

12-16-11 Tough and Tender

The best part of my job is getting to help people and not being labeled as co-dependent! That said, it doesn't mean being helpful is easy. What's the right approach? What's the next step? Who can I team up with for support and expertise?

Sometimes the first team I meet is the family and best friends of the person needing assistance. How fortunate they are to have a caring family and friends! Sometimes the family even jumps out of the woodwork, grateful for the assistance because, as you probably know, we all tend to be more stubborn with our own family than with a stranger and the extended family might have been trying to help someone for years. This is what I often see in housing situations where someone's home has become so cluttered that is unsafe. The extended family might have an idea but they're fuzzy on the details and they are hoping it is not as bad as they imagine. Realizing the full extent of the situation is left to their imagination because they might not have entered the home for many years. "Does the word "hoarder" apply?" they wonder. They might have their suspicions but denial is a wonderful thing; that is, until there's no denying it anymore.

The family continues to hope until something becomes the wakeup call. Usually the call is a literal one, from the hospital, where their loved one has been brought with a broken ankle or some other injury due to the unsafe conditions inside the home. The hospital might ask, "Is it okay to discharge your brother to his home? He will need some help for a while, you know." "Ahh...I'm not sure, actually. It's been a while. Let me check that out and I'll talk to you when I come in to visit him." Eventually, they have to check out that home and if it is not safe, then there are decisions to be made, facts to be admitted and lots and lots of work to be done.

If the local Fire Department was called for that injury, then I am called because of what they saw. Sometimes Animal Control is called because there are too many animals or evidence indicates the owner was not capable or willing to care for them properly. If the animals are sick or neglected or are at risk, then calling MSPCA (Mass. Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) can be a very effective tool. The Building Inspector might be called in the case of structural issues, as storing/packing/stacking many cubic yards of material in one area can overload the weight-bearing capacity of floors and beams.

No matter how small or large that initial assessment team is, it is the approach to the problem that, I have to admit, I find fascinating. I recall a man talking to me about the options available for the home where his sister had lived for most of her life. He told me he didn't think anyone but his sister had been inside that house in twenty years! He'd taken a quick look to see if it was safe for her to return there with her recuperating injury and realized, with no uncertainty, she couldn't go back there.

After receiving a call and getting some of the background, he and his wife came to my office one day. The husband tells me he's thinking maybe the house even has to be demolished. His wife reminds him that his sister might actually have something of value in there. His eyes roll. I agree with his wife, saying, "And she probably knows exactly where it is. Hoarders tend to think spatially. She might say something like, "Five feet over that way, in what used to be the dining room and about two feet up from the floor, there is a box with my birth certificate and some money." The wife felt validated. She gave her husband a nod.

We continued the discussion, with my glance going back and forth from husband to wife, agreeing with both. He wanted to address practicalities and she wanted to address emotional needs. Both did need attending. He reached his limit, however, when his wife suggested that, if the house really did have to be razed, that there could be a ceremony to say goodbye to it. Oh, brother, the husband rolled his eyes and began to turn away. I told the wife I liked her idea of the ceremony and I'd be honored to assist in any way I could. She smiled, once again validated. I looked at her husband and said, "It's good to have more than one perspective. When combined, it provides just the right balance. You're tough and you'll need to be. Your wife is tender and that will let your sister know she's loved. It's a difficult situation where your sister will need to be involved and take responsibility and you two will be there to support her in good ways. It takes being both tough and tender."

As they left, I said to Peggy, our wonderful administrative assistant "And that is why there are both men and women on this planet."

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. She invites you to tell your stories of dealing with hoarding. It isn't easy, is it? You can reach her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us