a right to ask the person to change. But even in these circumstances, you will be most effective when you reassure your loved one that you are not trying to take away his or her autonomy. Try to engage your loved one in a discussion (rather than an argument) about the home and his or her behaviour. Talk about your concerns in an open and frank manner, without being confrontational, argumentative or hostile. Ask your loved one what he or she wants to do, rather than just telling him or her what you want: “What do you think you would like to do about the clutter in the home?” “How do you suggest we proceed?”

Perhaps at this point you’re thinking, “Now wait a minute. My loved one has a serious hoarding problem, and it’s really important that he or she does something about it. So instead of telling them how terrible the problem is, I’m just supposed to be empathic, stop arguing and ask what he or she wants to do? How will anything change that way?” We have two answers. First, before anything can get better, it is imperative that you put the brakes on things that are not working. Remember that old joke: The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result! You might be surprised by how much more smoothly things seem to go when you just focus on stopping unproductive, confrontational discussions. Second, we have one more principle to tell you, which will help your loved one think about changing from a perspective that will be more meaningful to him or her: Help the person *recognize that his or her actions are inconsistent with his or her greater goals or values*. Some ways to facilitate this recognition include:

- Ask the person about his or her goals and values. Recognize that those goals and values might not be the same as yours. “What’s really important to you in life?” “How would you like your life to be in 5 years?” “What are your hopes and goals in life?”
- Discuss whether or not the person’s acquiring or difficulty organizing or getting rid of things fits with those goals and values. This is most effective if you ask, rather than tell. “How does the condition of your home fit with your desire to be a good grandmother?” “You’ve told me that friendships are very important to you; how well can you pursue that goal, given the way things are right now?”

If you have been accustomed to arguing and threatening and blaming, your new approaches will surprise you loved one, and it may take a little time before the person begins to trust you. Try these methods in several conversations and notice whether the balance seems to be tilting in the right direction. If so, be patient and keep up the good work.

## Set Limits

If your best efforts do not help the person see how his or her personal goals and hoarding behaviour don’t match, you may need to set personal limits to cope with your own needs. Be very careful to do this calmly and without arguing. Decide what you can and cannot tolerate with regard to your own personal needs and space or those of others (children, elderly people) you are responsible for. Tell your family member (1) how you feel, (2) what you want and (3) what you will do. State your feelings and your request clearly: “Susan, those piles you left on my desk make me very upset. That is my space and you do not have the right to put things there. Please remove the pile by the end of this week.” Or you might say, “Billy needs a place to sleep that is his own. The stuff you put on his bed has to be gone by Thursday.” Then state what you will do or not do: “If you can’t do this yourself, I’ll put it into a box and take it to the basement.” Don’t be punitive; just remove the clutter after fair warning. You can give a simple reminder, but remember to avoid using an unpleasant tone. If the request is not met by the deadline, you should carry out the stated consequence. Your loved one is likely to be upset with you, so remember to stay calm, “I told you I would move those things by Thursday. I understand that this upsets you and I am sorry about that. I tried to be as clear as I could about what I needed and what would happen.”

Obviously, it is not ideal to move things that belong to someone else when this upsets them. However, we all have our personal limits that we must protect. If stating your own feelings and setting limits helps your family member keep his or her things out of your space, you have accomplished your goal. If this does not work and your loved one’s hoarding behaviour continues to be seriously problematic in your relationship, you will want to seek help for your relationship

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