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Why do people hoard?

There are various reasons why people hoard; I've already touched on some of them in Chapter 1. Hoarding expert Dr Gail Steketee of Boston University, co-author with psychologist Dr Randy Frost of several books including *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (see 'Further reading'), says that there can be a number of contributing factors, including:

- being brought up in a chaotic or confusing home, or moving frequently;
- cognitive issues that affect decision making and problem solving;
- attention deficit disorder;
- anxiety and/or depression;
- excessive guilt about waste;
- genetics and family history, given that hoarding behaviours often tend to run in families.

It's well documented that hoarding tendencies can be triggered by certain life events. Research indicates that trauma, as well as learned behaviour from being raised in a hoarded home, can contribute to hoarding tendencies. The death of a loved one, divorce, eviction or losing one's possessions in a fire can all contribute, according to researchers at the Mayo Clinic, the medical research group based in Rochester, Minnesota. Dr Jessica Grisham of the University of New South Wales found that the link between hoarding behaviour and traumatic events, such as losing a partner or child, is especially important when people develop hoarding tendencies in later life, particularly when it follows soon after the loss. For others, hoarding can be a way of coping with an emotional upset, and can act as a form of emotional insulation.

People also hoard because of perfectionism. Perfectionists generally procrastinate through fear of making the wrong decision, which leads to indecision and respectively to keeping everything 'just in case', the result of which is clutter.

Hoarding issues can be triggered by deprivation – by 'not having a lot' when growing up, or from having had a frugal childhood in which nothing was ever thrown away. People with such childhoods consequently make up for this later on in life as a substitute for the feeling of having been denied books, toys, clothes, even friendships. Lack of meaningful relationships can trigger hoarding, which in turn leads to social isolation, the items concerned taking on a heightened importance in a person's life to fill a void and act as a replacement for interpersonal relationships.

Some people hoard for aesthetic and artistic reasons – because they appreciate and find real joy in the way objects look, or in their colour, shape, the way an ornament might reflect in certain light, the texture and feel. Objects for artists can take on a complex meaning and can be hoarded for the furthering of their art. You are probably familiar with art exhibitions in which artists have used objects to represent their artistic self – from unmade beds to crisp packets and tins of baked beans.

People also hoard for sentimental reasons, to help recapture a time when life felt good and secure. We worked in one woman's home which represented for her happier times in the 1970s, and the flat was stuck in that era. It was if time stood still for her after that decade, which was when her husband passed away.

In no particular order, the various factors that contribute to hoarding disorder can largely be categorized under the following headings.

Abuse

We have met a few people who suffered abuse during their childhood. In the main the abuse was psychological, but often people who have suffered sexual and physical abuse will be susceptible to hoarding behaviours. One man we worked with had been regularly beaten by his adoptive father. As a result, in

his later years Nick collected items which represented beauty to him and quite often they were unusual, even unique. He went to meticulous lengths to display these items, and it gave him great pleasure in terms of admiring them, but they greatly impinged on his living conditions not only as a result of the scale but also the weight of his collection. He lived in a block of flats, which brought concerns about health and safety for his neighbours. He was attracted to car boot sales and would frequently come back with cash registers, coffee machines, and musical items. Nick was acquiring stuff to substitute for an abusive father who both hit him as a boy and denied him toys and love.

In our experience, people who hoard report a greater lifetime incidence of having possessions taken by force, forced sexual activity or of physical treatment during childhood. Abuse can take more subtle forms, too, and indeed may be quite unintentional, the person's parents having acted as they thought best. Secrecy or lack of openness is common. Lack of consultation about domestic changes has led to hoarding behaviours later on in life – for example, some people remember not being told they would not be returning to their old school or that they were moving house, or perhaps a favourite toy was sold or disposed of without their knowledge. The parents may not have meant to hurt their child, but the wounds are long-lasting.

