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HSAG HEALTH SERVICES ADVISORY GROUP



Understanding Hoarding Disorder in the Nursing Facility

Health Services Advisory Group (HSAG) is the West Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) Quality Innovation Network-Quality Improvement Organization (QIN-QIO) Region 7.

Understanding Hoarding Disorder in the Nursing Facility

What Is Hoarding Disorder?

Hoarding disorder is a mental health condition characterized by persistent difficulty throwing away or parting with possessions. Attempts to let go of items cause significant stress. Commonly hoarded items include newspapers, bags, receipts, clothing, and mail. Over time, the accumulation of these items creates clutter, making it difficult to use rooms or living spaces.[i]



Related Conditions

Hoarding disorder often coexists with other mental health conditions, the most common being:[ii]



- Anxiety disorder
- Major depressive disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder

Signs and Symptoms

The residents' hoarding behaviors likely existed before admission to the nursing home. Some may be unaware that their actions could be classified as hoarding. Signs and symptoms include:[iii]

- Keeping random items despite limited storage.
- Strong reluctance to get rid of items, regardless of value.
- Feeling the need to save items and becoming upset if someone suggests throwing items away.
- Anxiety about needing items for the future.
- Cluttered, unsafe living spaces.

Causes and Risk Factors

The exact cause of hoarding disorder is unclear, but genetics, stressful life events, and personality are being studied as possible factors. Hoarding tendencies often run in families and can begin in adolescence or early adulthood, gradually worsening over time. It is commonly observed in individuals whose ages are 60 and older.[iv]

How Hoarding Manifests in Nursing Facilities

Family members bringing in excessive belongings



Compulsive online shopping for unneeded items with limited storage



Refusal to discard unused or unnecessary items



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Negative Consequences of Hoarding Behaviors in Nursing Facilities

- Fire hazard
- Fall risk
- Unsanitary living space
- Infection risk
- Roommate problems
- Isolation and loneliness
- Financial problems
- Hazards for staff entering to provide care
- Pest and rodent problems

Treatment Options

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has proven effective in helping to develop strategies for decluttering and coping with the distress of parting with belongings.[v]

Consulting a primary care provider or mental health professional is essential for evaluation and treatment. Family involvement can help limit excessive accumulation and support progress.



Approaching Hoarding Behaviors With Compassion

Respecting residents' rights is crucial in these situations. Removing items without consent can cause emotional distress and violate their rights. Effective strategies include:

- **Collaborate:** Let residents decide what to remove. Do not make decisions without the residents.
- **Start small:** Begin with a single drawer or a table.
- **Use respectful language:** Refrain from using negative or judgmental words about any residents' belongings, such as "junk," "messy," or "disgusting."
- **Set goals:** Develop a plan with residents using SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound) goals.
- **Involve the care team:** Engage staff, ombudsmen, and family.
- **Listen:** Take time to listen and understand the residents' attachment to items.
- **Avoid pressure:** Do not pressure any residents to get rid of things if he or she is not ready.
- **Discuss safety:** Address tripping hazards, overcrowded desktops, or pest concerns.
- **Encourage peer support:** Connect residents with a support group.

Self-Help Strategies for Residents

Residents with hoarding disorder have strong emotional attachment to their items and excessive worries about potentially needing them in the future. Reframing their perspective and managing worries can be helpful. Encourage residents to replace negative thoughts with empowering affirmations such as:

- I am ready and willing to change my relationship with my possessions.
- I will be OK without this item.
- As I declutter my space, I am making room for what I truly need.
- I deserve to be surrounded with beauty and order.
- With every item I release, I create space for more joy.



This material was prepared by the Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health in Nursing Facilities. This work is made possible by grant number 1H79SM087155 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. August 2025. This material has been adapted with permission by Health Services Advisory Group (HSAG), a Quality Innovation Network-Quality Improvement Organization (QIN-QIO) under contract with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Views expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the official views or policy of CMS or HHS, and any reference to a specific product or entity herein does not constitute endorsement of that product or entity by CMS or HHS. Publication No. QN-13SOW-XC-11122026-06

[i] Psychiatry Online. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition Text Revision (DSM-5-TRTM). Available at: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders | Psychiatry Online. Accessed on: July 30, 2026.
[ii] Ibid.
[iii] Ibid.
[iv] Ibid.
[v] American Psychiatric Association. What is Hoarding Disorder? Available at: https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/hoarding-disorder/what-is-hoarding-disorder. Accessed on: July 30, 2026.