



Community Interest Page



Charlotte Hettena, Ph.D., Editor

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BOOK REVIEW

OVERCOMING COMPULSIVE HOARDING

FUGEN NEZIROGLU, Ph.D., JEROME BUBRICK, Ph.D.,
JOSE A YARYURA-TOBIAS, M.D.

Packrats of the world; there is a solution! This book gives practical suggestions on stopping the hoarding habit.

Although there are a number of self-help books on organizing and dealing with clutter, this is the first to describe the psychological aspects of the problem. It is clearly and compassionately written.

Hoarders are not the same as collectors, who take pride in their possessions. Hoarders rarely enjoy their accumulations but have severe anxiety when they contemplate discarding them. They may have obsessive thoughts about their possessions such as fear of running out of an item. The accumulated clutter may lead to functional impairments such as family or marital discord or social isolation.

In the chapter "Why do you save," the authors discuss some characteristic traits of hoarders such as fear of losing information, indecisiveness, fear of making a mistake, inability to prioritize, fear of memory loss and lack of organization. These traits taken together, especially indecisiveness plus fear of making a mistake, equal clutter.

Clutter can cause family and financial problems. In some cases the homes of compulsive hoarders present safety and health hazards. Accumulated dust may lead to allergies and asthma. In extreme cases, living conditions become so dangerous that the legal system becomes involved.

If compulsive hoarding causes more than minor problems, effective treatment is available. Some people may need medication and there are various drugs, particularly antidepressants (you don't have to be depressed to derive benefit from them.) A cognitive-behavioral therapist can be of great help.

However, for most people, the chapters on Applying Cognitive Strategies and Cleaning up the Clutter constitute a program that people can use on their own.

Cognitive strategies involve changing one's usual thought patterns. Automatic thoughts such as "I'm such a loser" have an absolute all or nothing quality to them and are likely to lead to feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed. If a person realizes that these thoughts are hypotheses, not facts, he or she can evaluate the accuracy of the "I'm a loser" thought: Do you consistently fail at everything you try? Do you have good qualities? Do you have multiple sources of information suggesting you are a loser, or is that idea coming solely from you? Using this technique of testing the truth of one's automatic thoughts, it is then possible to develop a rational response, for example, "I am working on getting control of my hoarding. I have many positive qualities, and I have people in my life who love and respect me." Flashcards can be used to reinforce more positive thoughts.

The chapter "Cleaning up the Clutter," outlining specific steps a person can take to change, represents the behavioral part of the program.

Clutter can only be cleaned up one step at a time. The authors suggest selecting one target area to begin with, preferably one that will produce some functional living space when it is cleared. A technique called "Three and a half boxes" is then used to pick up everything in the selected space, and put the items in different boxes, depending on whether they are to be saved and replaced in the target area, discarded, or otherwise disposed of. The contents of the boxes are then appropriately distributed. The person is then encouraged to take a picture of the freshly cleaned target area, to compare the space with what it looked like before.

After this first step, other areas are then targeted. Specific tips are given, such as what to do with newspapers and magazines. After the clutter has been cleared, the authors present a systematic program for organizing the home.

All the chapters contain exercises and checklists to help a person to analyze hoarding patterns and successfully combat them. There are a multitude of helpful hints for the hoarder who wishes to change.

If this carefully-laid out program is faithfully followed, you will have the satisfaction of no longer allowing clutter to take over your life.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND DAILY LIFE ON THE WEB

GLORIA S. ROTHENBERG, Ph.D.

Did you know that:

- Writing about your stress can actually help to reduce it?
- Imaginary play can help boost learning in children?
- Exercise can reduce depression?
- Even low levels of lead can adversely affect children's abilities?
- Television can help change behavior for the better?
- "Attitude inoculation" can help prevent your kids from smoking?
- A psychologist demonstrated that a third brake light in your car's rear window can reduce rear-end collisions by about 60% and thus helped to change car manufacturing?

These and many more important facts have been organized into a web site by the American Psychological Association (APA) to help inform the public about psychological research and its impact on families, schools, businesses, health care institutions and government.

It grew out of an initiative by the 2002 APA President, Dr. Phillip Zimbardo, to improve public knowledge about psychological research. You can access the site at www.psychologymatters.org. In addition to important research results, it also contains a glossary of psychological terms, tips for consumers on how to evaluate psychological research, an overview of the history of psychology, and links to other useful sites.