Bereavement

Research suggests that bereavement is the most common contributor to hoarding behaviour. We have quite often met with people who are so consumed with grief over the loss of a loved one that they cannot bear to remove any items associated with the person who has died, and they may also shop and collect items to fill the void created by their loss. Miscarriage, the loss of a pet, the end of a relationship – all contribute to a sense of loss, grief and sadness. One woman we worked with, who had suffered a miscarriage more than 20 years ago, regularly bought baby clothes during the sales, and only just recently has she managed to stop. Coming to terms with grief can be challenging, and grief manifests itself in many forms.

Childhood issues

We have spoken to many people who have experienced unhappy episodes during their childhood, such as lack of love from their parents, being brought up in a strict and sterile home, or a sense of loneliness stemming from a lack of parental interaction or of siblings to play with. A few of our clients are themselves children, and while we cannot say that children are more likely to engage in hoarding behaviours, there is some evidence to suggest that they may be more prone to it. Some people have described feeling oppressed by their over-controlling parents, recalling their lack of freedom to act spontaneously and play freely.

Chronic disorganization

Chronic disorganization and a chaos of clutter can contribute to a hoarded home. I cannot stress enough how important it is to identify whether someone's home is hoarded because of emotional difficulties or whether the house presents as hoarded because the occupants are chronically disorganized and simply have not spent any time throwing things away. Quite often people will buy a replacement for something that they cannot find within their cluttered homes. In one home we worked in, a woman owned seven pairs of secateurs. She lacked the ability to allocate a home for her belongings and put items back there, which resulted in her difficulty in finding anything. I sometimes support my clients by acting as their 'blinkers', remaining quiet and unassuming, which helps them to stop becoming distracted and to stay focused on the task in hand.

Chronic overwhelm

Many of us feel overwhelmed at times, especially when we are experiencing a challenging and difficult situation, and it is a very common feeling among people with hoarding difficulties. For hoarders, the feeling of being overwhelmed can be all-consuming, and consequently many hoarders avoid situations where what we refer to as the 'overwhelm' will contribute to their circumstances.

Feeling overwhelmed prohibits us from dealing with day-to-day challenges, and for someone with clutter, the thought of even contemplating dealing with it contributes further to that feeling. This is why many hoarders churn (move things around the house without actually getting rid of anything – see end of Chapter 1). We churn emotionally as well as physically as we turn things over and over in our homes and our minds.

Collecting

As children we are often encouraged to collect; from stamps, football stickers or postcards to shells from our holidays. We are encouraged to collect mementos from excursions, holidays and special occasions. Memory boxes are purchased, shelves assembled and display cabinets filled.

We are quite often asked what the difference is between a collector and a hoarder. One answer is that while both hoarders and collectors place value on their possessions, collectors will typically display their possessions in a proud and organized way and spend time and energy on their collection. A collection becomes a hoarding issue when it impacts adversely on the use of the functional areas of their home, when it becomes impossible to organize possessions easily and rooms cannot be used for their intended purpose.

Mental health issues

Mental health conditions directly relating to clutter, hoarding and disorganization are many and varied. They include personality disorders, schizophrenia, anorexia, fibromyalgia, dyslexia, dyspraxia, learning difficulties, brain injuries, dementia, cancer, arthritis and COPD, among other anxiety-based disorders, and I detail the main ones below.

Depression

Depression, including post-natal depression, is very common among people who hoard, and I know many people with clinical depression who are also are affected by hoarding. This can have

a powerful impact on their motivation and engagement with their environment, as a depressed state results in low energy, difficulty in staying motivated and poor concentration. Hoarding has also been linked with bipolar disorder. The 'highs' can lead to shopping sprees, or the amassing of items for a collection of books, ornaments and so on, while the 'lows' may make it more difficult to be organized and to have the energy to throw things away. The more severe the level of bipolar disorder, the more severe the hoarding is likely to be, some research suggests.

Obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD)

OCD affects people in different ways, but according to the NHS website it can be characterized by four main steps:

- obsession – an unwanted, intrusive and often distressing thought, image or urge repeatedly enters your mind;
- anxiety – the obsession provokes a feeling of intense anxiety or distress;
- compulsion – you feel driven to perform repetitive behaviours or acts as a result of the anxiety and distress caused by the obsession;
- temporary relief – the compulsive behaviour temporarily relieves the anxiety, but the obsession and anxiety soon returns, causing the cycle to begin again.

A few people who experience the effects of OCD find that their compulsive behaviours and fears trigger hoarding. A fear of contamination leads, for example, to the inability to tackle the post, to throw away rotten food, or to handle anything entering their homes from outside.

Lizzie

Lizzie, who had depression, OCD and schizophrenia, did not like anything being moved and if it was, it had to be put back in the same place. She was obsessive about lining up cigarette packets beneath one cushion of her sofa, as well as lining up used lighters within inches of her ashtray, next to where she sat and smoked. We tackled the hoard of cigarette packets by suggesting that as soon as she finished a packet, she should put it straight in the rubbish bin, and we

explained the fire hazards to her. Lizzie recognized that her behaviour had become a ritual and understood that for her own safety she had developed a habit of putting her cigarette packets without thinking under the cushion of the sofa, and that this needed to be replaced by a new discipline of putting them in the rubbish bin.

Lizzie was also preoccupied with buying potatoes. She developed a compulsion which involved stacking up the potatoes she bought neatly in the kitchen – not only on the kitchen counter but, once that was full, on the floor. Unfortunately, she never cooked them as she was worried that her cat would burn itself with the heat of the hob of her oven. She did not use the hob for anything else. Her anxiety over her cat hurting itself far outweighed her desire to cook the potatoes she so craved. The potatoes would rot over time and she could not face picking them up; she became very anxious about handling them even with rubber gloves. She recognized that the rotten potatoes produced a vile smell as well as an obnoxious fluid that spread across her kitchen floor. In time, Lizzie was persuaded to dispense with the stored potatoes, and to replace them with baking potatoes which she could safely cook in the oven.

Forming new habits

There's a famous saying that if you do something enough times, it becomes a habit. A 2012 study at University College London described how habits are formed through a process called 'context-dependent repetition', in which we become almost conditioned to performing behaviours at certain times and in certain places, for example, having a snack as soon as we get home every evening after work. It's possible to form a new habit, such as drinking a glass of water instead, but the researchers emphasized that repetition of the behaviour is the key, rather than carrying it out for a set amount of time (the period studied was commonly either 21 or 66 days). In other words, 'Repeat, repeat, repeat', and stay strong – don't give up.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Many people I work with have trouble staying focused on a given task and find it a challenge to maintain the attention needed to complete it. I have come across more and more people who, even if undiagnosed, are affected by both ADHD

and hoarding difficulties. Not only do they have difficulty in sorting their possessions but they are also prone to impulse buying. I call the people I work with who are affected by ADHD 'butterflies' as they are prone to flit from one area of interest to another.

Often people with ADHD find it difficult to throw things away – not necessarily because of an emotional attachment to their belongings but because they find the thought process of deciding what to keep and what to throw away completely overwhelming. People with ADHD quite often don't see the mess, but recognize their difficulty in finding things because of it. The idea of putting an object in a cupboard feels like sending it into a black hole. Many of the people I work with don't like to pile items up, as they feel anxious about not knowing what is at the bottom of the pile. They like things to be visible, and they spread their possessions out horizontally rather than vertically. One lady I work with uses cat litter trays to house papers that need either actioning, filing or reading. The papers are not necessarily in order, but she can see them and move the trays around the house.

How can you help someone who both hoards and has ADHD? Remove distractions, perhaps put on some calming music, introduce some time management skills, use a timer and provide reminders. Post-it notes and clear labelling are useful tools. Chapter 5 provides some useful tips.

Figure 1 is designed to show the chaotic nature of what's going on in the ADHD mind, and how debilitating ADHD can be.

