



Research Article

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Overly Attached to Too Much

Summary of a Study on Why Hoarding Clients Have Trouble Letting Go *and How Professional Organizers Used Tailored Strategies to Help Them Declutter*

Summary

A study from the University of New Mexico reveals that with the help of specially trained professional organizers (POs), people with hoarding behaviors can declutter by untangling their extreme attachment to belongings.

Professor Catherine A. Roster's research, published by the *Journal of Consumer Affairs* in Summer 2015, discovered that:

1. Clients with hoarding behaviors were best served by specialist POs with appropriate skills and training in chronic disorganization.
2. Clients with hoarding behaviors were successful in decluttering when their POs identified: a) the clients' attachment styles and b) the meanings they assigned to their possessions.
3. Strategies that were uniquely tailored to clients' needs were most successful.

Impact of Hoarding Behaviors on Clients, Their Families, and the Community

- 2-4% of US adults (6-10 million adults) have hoarding behaviors
- Depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder are often associated with hoarding behaviors
- Hoarding can impair basic life functions and expose people to risks such as injury, fire, poor sanitation, and stress
- Relationships with family members are often strained because the people with this behavior do not see it as a problem and are resistant to treatment, thus exacerbating family tensions
- Hoarding cases pose a significant financial burden on the community (\$6 million are spent by public and private providers in San Francisco annually)

Background

It is natural to form attachments and assign meaning to belongings. Attachment is a sign of positive mental health and successful accomplishment of life goals. People create bonds with their possessions in two types of attachment styles:

- Attachment-seeking motive ("we-ness"): the need to keep things because they represent important connections with others, our heritage or tradition, or memories that foster connection to others
- Autonomy-seeking motive ("me-ness"): the need to keep things because they signify individuality, accomplishments, and control over the environment

4 Beliefs Associated with Hoarding Behaviors

Problems arise when people over-consume. This can stifle development of a

In 2015, the NAPO Board of Directors updated the association's mission statement to include a focus on a mounting demand for research and information. To fulfill this new part of the mission, the Board of Directors approved the formation of the new Information and Research Committee (IRC) in September 2015. An early project of the IRC was an outreach to NAPO Student Members with an opportunity for students to summarize research articles on key trends and topics impacting the organizing and productivity industry. The IRC is proud to share the first article resulting from this initiative.

—Nicole Chamblin • Chair, Information and Research Committee

healthy self-identity. Those with hoarding behaviors have extreme attachments to their things to the point that the bond gets in the way of using those items. This behavior can lead to an unmanageable volume of stuff that threatens their quality of life.

Previous research has identified four common beliefs associated with compulsive hoarding:

1. **extreme attachment** to objects as source of self-identity
2. reliance upon possessions to represent and enable **memories**
3. strong need and wish to have **control** over possessions
4. amplified sense of **responsibility** for belongings

Study Description

- the study invited 126 US-based POs who were a) members of The Institute for Challenging Disorganization and b) who had achieved or were seeking the Certified Professional Organizer in Chronic Disorganization (CPO-CD®) certification
- 28 of those POs completed an online survey

Key Findings

- One of the strongest attachments people with hoarding disorders form is the belief that their belongings bond them to others. They fear that letting go implies they no longer care about the relationship and that the meanings embodied in the objects will be erased permanently. For these “we-ness” attachments, POs in the study successfully used strategies such as storytelling, transferring objects’ meanings into photos or collages, and having the client avoid touching the objects.
- In the “me-ness” attachment style, people with hoarding behaviors exhibit the need to keep belongings because they can control their environment through them. For example, objects served as memory cues for one client who had to have piles of things visible in order to remember them and whose perfectionism caused her to waste time picking bits of paper from the shredder. In other cases, clients’ experiences of deprivation contributed to an extreme need for control. In another example, when POs gathered the mass of categorized belongings

into one place, clients were stunned with the volume and able to let go.

- The study also discovered that some tactics such as meaning-matched discarding (making sure an item “went to a good home”) worked for both types of attachment styles; however, using emotion-based strategies such as “friends, acquaintances, and strangers” annoyed clients with a primarily “me-ness” style.
- In an increasingly digital world, how clients thought of their extended selves differed according to their “we-ness” or “me-ness” attachment style. For those with a “we-ness” style, transferring memories into other forms that they can still see and touch regularly satisfied their emotional needs for connection. Those with a “me-ness” style seemed satisfied with this strategy also, but, in contrast, they rarely accessed those digitized forms.
- Finally, the study revealed the value of a trained PO’s ability to connect skillfully three elements when working with hoarding clients: attachment style, beliefs about an object’s meaning, and appropriate decluttering strategies.

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Resources

- Catherine A. Roster, PhD, associate professor of marketing at the University of New Mexico: www.roster@unm.edu
- Institute for Challenging Disorganization: www.challengingdisorganization.org
- National Association of Professional Organizers: www.napo.net
- Institute on Compulsive Hoarding and Cluttering: www.mentalhealthsf.org/programs/ichc

For further information about this article or the research study *Help, I Have Too Much Stuff!: Extreme Possession Attachment and Professional Organizers* published by the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, contact Judy Dang at judy@judydang.com.

"It is natural to form attachments and assign meaning to belongings. Attachment is a sign of positive mental health and successful accomplishment of life goals."

summary of research study HOARDING BEHAVIORS & STRATEGIES USED BY PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZERS

Clients with hoarding behaviors are best served by professional organizers with specialist training.



1 WHICH ATTACHMENT STYLE?

We-ness or Me-ness



2 WHAT MEANINGS ARE ASSIGNED TO BELONGINGS?

- self-identity
- memories
- control
- responsibility



3 WHAT STRATEGIES WILL WORK BEST WITH THIS CLIENT?

Clients with hoarding behavior require a capable & trained professional organizer.

FIND A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZER
napo.net

GET SPECIALIST TRAINING
challengingdisorganization.org