

What is Hoarding?

Hoarding is a recognised mental illness but has only been classified as a medical condition since 2017. It is when someone “acquires an excessive number of items and stores them in a chaotic manner, usually resulting in unmanageable amounts of clutter. The items can be of little or no monetary value” (NHS definition). It is distinct from collecting and from general clutter or mess. It becomes a significant problem when it interferes with everyday living and affects the quality of life of the person or their family. Historically, hoarding has been viewed as a ‘lifestyle choice’. However, it is important to recognise that hoarding is a diagnosable mental condition in its own right.

The most common type of hoarding can involve a single type of object like newspapers or a mixture of items such as clothes, food, containers and tools.

How common is it?

Research indicates that between 2% and 5% of the UK population show significant levels of hoarding, making hoarding behaviours more common than people might think - up to 7.3 million people. There could be over 2,500 people in East Lothian and 2,000 people in Midlothian with a hoarding issue.

Hoarding is found across all ages, ethnicities, genders and religions, challenging stereotypes that it is generally associated with older people.

Why is Hoarding a Public Protection issue?

Hoarding has a significant impact on the people living with and around the person, not just the person themselves, making it a Public Protection issue. There can be increased risk of house fire, self-care and health issues due to the unsanitary, infested environment and risk of trips and falls.

Inside hoarding homes, cultural norms of family life are squeezed out as parents become entrenched in the flow and placement of objects. Where severe hoarding exists, families rarely have space for shared activities, or they are forced to combine spaces inappropriately - such as when an older child has to sleep in the same bed as a parent. Sometimes children are forced to live in one space that serves multiple functions. A vacant spot on a couch is used for sleeping, doing homework, watching television, and eating.

Children may think that if they talk about their family situation, they could lose their parents and homes. Early in life, children of people who hoard are confused by their parents' behaviour. Parents can show clear signs of devotion, especially in areas that do not compromise hoarding. However, it can reduce their access to a functioning physical home where they can play, learn and relax. And they internalise the message that their parent's objects are more important than they are.

“As objects invade spaces in homes, they block usual pathways to intimacy. Relationships occur in a vacant spot on a couch and the remaining edge of a table. In cases where only one parent is a hoarder, the non-hoarding parent runs the risk of eventually becoming disabled in one way or another” ([Chabaud, 2011](#))

Why do people hoard?

The backstory of someone who hoards can be complex and not fully known. Whilst the adult might be able to link the start of their hoarding to a traumatic period in their life, including abuse or bullying, loss, stress or isolation, it does not follow that someone who has such experiences will go on to become a hoarder. Research identifies that people growing up in a chaotic and cluttered environment might experience hoarding tendencies at a later stage. Lack of financial security in childhood may lead to someone feeling an increased need to accumulate items in later life. Some studies suggest there are some genetic factors, but there is a complex interaction of different factors that may come into play.

What is the impact of hoarding?

Feelings of fear, shame and embarrassment can prevent someone from seeking and accepting help. It is important to understand the perspective of the individual and the importance they place on the items they hoard – to us, the items hoarded might look like ‘rubbish’ but they will be significant to the person.

The impact of hoarding can be far reaching. Loneliness can be further exacerbated by keeping a distance from others to prevent someone knowing about the situation. Money problems and housing problems can develop if someone cannot keep on top of letters and bills, or get repairs done to the home. In extreme cases, someone can physically be at risk if they cannot get out of the home quickly in a fire.

However, only about 5% of people who have a hoarding problem come to the attention of professionals.

What is the Clutter Image Rating Scale?

People have very different ideas about what it means to have a cluttered home, and no two homes look exactly alike. The [Clutter Image Rating Scale](#) is a rising pictorial scale of nine photos showing clutter in three rooms: the living room, bedroom and kitchen, and is an internationally recognised assessment tool.



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9

How can we help someone who hoards?

- Learn more about the stories behind hoarding directly from those who hoard – to help your understanding which in turn can help your response.
- Be aware of how the person may react – listen to what the person says and understand the emotions that might be behind their words and behaviours.
- Understand how much insight the adult has about their hoarding – they may not share your concerns.
- Assess the level of severity – identifying and classifying hoarding behaviour can be subjective and what it means may vary from person to person. The layout of each home is different, and items may be stored at different levels within a room. Use the Clutter Image Rating Scale to measure the level of clutter in the home.
- Recognise that responding to hoarding is not a quick fix – someone who has developed a hoarding problem has built this up and sustained this over time. Doing a deep clean will not fix the issue, rather can make things worse. Whilst the person needs to be safe in their home, which involves the need to support removal of some of the clutter to do so, this needs to be done sensitively and involving the adult.
- Focus on relationship-based practice. Building a relationship over time, going at the adult's pace, and being prepared to provide longer-term support are key elements.
- Remember that Adult Support and Protection and Child Protection frameworks exist to protect children and adults who are at risk of harm. Hoarding is a type of harm that can lead to the need to use those frameworks to support and protect the most vulnerable in our communities.

Where can I learn more?

Hear the stories of people who have lived experience of hoarding

[I'm a hoarder - it's my mess and it's who I am](#)

[Clare shares her experience of hoarding disorder to help raise awareness](#)

[Keith's story - a personal and touching film about hoarding](#)

Learn more about the impact on children

[The significance of growing up in a hoarded home](#)

[The hidden lives of children of hoarders](#)

[I just didn't see mess](#)

[Hoarding and Families - the stuff was more important than me](#)

Useful websites

<https://hoardinguk.org/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/hoarding-disorder/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/hoarding/about-hoarding/>

<https://hoarding.support/>

Procedures

If you are concerned that a child or adult is at risk as a result of hoarding, refer to the relevant Child Protection or Adult Support and Protection Procedures.

[Edinburgh and the Lothians Multi-agency Child Protection Procedures](#)

[EMPPC Multi-agency Adult Support and Protection Procedures](#)

Contact us

Our Lead Officers support the work of EMPPC and you can contact them for more information about anything in this newsletter, or about their role:

Alan Laughland, Adult Support and Protection
Lead Officer

alaughland@elothianmail.net

Eileen Marnoch, Child Protection Lead Officer

emarnoch@elothianmail.net

Jenny Mair, Co-ordinator - Protecting Women and
Girls Against Violence

jmair@eastlothian.gov.uk

What would you like to see in a future newsletter?

Please get in touch with us at

emppo@eastlothian.gov.uk



Find out more about us at

emppc.gov.uk