Autism

Research suggests that people on the autistic spectrum commonly have special interests and hobbies which, in turn, can lead them to put together specific collections. For some people, this activity may be obsessive, while in others it may not. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether hoarding is related to OCD or to behaviours associated with autism. You may ask how you deal with someone with autism who exhibits hoarding behaviours. From my experience and knowledge, it is about setting limits and boundaries, and pointing out the implications of the person's hoarding and the impact it may have on his or her health and

safety. Clear communication is key, along with step-by-step actions and bite-sized interventions.

John

Social services contacted me asking for my help with a family who were being threatened by eviction because of the clutter in their new flat – especially around John's bedroom. Mum was depressed, going through a divorce, and John, a young teenager, had autism and was also anxious and depressed as a result of the change to his family life and the need to adjust to his new bedroom.

The bedroom was a sea of rubbish – empty fizzy drink cans and crisp packets, sweet wrappers, batteries, dirty clothes, towels, pizza boxes and books. John did not want his mother invading his personal space, but he let me in and we talked about how we would need to clear his items off the carpet so that the landlord would be happy about retaining their tenancy. The key to helping was to be specific in what tasks were needed to tackle the mess. Both John and his mother were too overwhelmed to tidy it.

I worked with John over four sessions. Rather than just bringing in bin bags and throwing everything away, at first we looked at the pizza boxes, then the crisp packets and other food wrappers. I explained to John that the reasons for addressing the food items were to eliminate the possibility of any problems with mice. I then asked his mother to buy John a rubbish bin for his room and we agreed that meals were to be eaten at the dining room table, and that he should not allow pizza boxes in his bedroom. At our next session, we dealt with batteries and fizzy drink cans (both of which were to be recycled). At this session we also suggested that Mum ask John for any cans to be recycled from his room each week. At a further session we worked on dirty clothes and asked his mother if she could provide John with his own laundry bag. Towels, too, were picked up and assigned a hook on the back of John's bedroom door. At the last session we addressed clean clothes and allocated them drawers clearly labelled for his socks, T-shirts and underwear.

At each session I checked with John that he was happy with me doing all this in his space, and that he was happy about the decisions we were making about his belongings. On some occasions he asked that we stop and on others he was happy to carry on. When we eventually brought the vacuum cleaner in to clean the floor, he was very happy and proud to show his mum his room.

Clear boundaries about what food items were allowed in his room were established, and structures and routines put in place with respect

