

## 12-21-18 Some of the Most Intelligent, Creative and Sweetest People

Hoarding has been recognized as a form of compulsive behavior for a very long time, but it wasn't until 2013 that the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) included hoarding as an official mental disorder diagnosis, "assigned to individuals who excessively save items and the idea of discarding items causes extreme stress". Before 2013, clinicians had to use other diagnoses, such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, for record keeping and for insurance purposes.

A diagnosis can be received with relief when the person has been struggling with a mysterious illness, with no hope for treatment because the physicians do not know what they are treating. When it comes to mental disorders, though, there is so much stigma attached to them, I am not sure if the recipient feels shame, denial, or what. It is a societal problem on so many levels, for instance the stigma attached to substance use disorder. While the vocabulary is evolving and becoming more sensitive, talking about substance use, rather than addiction, the word "disorder" is still there, and it is tough to get past that.

Used literally to describe the hoarder's surroundings, the word disorder is very applicable, or so it appears on the surface, to others viewing the living quarters of the one who hoards.

When you get to know the person, though, you discover there is more than one definition of "order" and there is more than one way of viewing the world and one's surroundings.

The opposite of disorder, in this physical, literal way is something along the lines of tidy and organized. The medical meaning of disorder is a mental condition that is not normal or healthy.

The person who hoards sees their world in their own way and it might be very different from how others see and organize their stuff. The hoarder is known to be intelligent and creative, remembering shapes and colors and the spatial relationship of items within the space. You ask them where something is, and they know, much to your surprise! He or she might say, "Oh, that, yes, that is about 12 inches down over there on that side of the dining table. It is in a red bag." (You are thinking, "There's a dining table there?!")

Rather than getting bogged down with varying philosophical viewpoints, as the health agent I first work with the Building Inspector and Fire Chief on very practical issues. Does the person (not hoarder; the person) have two safe egresses?

Are those paths wide enough? Is the structure sound? Are the items/materials/stuff piled up to the point of being an overload for the floor's structure?

After that initial assessment, a plan begins to take shape and every case is different. Their finances, their physical capabilities, their willingness to purge, their trust or mistrust of me and others dealing with the situation. Do they have family? Do they have friends? Has their family tried to help but they were ignored and offers to help were rejected as an intrusion? (Never assume their family does not care.)

As part of the plan and while talking about friends and family, it is important to find out if my new friend has a life of his or her own. Is there a health proxy and power of attorney? Is there a primary care physician? If the answers are "yes", those people may or may not want to talk to me. If the answers are "no", I can at least point out the importance of having them. Everyone needs to make these choices, when they are of sound mind. Those who know you best can decide for you, as you would have chosen. Speaking of sound mind, a person can have a "disorder" and still be of sound mind.

I have my own definition of people with the hoarding disorder. They are some of the most intelligent, creative and sweetest people I know.

There is so much more to say! If you would like me to visit your organization and speak about hoarding, please contact me. It would be an honor.

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