

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR LOVED ONE WHO HOARDS?

Fact File for Family and Friends – Instructions for Coaches

Overcoming hoarding is difficult. Many people find it helpful to have a support person or “coach” who can assist them with the process. As a coach, you will work together with the person with the hoarding problem. Here are some ways to make your involvement most helpful:

Meet as a team with the person with the hoarding problem. Two people working together is a recipe for success, whereas two people working in different directions will not work.

Help the person remain focused on the task in front of him or her. People with hoarding problems often find themselves easily distracted, especially when they are trying to reduce clutter, make decisions about possessions, or resist the urge to acquire things. The coach can be very helpful by politely reminding the person what he or she is supposed to be doing right now.

Provide emotional support. In our experience, acting like a taskmaster or drill sergeant just makes people feel nervous or angry and interferes with their ability to learn new approaches. They feel even more isolated and misunderstood, and retreat into bad habits. Therefore, we suggest using a gentle touch. It’s often very helpful to express empathy with statements such as, “I can see how hard this is for you,” or “I understand that you have mixed feelings about whether to tackle this clutter.” The person with the hoarding problem is going through some major stress and often needs a sympathetic ear or even a shoulder to cry on.

Visit them in their home. One of the most powerful things you can do is to visit the home of your loved one without talking about hoarding. Visitors increase motivation to work on hoarding and help jumpstart the process of using the home for normal activities.

Help the person make decisions, but DO NOT make decisions for him or her. During treatment, the person with the hoarding problem is learning to develop new rules for deciding what to keep and what to remove. It will help them to have you listen while they describe their thoughts about items they are considering discarding. You needn’t say much; let them think through each item and come to a conclusion. Their job is to develop these skills; yours is to listen while they do so.

Be a cheerleader. Sometimes, we all need an extra boost when things get difficult. Calling to remind them of a homework assignment, telling them you believe they can do it, and noticing when they are doing a good job are all good cheerleading strategies.

Help with hauling. Many people who hoard have accumulated too much clutter that it would take them a year or more to discard it all by themselves. This makes it easy to get discouraged because progress is slow. Coaches are very helpful when they roll up their sleeves and help remove items from the home, provided that the person with the hoarding problem makes all the decisions and remains fully in charge of the process.

Accompany the person on non-acquiring trips. People who acquire too many things will need to practice going to a tempting store or yard sale and not buying anything. It can be extremely helpful to have someone go along to help them resist temptation and make the trip a success.

Even the most well-meaning coaches can make themselves less helpful by using wrong strategies. Here are some **DON'Ts**:

Don't argue with the person about what to get rid of and what to acquire. Debates about the usefulness of an item or the need to get rid of it will only produce negative emotional reactions that don't facilitate progress. Instead, whenever you feel the conflict, take a break, relax a bit and remind yourself how difficult this is for the person with the hoarding problem. You can always come back to it later.

Don't take over decisions. It would certainly be easier and quicker if coaches simply took charge, decided what should stay and what should go, and hauled the clutter out themselves. But this method doesn't teach people how to manage their problem: the clutter will just build up again. Instead, be sure the person with the hoarding problem is in charge at all times and makes all the decisions.

Don't touch or move anything without permission. Imagine how you would feel if a well-meaning person came into your home and handled your things without permission. Doing this can damage the trust between you and make it impossible for the person to proceed.

Don't tell the person how he or she should feel. It can be very hard to understand why someone feels so sentimental about keeping what looks like trash to you or feels afraid to get rid of something that is clearly useless. But these feelings developed for reasons that are not always clear. Be as patient as you can. We know that coaching can be frustrating.

Don't work beyond your own tolerance level. To be a good coach, you have to take care of yourself first and then help your friend or family member. So feel free to set limits on how long and how much work you can do on any given occasion. Pat yourself on the back for your own efforts; helping someone who hoards is very hard work.

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