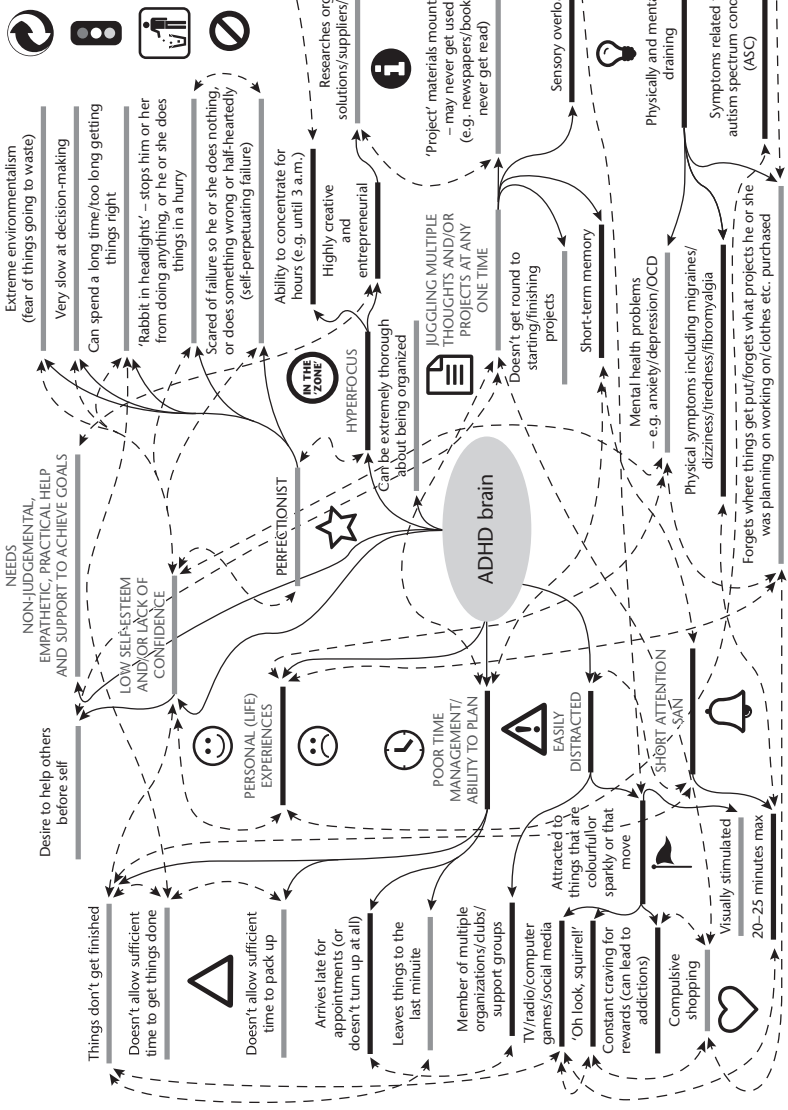

Figure 1 The planning and organizing chaos of the ADHD brain

to rubbish, recycling and laundry. The tenancy is no longer at risk and John feels more secure and empowered about managing his personal space.

Much of our role in helping the people we work with is to come up with practical solutions, many of which are creative and tailored and unique to each individual's circumstances. I feel John's story is particularly important as it is not a story of hoarding per se, but of problems that present themselves as a hoarding issue, one which – with the right interventions and strategies – was successfully managed. Although this approach might not work for everyone – as I've repeatedly stressed, this is an individual issue – I feel that this story is a useful one to share.

Trauma and crime

Both PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and any other trauma experienced in life can contribute to a hoarded and chaotic home. Events including accident and disaster, miscarriage, burglary, sexual attack, sudden death within a family, even divorce, can all precipitate hoarding behaviours as a safety mechanism. It is as if the people concerned are trying to create a barrier or buffer against further disaster.

Some people who have been affected by a crime can begin to exhibit hoarding behaviours as part of their coping response. We know of one gentleman who had been attacked quite brutally in the street and his rucksack, which contained his laptop, diary and wallet, stolen from him. The victim could not provide sufficient evidence and a description of the attacker to the police for the crime to be solved. In response to the incident, the victim developed an obsessive routine of reading and collecting local newspapers in the hope that he might pick up on some information that he could give to the police in relation to his attacker. His flat now presents as a hoarded home filled with potential paper evidence.

Empty nest syndrome

So often, as parents, we become solely focused on our roles of raising our children, from the early days of potty training to teaching our older teenagers how to iron shirts ready for their first office job. As parents, it is easy to become absorbed in that role and forget what life was like before children. But, in the same way we should plan for retirement, we need to plan for life after children. The effect on a home once the children have flown the nest can be dramatic, leaving a vacuum in which we find ourselves with more time, less dependency and more questioning 'Who am I?' Some parents may feel the need to rediscover themselves as individuals with their own hobbies, interests and talents; others may lack the confidence to return to work. They may try to fill the void by acquiring stuff, so that often unhealthy shopping habits develop, resulting in hoarding behaviours.

Another related issue can be the temptation to hold on to the possessions that grown-up children have left at home, and which have simply never been sorted through. Boxes of school work, musical instruments, clothes and books can all pile up, consuming a surprising amount of space. This is an issue that obviously needs to be addressed with your child.

