

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I am a 59-year-old man who works full-time as a professional. I am intelligent and organized in my mind. However, I have a big problem that has caused many other problems in my life. I am a slob. My house is a big mess and has been for years. I have difficulty throwing things away. I am relatively neat and clean about my personal self. I have some obsessive-compulsive disorders and problems with depression. These problems have prevented me from having a long-term relationship with a female. I'm very embarrassed with my problems but have never been able to solve them. Can I get help with this disorder? Is it too late to change? I am nearing retirement and I am scared I will be lonely in this big mess of a house. Thanks for the advice.

-- Outer Banks Slob

Dear OBX Slob,

You show good insight into your problem, in spite of the difficulties it causes, and that is the first step toward making real and important changes in your life.

Being a "slob" is a matter of degree. Remember the old TV show "The Odd Couple?" A great deal of the humor in that series was based on the constant conflicts between the characters of Oscar Madison – the easy-going slob – and Felix Unger – the uptight neatnik. It's clear that people can have very different standards of tidiness and still fall within the "normal" range of behavior. Problems usually arise when people at different ends of this normal continuum have to live together, and suddenly one person's habit of leaving unwashed dishes in the sink, tossing dirty socks on the floor, and neglecting to hang up clothes, runs head-on into a partner/spouse/roommate's white-glove tests for fastidiousness.

But, Mr. OBX Slob, in your letter, you are describing a pattern of behavior called "hoarding," and that is a clinical manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder, as you point out. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (sometimes called OCD) is a type of anxiety syndrome in which time-consuming obsessions and compulsions interfere with normal routines, life, and relationships. It may help to know that you're not alone. OCD affects some four million American men and women, though hoarding is the least common, and the least understood manifestation of these disorders.

Although psychologists are not entirely certain what causes hoarding, a recent study showed that about 80% of people with this problem grew up in homes in which one or both of their parents hoarded. Another study conducted at UCLA found that there were some brain differences between hoarders and people who did not experience this difficulty. Hoarding usually begins in adolescence, but can be triggered at any point in the life cycle by a traumatic event – like the death of a loved one or a divorce. Some people report that they began collecting things that reminded them of the person who died or left them.

Hoarding causes people to feel a great deal of shame. But hoarders are not psychotic; they recognize that their behavior is excessive, disruptive and not "normal".

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony

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Because of embarrassment, hoarders don't talk about their symptoms with others. The problem often goes largely unreported or undiagnosed, unless, as in your case, it causes serious interpersonal problems, or comes to the attention of a landlord or the public health department.

There are key differences between an individual with a clinically significant obsessive-compulsive disorder, and someone who collects things, or is just a messy housekeeper. Three behaviors distinguish hoarders: Hoarders *compulsively acquire things* that most people would consider to be meaningless or of no value, such as old newspapers or empty soup cans.

Secondly, they *keep these things in a state of wild disorganization*. We're not talking about archiving newspapers in orderly files by subject, collecting stamps neatly organized in books, or displaying carefully arrayed Hummel figurines. Instead, the objects that cannot be thrown away are dumped in heaping mounds all over the place -- sometimes spilling out of the oven or kitchen sink -- and often encroaching on living space. Sometimes whole rooms are filled with the hoarded soda cans, old Christmas trees, junk mail, outdated catalogues, or broken appliances. This clutter has a disturbing effect on other people, and prevents the hoarder from living a normal life or having healthy relationships.

Third, and most important, hoarders have difficulty making decisions about throwing things away, and *experience very high levels of anxiety* when they attempt to discard these useless items. People without this disorder have no such emotional response to tossing an empty cereal box into a trashcan. Cognitive behavioral therapy -- in which a therapist will help you make decisions and practice letting go of these objects without distress -- has been shown to be effective in treating this disorder. Often a therapist will recommend anti-depressant medication as part of the treatment plan. But medication without therapy only masks the symptoms.

There are lots of good resources to learn more about hoarding and other Obsessive Compulsive Disorders. You can find some good information at the Anxiety Disorders Association of America (www.adaa.org), The American Psychological Association (www.apa.org), and in Bruce Hyman's book *The OCD Workbook*, among many others. You can -- and should -- get professional help with this problem. Remember, it is never too late to change, and with courage and perseverance you can recover and reinvent your life. You can do it!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949 *Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D. is a writer, personal coach, motivational speaker, clinical psychologist and producer/host of the "HeartWaves" radio program (WVOD-FM, 99.1 at 12:40 weekdays).*

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