

3-4-11 Self Neglect and Public Health

It is easier to stop abuse of another than it is to stop someone from abusing him or herself. Neither one is easily resolved but they do share some commonalities. Laws allow the recipients of abuse to be assisted immediately by restraining orders and assisted in the long run, if necessary, with prosecution of the abuser. If the victims of abuse do not receive assistance and guidance with understanding the reasons for their silence and acceptance of the unacceptable and what they can do to prevent becoming a victim in the future, it can happen again. Also, their own misery can continue with self-imposed guilt that the abuse and the resulting consequences were somehow their fault.

People who mistreat themselves are similarly in need of counseling so that they can understand why and how they are perpetuating self-abuse and they need assistance in learning what is automatic for most: loving one's self. Eleanor Roosevelt is often quoted as saying, "No one can make you feel inferior without your own consent" but I have not heard her thoughts on the ease or difficulty of acquiring self-confidence.

Getting help is there in many forms and is critical for how our society and country will function. If you wish to report or receive help for an elderly person, contact your local council on aging. If you wish to report or receive help for a young person, contact your local school. You can go to your local police station to report abuse of another. Finding help for self-abuse is more challenging, though. It is not always as obvious as cutting one's own body. It might be more subtle and more secretive than that. Health agents are discovering instances of one form of self-abuse in housing circumstances.

Health agents deal with hoarding and all hoarding cases have some degree of filth because it is difficult to keep clean the rising piles and mounds of papers and objects. There are also sub-classes of hoarding. Animal hoarding is one sub-class on the rise, as animal lovers attempt to rescue more animals than they are capable of caring for. Those homes and yards and barns and pens result in a lot of filth, as the rescuers age and their volunteer help leaves and their finances dwindle but the "stuff" keeps arriving.

There is another sub-class of hoarding called "Diogenese Syndrome". The term, ironically, means living in squalor but is derived from Diogenese, a Greek philosopher who shunned materialism and lived an unconventional life in a tub or barrel and eating only what was given to him. He also engaged in cynical and amusing behaviors such as walking around with a lamp during the day, claiming he was searching for an honest man.

The reality of Diogenese Syndrome is anything but amusing, though. While the term usually refers to the elderly and indicates dementia, this condition can also apply to younger people, especially when they live alone. The elderly person can be helped in their own home with meals and cleaning services and engaging them in more social activities. If the dementia

has progressed to the point where these services are not enough, then nursing home placement may be the only choice.

The younger person who is living in filth has more than likely developed two lives: the public one and the private one. They can be masters of deceit, with perhaps a gym membership for showering and the frequent purchase of new clothes for those public and employment circumstances. This talent for avoiding the truth of their circumstances can allow them to achieve professional success while sinking ever more deeply into social isolation.

A health agent may become involved when the Fire Department responds to smoke detector alarms and unexpectedly has great difficulty entering because of stuff in the way. Then, once the egress is cleared enough to enter, they discover the deplorable conditions and contact the Board of Health. While there may not be a child to report to the Department of Family Services and there may not be an elder to report to Elders at Risk, if there are animals living in this squalor, that can be reported to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, for living in filth is considered cruelty to them.

The health agent is also responsible for dealing with the lack of sanitation in the home. It comes as a surprise when newbie health agents discover that the housing code applies to owner-occupied houses, in addition to the more frequently seen cases of rentals. It is not an easy choice to declare a house as uninhabitable but it allows for the person to be confronted with that which can be solved: living in an environment that is clean enough to prevent disease and safe enough to prevent harm.

By the time the person returns to the home, counseling services are in place and the home is safe to enter and it is the beginning of a whole new life. It is the beginning of a life where the owner can invite friends over. It is the beginning of a life that does not depend on constantly expending an exhaustive amount of energy on how to succeed at living a lie. Restoring a life is worth the effort.

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