Filling the gap

When our emotional needs are not being met, we can be prone, perhaps, to over-eating or to over-spending to fill a void in our lives. Hoarding can act as compensation for a lack of close relationships, an unhappy marriage, loneliness, low self-worth or dents in self-esteem. A divorce, for example, may well precipitate a need to hoard and acquire in response to the breakdown of the relationship. If we feel we are not being sufficiently emotionally nourished, we may seek comfort in hoarding and acquiring, just as we seek solace in over-eating. Retail therapy, buying extraneous items because they are reduced, visiting car boot sales and charity shops, are all common, and with more online opportunities to buy, such as Freecycle and eBay, the temptation to acquire more things is strong.

In addition to partnerships, wider emotional issues may include generally not feeling protected, safe or cared for, or not feeling sufficiently loved, accepted or stable. This does not apply only to personal relationships but is equally valid in our professional life. As people, we need to feel fulfilled, supported, included and accepted, not only in our personal lives but also at work.

Hunger

My father lived through the Second World War and was evacuated from Poland as a child. He remembers feeling hungry at the time, and this left an impression on him as an adult, a husband and a father. He hated wasting food, and we as children had to eat everything on our plates. If we missed even a grain of rice or two, this was spotted and we had to eat it. From our childhood garden, each blackberry from the bush had to be picked and frozen, apples gathered and chestnuts collected and distributed among family and friends. Any waste that my mother incurred was hidden from my father.

Hoarding of food in response to hunger is well known among the survivors of Nazi concentration camps. They went on later to hoard not only food, but clothes and money as well. I have witnessed an abundance of bread rolls and fruit laid out on the dining tables of Jewish residential care homes for survivors of the Nazi camps. The staff felt that having this abundance of food on the table would reduce the anxiety experienced by the residents, which had resulted from not having enough to eat in the past, and that they would feel less compelled to take food to their rooms if they knew that there was 'enough' in the kitchen and dining room.

Redundancy

In the current economic climate, and following the recent recession, redundancy is common. We have worked with individuals who have experienced the impact of being made redundant, not just from one job but from two or three within their professional careers. The psychological effects of redundancy can bring about a tremendous sense of loss – not only a

financial loss, but also a loss of status resulting from the absence of full-time employment. Quite often our careers define our sense of purpose, and the shock of redundancy can be life-changing. Feelings of overwhelm can lead to unusual spending habits, and hoarding can help soothe the anxiety and alleviate a need to stockpile due to financial concerns.

Eric and Joan

Quite often married couples have opposing characteristics. One may be tidy, the other messy; one good with money, the other a spendthrift. In some marriages, however, the partners are two of a kind. You may wonder what this has to do with hoarding, but when a compulsive buyer and an 'I might need it one day', chronically disorganized hoarder live together in one house and both share a love of dogs, the outcome can be similar to that of Eric and Joan. The couple, who were childless, had more than a dozen Miniature Schnauzer dogs living with them. Their home ended up congested with clutter, so that the couple were barely able to see from one end of the living room to the other. A nurse who was a family friend contacted me quite soon after Joan died of cancer. As Joan's life was ending, she apologized to Eric for all the mess and the dogs that he had to take care of.

After Joan died, Eric poured his energies into rehousing the dogs and then was left with a house full of stuff – unopened packages of clothes, pens, brooches, cups, aprons – mainly featuring pictures of Miniature Schnauzers. Eric too had his own hoard – every broken tap or broken lampshade would be stored in the attic. Both Eric and Joan had been only children, and on the death of both sets of parents, their belongings had been stored in the attic and the summer house. Eric had built the summer house himself. It was beautiful, made of cedar wood and located at the bottom of the garden, an ideal place to sit and muse. He delighted in telling us that at one time it had revolved. We had never heard of a revolving summer house, but then understood that it revolved for the purposes of capturing the sun and shade. Sadly, though, Eric told us that it had stopped revolving many years ago thanks to the weight of the couple's belongings.

Eric's garage was full of broken lawnmowers, rusty tools, and the remnants of his and Joan's lives with the dogs. We started by donating more than half a dozen dog crates to the Dogs Trust, along with various bags bursting with dogs' clothes, leads, bowls and balls and an assortment of toys and flea and worm treatments. We recognized that Eric would not be able to cope with a quick and dramatic

clearout, or the 'bring in a skip' approach. He would, however, benefit from a slow but sure approach to reclaiming his space, dealing with his wife's estate and the contents of his home. Eric needed gradually to come to terms with his grief, part of which involved being able to better understand his wife's compulsion to shop.