TURNING LEMONS INTO LEMONADE: Hardiness Helps People Turn Stressful Circumstances Into Opportunities

Why do some people suffer physical and mental breakdowns when faced with overwhelming stress while others seem to thrive? A study of downsizing by Illinois Bell Telephone provides some answers.

In 1981, the company laid off half its workers. The remaining workers faced radical changes in their jobs. Research results showed that about two-thirds of the employees suffered significant performance and health declines as a result of the extreme stress brought on by the massive changes. They experienced heart attacks, strokes, obesity, depression, substance abuse and poor performance reviews.

However, the other one-third actually thrived during the upheaval despite experiencing the same stressful events as their co-workers. These employees maintained their health, happiness and performance. Moreover, they felt renewed enthusiasm.

What made the groups so different? Psychologist Dr. Salvatore Maddi found that those who thrived maintained three key beliefs that helped them turn adversity into advantage: commitment, control and challenge attitudes. Commitment led them to strive to be involved in ongoing events, rather than feeling isolated. Control led them to struggle to try to influence outcomes, rather than lapse into passivity and powerlessness. Challenge led them to view stressful events, whether positive or negative, as opportunities for new learning.

There is no more extreme example of workplace stress than the battlefield. During the first Gulf war, the higher the hardiness of the Army reserve personnel sent into combat, the greater the ability of the soldiers to experience life—and combat-related stress without apparent negative health consequences, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression.

Results from these studies show that hardiness or resilience enhances performance, leadership, conduct, stamina, mood and both physical and mental health by giving people the courage and capacity to turn adversity into advantage.

Dr. Maddi used what they learned about the roots of hardiness to develop a training program to help stressed-out employees. Those that took part in the program reduced their anxiety, depression and other signs of strain, while increasing their job satisfaction and morale. These changes persisted after the training was over. This program, offered through the Hardiness Institute, is now widely used by organizations to improve worker performance and health. The Institute also offers a program for students that motivates them to do well, and to stay in and graduate from school.

Hardiness and resiliency research is being used by the American Psychological Association (APA) to help children, teenagers and adults to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, and the threats that

we face today. In 2003, APA launched “Resilience for Kids and Teens,” a school-based program which focuses on teaching skills for such problems as adapting to a new classroom, bullying, or even abuse at home. The campaign included the distribution of a special issue of *Time for Kids Magazine* to more than two million fourth through sixth graders and their teachers to help them learn the skills of resilience, using “kid-friendly” language.

APA has also partnered with the Discovery Health Channel to undertake a national, multi-media campaign designed to help Americans work through personal tragedies by learning strategies for resilience. This partnership was forced in the wake of the September 11 tragedy.

DEMATERIALIZING OUR KIDS

CHARLOTTE HETTENA, Ph.D.

Advertisers are more and more exploiting children in ways that harm them psychologically.

From advertising for junk food, to promotion of violent movies and violent video games, to curricula sponsored by energy companies that minimize the effects of global warming, to enlisting children to distribute free samples of toys that companies want to market, to implying on MTV that parents and teachers are dorks and nerds and creeps, the attempt to build a children’s consumer culture, literally from birth, is damaging kids’ mental health. The most popular commercials for eight-year olds have consistently been the Budweiser commercial!

Research done by Juliet B. Schor, Ph.D., an economist, shows that children who are more consumer involved become more depressed and anxious, have lower self-esteem and are more likely to fight with their parents. One of the marketers interviewed for this article actually said, “It is really harmful what we are doing; we tell the kids that without our product, they are nothing, worthless.” Research on both adults and children shows that the more we compare ourselves with others, the more we worry about keeping up, the worse off we are.

There are some tips that parents can use to help children resist excess materialism:

- Limit the time your children spend on line and watching TV. For youngsters who need help managing money and resisting advertising, see www.newdream.org/kids.
- Connect shopping and the environment. Talk to kids about what products are made of, who made them, and where stuff goes when discarded.
- Celebrate birthdays and holidays in non-consumerist ways. Check out www.simplifytheholidays.org
- When you say “no” to pleas for a product, say “yes” to something else. Enjoy such activities as cookie baking parties, fishing trips or adventures involving mystery and challenge. Encourage kids to get involved with causes and community service, so that they feel needed and have some purpose larger than themselves.

Adapted from an article in Hope magazine.

