Creating Effective Hoarding Interventions: Setting the Stage for Success

Elspeth Bell, Ph. D., Licensed Psychologist

Compulsive hoarding, characterized by excessive acquisition of items and extreme difficulty in letting go of them, is considered very difficult to treat. There is no “cure,” but rather there are interventions and treatments that work to minimize and manage the hoarding-related behaviors. Through cognitive behavior therapy, collaboration with an organizer, medication where appropriate, and other interventions, it is possible to achieve successful treatment interventions. So why is it so difficult to achieve success when there are these effective interventions available?

I hate to be the one to say it but success doesn’t come without work and it doesn’t happen overnight. That being said, success is attainable and progress is sustainable provided the appropriate efforts are made. One key effort takes place before a single item is sorted or an acquisition is avoided – planning. Planning for success greatly increases the likelihood of achieving success. Consider this preparation as laying the foundation for all subsequent efforts.

Imagine someone makes the decision to eat healthier. Would you recommend stocking the kitchen with vegetables and whole grains or cookies and ice cream? Having the proper supplies on hand to support healthier choices makes it that much more likely that those healthier choices will be chosen. There’s a similar approach with exercise – putting on sneakers is more likely to result in a workout than putting on pajamas. That’s all well and good for someone who wants to lose a few pounds, but how does this translate to someone looking to shed a few pounds (or more) of clutter? Here are some effective guidelines to help lay the foundation for productive decluttering efforts:

* Make an appointment with yourself

Schedule a time for decluttering – a start and a stop time. When you commit to a time, there’s a greater chance that you will actually use that time to work toward your goals. For example, I scheduled multiple chunks of time to work on writing this article rather than “winging it” and catching writing opportunities where I could. If I had taken that approach, this article would still be very much in the conceptual stage. I speak from experience. Figure out what time of day works best for you, taking into consideration other obligations or responsibilities (like work), energy level, and distractions (such as when other people are around). My weekday decluttering tends to be before dinner or before going to bed because there are fewer distractions in the home at these times and I have definite end-times. On the weekends, I opt for early morning before anyone else is up and moving. It’s an hour or two of quiet “me” time where I can sort through papers and not worry about someone else disrupting my piles.

* Make that appointment a regular commitment
Schedule time everyday and you’re more likely to get consistent decluttering done on a regular basis. It’s much more difficult to be consistent when decluttering is planned on a haphazard or every-other-day basis – life has a habit of getting in the way, with unanticipated events and emotionally “off” days. When scheduling your decluttering appointments with yourself, remember that they don’t need to be at the same time each day, but they do need to be put on the calendar. Consider them “repeating appointments” with yourself and treat them as though they are sacred times.

**Have supplies on hand**

Imagine you’re baking a cake and, mid-preparation, you realize that you’re out of eggs. Assuming you don’t abandon your baking endeavors at that moment, you might run out to the store, do some other grocery shopping while you’re there, return home later than planned, realize you left the half-prepared batter sitting out, throw away the batter, and then put off your baking to another day. Decluttering without the right supplies can be equally defeating and frustrating. Put together a “decluttering kit” so that the things you’ll need are within reach. I would include containers for the various predetermined “keep” categories (bankers boxes are great for this, with handles and lids), permanent markers for labeling the boxes, trash bags, recycling containers, and bags/boxes for donate or give-away items. Other supplies might include rubber gloves, a notepad and pen for keeping track of items or ideas, and a timer to keep track of how much time you’ve spent decluttering.

Decluttering is generally viewed as the key intervention for reducing clutter and managing one’s physical space. However, these efforts can be readily undone if acquiring behaviors continue and new items are regularly introduced into the space. When laying the foundation for non-acquisition, consider the following:

**Make a list**

A client once said that it was impossible to go into the grocery store and only buy items included on the grocery list. It’s not impossible, but it is a challenge. Putting together a thorough, detailed shopping list takes forethought. Is it really possible to anticipate menu choices for an entire week before walking into the grocery store? What if something in the store serves as a trigger, reminding you that there was something else you were planning to get? And don’t forget coming across those items on sale. When encountering a “forgotten” item, consider adding it to the next grocery list. That way, if it really is a necessary purchase it will be taken care of with the next trip to the store. However, if it’s an impulse purchase, there will have been sufficient space created to help with regaining perspective on the choices being made. And remember, there’s no rule that says you can only go to the store once a week.

