

Tortured Ambivalence:
Understanding the needs of the
hoarder's family

**Arizona Hoarding Conference:
Opening the Door to Change**

**Tuesday, May 17th, 2011
Scottsdale Civic Center Library**

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- Donna Austin, Founder, Children of Hoarders Website

- Participants in the Children of Hoarders Website

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Family Members

- All members of a hoarding family are affected
- Children of people who hoard appear to be most affected
- Effects vary depending upon
 - Age of the individual when the collecting and clutter becomes hoarding
 - Length of time in the home

Frost & Steketee 2010

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As Adults...

- Most individuals who grow up or who lived in a hoarded home develop effective coping skills
- Many "squalor survivors" have resilience and lead effective lives

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Growing Up in a Hoarded Home

All children who lived in hoarded households suffer negative consequences. Children who are younger than 10 seem to suffer more severe consequences than those who were older.

Before the age of 10 vs. after 10:

- More embarrassed
- Less happy
- Fewer friends
- More strained relationship with parent(s) who hoard

Frost & Steketee 2010

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Growing Up in a Hoarded Home

Children who lived in hoarded households before the age of 10 vs. after 10:

As adults,

- Higher degree of social anxiety & stress
- Continued strained relationship w/ parent
- Higher degree of hostility toward parent(s) who hoard

Frost & Steketee 2010

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Growing Up in a Hoarded Home a child...

- No adult visitors in the home
- No friends over, no sleepovers at home
- No cleaning, sorting, organizing
- May be exposed to health, safety hazards

- May experience anxiety
 - "Walking on eggshells"
 - worry about what can be touched, what can be moved
 - "doorbell dread"

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Growing Up in a Hoarded Home

- May witness parental conflict and divorce
 - divorce is common; often sends the hoarder into a tailspin, causing emotional trauma and resulting in increased hoarding behaviors
- May experience abuse
 - retaliation for touching or moving items
 - emotional or physical abuse

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Growing Up in a Hoarded Home

- Often develop accommodating behaviors
- May be pushed out of their bedrooms or house by encroaching possessions
- Often feel obliged to keep the family secret/protect the parent's secret
- May be removed from the home by Child Protective Services/may live in fear of being removed and placed in foster care

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As an adult...

- May have core imprint of being devalued, unimportant
- May not know what to keep, what to throw away. (Jessie Sholl can't find her college diploma, thinks she threw it out during a "purge.")
- May lack basic housekeeping knowledge and skills (post on COH: how often should I wash the sheets?)

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As an adult...

- May have lingering fear of becoming like parent and therefore react by behaving in opposite manner
 - living a minimalist life
 - frequent cleaning / purges
 - anxiety regarding shopping
 - anxiety with minimal clutter
- May be very uneasy hosts

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As an adult...

- May experience more significant conflict when merging lifestyles and domestic habits with a significant other
- May experience angry encounters with parent's neighbors, authorities, accusing neglect or abuse for permitting mom/dad to live in unsafe and hazardous conditions

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As an Adult...

- May have developed accommodating behaviors that carry over to adulthood
- Constantly worrying about the loved one dying in a fire, avalanche, "drowning" in their stuff
- Frequently shoulder a burden of figuring out what to do with an aging parent living in unsafe and unhealthy conditions

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As an Adult...

- May be viewed as
 - abandoning their parent
 - Spewing "venomous anger" toward parents (and subsequently to all hoarders)
- Often have conflicting feelings of love and resentment toward hoarding parent

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As an Adult...

- Out of frustration, may conduct clandestine cleanouts which can lead to family fractures
- Hoarding parent
 - may become angry, resentful, feeling abused, suicidal
 - may disown the adult child for stealing possessions and betraying their trust
 - May become more depressed, isolative and distrustful
- Adult child
 - may become more frustrated and angry
 - may emotionally "detach" from the parent
 - may experience additional guilt, shame
 - may develop a "tortured ambivalence" toward the parent

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As an Adult...

- May be frustrated and angry after years of attempting to help the parent and the parent continually denying they have a problem
- May have to step back emotionally from the parent and focus on their own self recovery
- If the parent who dies in the hoarded environment they may suffer from shame, intense guilt, and anger

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As an Adult...

- Can be resilient
- Can develop positive coping mechanisms
- Can contribute to improved conditions and behaviors for the parent who hoards

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Seeking/Receiving Help

- Therapists are mandated reporters; reporting the neglect related to living in hoarding environments often results in the hoarder or family member not returning to therapy
- Protective service workers, code enforcement, and other responders, if not familiar with ways to work with hoarders may respond inappropriately with traumatic results

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For Professionals

- Family members feel victimized by hoarding
- Be sensitive to the family member's anguish with the situation

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An e-mail from an adult child of a person with hoarding disorder:

"We are preparing for my aunt's burial happening this afternoon-she was sadly one of the extreme types of people who hoard, ya know-the human waste type? (My mom just inherited *another* hoarded house, woo hoo!) Anyhoo-

My aunt died sooner than she should have and it was a result of her squalorous/unsanitary conditions."

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"So my aunt adamantly refused to accept any offered help from the family who compassionately, constantly tried. After years and years of her refusals, and she being a "competent adult," we had no choice but to detach from her hoarding, or just keep banging our heads against the walls. **"She was a competent adult and had a right to live the way she wanted,"** was the advice we got from all professionals. So attached is a photo of her bed where the EMTs found her, where her infection and bed sores were so bad the doctors were going to cut away part of her tail bone that had been eaten away. She died before they could do the operation."

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"She was not abandoned. We were following her wishes. We had to detach in our own separate ways, to be able to live with ourselves and the guilt of knowing how one of our family members was living and we were fully aware of it. (I reported self-neglect conditions to APS about her multiple times and we think she just wouldn't let them in when they came, as nothing came of it.) Will live with that guilt for a very, very long time. So if someone were to tell us we abandoned her, it just would make us all feel worse about something we already carry in silent shame."

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Conclusion

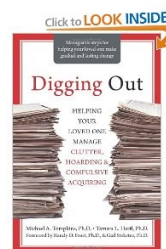
- Hoarding can cause untold misery for individuals who grew up in hoarded homes
- There is no easy solution
- Much more research is necessary
- Awareness continues to need to increase
- Be kind, always

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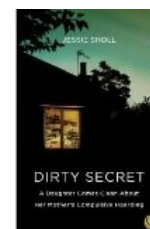
Recommended Reading



Digging Out: Helping your loved one manage clutter, hoarding and compulsive acquiring by Michael Tompkins and Tamara Hartl

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Dirty Secret: A daughter comes clean about her mother's compulsive hoarding by Jessie Sholl

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