

When throwing things away becomes hard: Why people hoard

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7-9 minutes

SINGAPORE: Say “hoarder” and images of stacked newspapers and boxes, little space to move, and in some cases, scurrying cockroaches come to mind.

These are the kinds of homes that Habitat for Humanity Singapore has entered and tried to turn around. Decluttering them, however, does not mean entirely ridding them of unwanted items.

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“When you use the word declutter, we are always assuming that we are able to get the hoarder to fully declutter but in our experience, we have not seen too many cases of that happening for those who severely hoard things,” said Mr Yong Teck Meng, the housing charity’s national director.

It is a “huge challenge”, he told [CNA938](#).

“Every item you want to discard, you need to get the permission of the hoarder. Maybe about one hour, two hours down into the activity of decluttering, the hoarder will tell you that he or she is not able to go on because it's very traumatic to him, so then you have to stop,” he said.

What is more common is reducing the severity of hoarding to some extent, said Mr Yong.

Among the homes his organisation has tried to improve is one in Jurong that was so blocked that its occupier had to climb over a small mountain of items just to get inside. At another home, 33 visits over one-and-a-half years led to the clearing of just one-third of its contents.

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WHY DO PEOPLE HOARD?

The root cause of hoarding behaviour is complex, Senior Minister of State for National Development Sim Ann [said in Parliament](#) on Monday (Sep 12). She was responding to several questions from Members of Parliament on the issue which came to the fore after a [fire in a cluttered home](#) left one man dead.

The Singapore Civil Defence Force said at the time that the firefighting and damping down operation for the incident was [very challenging](#) as the entire unit contained "a large volume of debris that was closely packed together from wall to wall".

Hoarding could be a symptom of underlying mental health conditions like obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) or developed after trauma or deep grief, she said.

The authorities are working on 260 active hoarding cases that remain "protracted and unresolved" because it is difficult to gain hoarders' cooperation to declutter, Ms Sim added.

Hoarding could also be linked to sentimental reasons.

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Mr Sng Hock Lin, a PhD student at the Singapore University of

Social Sciences who did a study on hoarding behaviour, said that he met a senior who was collecting stuffed toys and keeping them wrapped in plastic bags.

She had managed to accumulate discarded carnival tickets to collect the toys. When asked why, she said she was deprived of such toys during her difficult childhood, Mr Sng said.

“To her, it's a lot of memories of the childhood that she faced and also the emotional connection to those stuffed toys,” he said.

HOW THINGS ACCUMULATE

Hoarders might have difficulty discarding or parting ways with their possessions regardless of the actual value of the items, said clinical psychologist Stephanie Chan from Annabelle Psychology.

She gave examples of items like pieces of paper and plastic containers.

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They may think they need to keep the items for next time or think of turning them in for a small profit, she said.

“What happens in a very cluttered environment is that these things start to take over the environment in a very disorganised manner that you no longer know where that one tin you have kept, maybe two weeks ago, has disappeared to,” she said.

“So you just think to yourself, maybe I need to collect another one just in case I need it again next time.”

The hoarder also has a problem trying to perceive what is of value, Mr Yong said.

“To us, it may look like a piece of junk, but to the hoarder, it could be as precious as a pound of gold,” he said.

“They keep collecting stuff and they keep accumulating for no conceivable purpose.”

However, a suggestion that the items should be discarded could bring about a “significant amount of distress” in such individuals, said Ms Chan.

Such distress would be a distinguishing factor between someone who simply has no time to clean up and someone who has a hoarding disorder, a mental health condition, said Ms Chan.

“The fine line between collecting and hoarding would be that the latter would impact the living spaces of that person to the point of endangering the safety of that person,” she said.

WHO ARE THE HOARDERS?

Research has shown that there is a larger proportion of hoarders who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, said Ms Chan.

“If you think about it, this demographic would be more likely to live in smaller houses. It makes it a lot quicker for their things to clutter up and to build up to the extent that is unsafe restricting their movement,” she said.

She added that such individuals are also more likely to hoard if they're concerned about their financial ability to replace something, she said.

Mr Yong said that while his organisation serves people from lower income brackets, it does get requests from people who may be of higher socio-economic status, like those who live on

landed property and in condominiums.

Age-wise, research shows that hoarding is about three times more prevalent in those aged above 55 compared to in younger adults, Ms Chan said.

HELPING THE HOARDERS

Mr Sng said helping hoarders takes a lot of compassion, patience and understanding.

Building relationship and trust is key, he said, adding that professionals may also be able to help.

“It takes a whole village and the community to come together ... to help them,” he said.

Helping hoarders may need to begin with listening to them and asking them about their thoughts and concerns, said Ms Chan.

“A lot of times actually, such hoarders are distressed about their living environments, but they have perhaps sort of resigned to the fact that it has gotten to such a point that is beyond their control,” she said.

While professional help may be part of the solution, the hoarders may not have the awareness that there may be an issue with what they are doing in the first place, she said.

“It is important for them to know because only when they know that it’s an issue can they start accepting help,” she said.

An ambitious plan to clear up the home may be too overwhelming for them, she added.

“Some of them ... might have anxiety attacks, because they have, in their mind, associated a lot of significance to these items, even though rationally and objectively we know that they

are not (significant)," she said.

She added that there is a "high chance" of relapse for the condition, but being in therapy with a mental health professional could act as a "buffer" for the relapse.

"If you are saying (they should go) from a very cluttered corridor to a space that is spick and span, that's quite a far reach," she said.

"But at least to be able to keep things organised in a way that makes their living space more safe for themselves and for the neighbours - that could be a goal to work towards."