We worked with Eric slowly and regularly over the course of two years. Eric and Joan had been too embarrassed to ask a plumber in to deal with the taps in the bathroom, which had been dripping incessantly and furiously for several years. Their water bills had been extortionate. Eric had managed to reduce the bill by turning the water off and each morning he would take his tool to the mains in the road to turn it on again. He liked the idea of having the taps fixed and once we had managed to sort and clear enough space we contacted Lisa, a local plumber who we knew would not judge or comment on the condition of his house. She not only replaced the taps but the bathroom sink too (the taps had become welded to it). On our next visit, when we asked how Eric he was enjoying having water on tap, he remarked that he was at a loss to know how to deal with no longer having his morning and evening routine of turning the water on and off at the mains.

We worked on making both the small changes that Eric wanted and also those needed to address the damp, mould and mildew in the bedrooms that had been used as storage units.

After some time, Eric developed Alzheimer's, and he explained that he was happy to go into a care home and sell his house and let go of his stuff. We helped him sell and clear his belongings, and downsize his wardrobe and books. On our many visits to the care home to ensure that Eric was involved and kept in the loop as to the destination of his belongings, it became apparent that he was happy to leave his stuff and his past behind. Eric was now much more motivated and eagerly told me of his intention to learn to play his clarinet. The house is now empty, having been sold, and Eric is quite happy with his clarinet and a few precious books and photos. He says he feels not only liberated but also relieved that he can now be taken care of without the challenges of living in a house full of stuff. And he plays his clarinet regularly!

Research on attachment

Over recent years, the amount of research into hoarding has increased and I was delighted when Jessica Barton, trainee research psychologist at The Oxford Institute of Clinical Psychology

Training and Research, approached me to ask if members of our hoarding support groups could contribute. The survey called for anyone in the UK with a significant hoarding problem, either with OCD or without mental health concerns (healthy control group) to respond.

Jessica explains that, 'There are three different beliefs someone holds that can drive this behaviour. First is a belief about avoiding harm – that something awful will happen if I don't acquire this object – next, it's a fear of material deprivation leading to someone feeling they are preventing themselves being deprived at some stage in the future, and thirdly, that an attachment to possessions may take the place of relationships with people.' It's the last of those that her work focuses on: trying to better understand parental bonds or attachment styles in early years, and how these may affect someone's hoarding behaviour.

The foundation of John Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that humans have a basic need for social connection and, through our childhood experiences, our attachment styles are consequently developed. The research looks at the attachment styles of those with and without hoarding behaviours.

Findings in this study also generate questions about how varied the experiences are of those with hoarding issues. For some people, beliefs about 'harm avoidance' are more relevant. This is a theme that runs through our support groups in terms of 'people hurt me, stuff doesn't'. The two attachment styles, 'fearful attachment' and 'preoccupied attachment' appear to be more prevalent for those with hoarding issues.

Social isolation and loneliness

The research included 38 individuals with hoarding behaviours, 57 individuals with OCD and 49 'healthy control' participants not experiencing mental health concerns. The study found that individuals with hoarding and OCD reported higher levels of loneliness and social isolation compared to the 'healthy control' group. Sometimes it's not necessarily the need to purchase an item from a charity shop, but more the need for social contact and connection. I highly recommend reading *Lost Connections* by Johann Hari (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), who talks about

our need for connection and how depression is often misdiagnosed as grief.

What does this mean and what next?

The perceived poorer quality of parenting is important and relevant to individuals with hoarding disorder, but it's not unique. Intervention for people with hoarding disorder designed to promote interpersonal effective skills, social support and positive relationships is needed. To view the entire research paper please refer to the Hoarding Disorders UK CIC website (see 'Useful addresses').