How To Help A Hoarder

Q: How can I help my elderly neighbor who hoards?

A: Compulsive hoarding is a progressive and chronic condition that can begin early in life, and increase in severity as people get older.

Hoarding is an underreported and poorly understood mental health condition. As many as 15 million Americans are hoarders. There are people in your community who have been trained to help people with hoarding issues. Hoarding is a challenge that affects the elder, their family and community. Hoarding is one of the leading causes of eviction in Massachusetts.

Many people who hoard choose not to seek treatment, but are discovered by a neighbor. A private issue becomes public---and this can lead to anxiety and fear, causing the person to refuse help. They may have been traumatized previously by a major clean out, and will be very reluctant to ask for help again. It may take several contacts to develop enough trust for the elder to accept help.

92% of individuals with hoarding condition also have another co-occurring mental health issue, such as depression, anxiety, obsessive/compulsive disorder, or social phobia. Counseling is as critical as cleaning up the clutter.

A new guide says that without active participation from the person who hoards, the courts may choose to clean out the apartment, or force the person to leave their home, creating a new homeless problem. A person who hoards and gets no counseling help, will begin to hoard again at some point. The guide suggests that the hoarder must be part of developing a plan to deal with the clutter, including clear goals---which may start with maintaining safety in the home. Goals should also be measurable, like cleaning up one room at a time. Goals that seem insurmountable, can be broken down into smaller tasks, one week at a time. Help the hoarder to talk about what their apartment will look and feel like after the work is done. There may be a need for more support than just heavy cleanup. Therapy, companion support, or other needs should be brought up at the beginning.

When reaching the actual clean up stage, the elder should do some of the hands on work, to build a tolerance for de-cluttering and showing that they can, in fact, do the work. Supporting, building self-esteem, helping to stay focused and on task, and motivating the person to work towards their goals is the role of the coach or counselor.

Success in hoarding work is hard to define because everyone has a different view of what is good enough. If the elder feels successful in reaching their short and long term goals, and their home is safe and clear of health concerns---then let them manage their “chronic condition” on their own. It is important for the elder to see that they are in charge and that their ideas matter.

For more information about how to find help for hoarders in your area, how to work with a hoarder, how to develop a plan of action, or how to motivate a person dealing with hoarding---call 1-800-Age-Info and press “1” or review the new guide at http://forprofessionals.800ageinfo.com/2013/03/care-guide-for-hoarding.html