**Gauge your emotions**

Is it an emotional buy or something you intentionally planned to purchase in advance? Before entering a situation where you’re faced with acquisition opportunities, evaluate your emotional state. If you’re feeling vulnerable, postpone the trip until you’re feeling stronger and more capable of resisting the urge to acquire. Very rarely is there a
situation where you have to decide about an acquisition that very moment. Give yourself permission to wait, as it’s more likely to result in a positive and rewarding experience with less guilt or remorse afterward.

**Consider your route**

When out and about, do you find yourself passing locations that are particularly tempting? Perhaps there’s a store or a recycling center where you’ve come across great finds in the past. Each time you’re in that area, you seem to switch over to “auto-pilot” and head directly there. Disrupt that mindless, unintentional approach by taking a different path to your ultimate destination. Is the Goodwill on Main Street particularly tempting? Then drive down Elm Street instead so that you don’t even have to lay eyes on the storefront, let alone be tempted to think about what might be available inside. Consider “out of sight, out of mind” and keep those triggering opportunities off your radar.

Whether sorting, recycling, discarding, or resisting acquiring, there are some approaches that are universal. While they apply to all aspects of living a healthy, fulfilling life, they can be applied specifically to these hoarding-related situations:

**Adopt a positive mindset**

Think about the carrot and the stick. What is your carrot when it comes to these decluttering and non-acquiring efforts? All too often, people focus on the stick and become angry, dejected, or resentful of the situation. Identify specific benefits associated with each goal. When those negative voices in the back of your head start to get louder, stop and remind yourself of all the good that’s happening. Pay attention to what you have accomplished, the challenges you’ve overcome, and your progress toward each goal. This might sound like a “Pollyanna” approach, but there truly is a benefit to talking to oneself in a positive voice. If you were to talk to your best friend or closest family member in the critical and disheartening way in which you talk to yourself, how long would they stay in your company? We don’t have the luxury of walking away from our own thoughts, making it all the more important to learn to talk to oneself in a manner that’s supportive, encouraging, and reinforcing of constructive efforts.

**Recruit a support team**

Trying to tackle this, or any challenging situation, on your own can be overwhelming. Making efforts to improve your life shouldn’t feel like a punishment where you’re serving your time in solitary confinement. Allow other people – family, friends, professionals, and volunteers – into your life so that they can help you reclaim your space. They may be able to do things for you that you’re unable to do for yourself. Recruit team members that will help you structure your decluttering time by scheduling appointments for sorting. This can help reinforce your attempts to make a schedule for yourself with your individual decluttering appointments. Ask your support team to keep track of progress, documenting what has been let go of so you can have that reminder to help motivate you on a down day. Allow others to do the physical labor of delivering items to their “new homes,” such as local donation or recycling centers, once you’ve
decided to let go of them. While an effective support team does introduce an element of accountability for decluttering and non-acquiring, it also introduces rewards and recognition for all the efforts and progress you make.

*Take care of yourself*

“Without your health, you haven’t got anything.” It’s not uncommon for the clients I’ve worked with to consistently put other people ahead of themselves. Not only are they second or third on their list of priorities, they’re often dead last. Let me be the flight attendant instructing you on your flight to a decluttered space – secure your oxygen mask before helping others with theirs. Without taking the time to take care of yourself, how will you have the energy or the resources to take care of others? While it may feel as though you’re being selfish, I consider it being self-focused. When you focus on other people, it can serve as a distraction from your own anxieties and worries. Focusing on yourself may feel uncomfortable to begin with. However, by paying attention to your thoughts, feelings, and actions you can become more aware of themes in your life and how to address them. This is one of the first steps to creating change in your life and your environment.

Being faced with the prospect of decluttering your space can be overwhelming. Approaching it without a game plan can be paralyzing. Take the time to identify your goals, evaluate your tools and resources, and map out your plan of attack. While it’s never possibly to always “be prepared” (regardless of what the scouts say), it is possible to increase the likelihood of reaching your goals of conquering hoarding-related behaviors by taking a little time up-front to set the stage for success.