

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR LOVED ONE WHO HOARDS?

Fact File for Family and Friends (pg 20)

A word to family members and other loved ones: Many of the people reading this book [Buried In Treasures – Second Edition] have a loved one with a hoarding problem. Often the person agrees with you that the problem exists and that something needs to be done about it. However, for many of you, your loved one (who might be smart, logical, and rational in every other way) denies or minimized this problem. This can be maddening for families. We have lost count of how many family members have asked, in exasperation, “Doesn’t she see it?” or “Why doesn’t he just clean up this mess?” Later in this book, we will suggest some specific ways to talk to your loved one about the problem. For now, recognize that his or her denial or minimization is part of the problem and is a common feature of hoarding.

Fact File for Family and Friends (pg 92)

Helping Your Loved One Recognize the Severity of the Problem

Failure to understand or acknowledge the severity of clutter or acquiring is an all-too-common problem among people with hoarding problems and reflects what we call **limited insight** into the troublesome nature of the symptoms – in this case, clutter, difficulty getting rid of items and perhaps also acquiring too many things. Even people who actually seek help for clutter become ambivalent when they are faced with difficult decisions about discarding or categorizing and putting away their things. Motivational techniques have been very helpful for other problems, like alcohol addiction, in which denial is common.

This requires a non-confrontational approach in which you try to step into the person’s shoes to see it completely from his or her perspective. Then, ask questions and make comments that are genuinely motivated, not snide or condescending. For example, when the person has just denied that there is any problem, you can summarize calmly: “You don’t really feel there is any problem. You are quite happy with the way the house looks.” Remember, don’t be sarcastic, just be clear and direct. This restatement of what the person has just said helps him or her feel heard and is less likely to make him or her feel defensive. More than likely, the person will respond with something like, “Well, I’m not completely happy. It is more stuff than I want, but I will get to it.” This is a partial admission of a problem and moves just a little closer to being willing to work on it. Go on with, “You plan to get to it but haven’t been able to yet, what do you think you need to get to it?” Again, say this calmly, with curiosity. This might move the person closer to talking about his or her struggle, again a further step in admitting a problem and considering working on it.

Of course, after the person’s initial denial, you could have said, “But look at all that clutter! It’s a fire hazard!” Imagine how you’d react to this if your situations were reversed. You’d dig in your heels, deny the danger or inconvenience, and defend the importance of your things and your right to keep them. So, this strategy really doesn’t work to help motivate someone to work on the problem. But a direct statement that empathizes with the person’s perspective reduces his or her defensiveness and often helps him or her to reconsider his or her position.