

# Hoarding Self Help Manual

❖ SOURCE: This manual summarises some of the exercises in the book *Buried in Treasures: Help for compulsive acquiring, saving and hoarding*, Tolin D.F., Frost R.O. and Steketee G. 2007. Please see the book for full details and additional exercises.

# Sentimental attachment

*Keeping things that remind us of events, places, people and other times.*

## **Questions to ask yourself:**

*How much do you actually look at or enjoy this object?*

*Are you keeping it as a way of remembering good times or a special person? If so, is keeping it the best way to remember?*

*If that special person could see your home, what would he/she encourage you to do?*

*Do you keep this for emotional comfort or to make you feel less vulnerable? If so, does it really protect you?*

*Is this object really a friend or a companion? Does it have thoughts and feelings, or is it just a thing?*

*Tip from a hoarding client:*

*As you discard an item that reminds you of a special person, place or event, write the memory down in a special book.*

*For clothes, you could stick a scrap of fabric in the book with the memory.*

# Identity beliefs

*Keeping things that we feel define us as people or somehow represent us*

☒ *My possessions make me feel like a craftsperson or artist.*

Think about how much art or crafts you have produced in the past year. Are the materials you save proportional to the amount you actually produce?

☒ *My possessions make me feel like a handy person*

How many broken things have you saved with the idea that you will fix them later? How many have you actually fixed in the past year? How many can you realistically expect to fix this year?

☒ *My possessions make me feel like a businessperson or entrepreneur*

Do you keep things in the hope of selling them or starting a new business? What steps have you taken so far to actually sell them or start that business? Will you get around to it?

☒ *My possessions make me feel like a good family member or friend*

How many potential gifts are in your home? How long have they been there? How many gifts have you actually given in the past year?

**A common theme here is: is the amount you *have* proportional to the amount you *do*?**

Identity comes from what we *do* not what we *have*. For many people with compulsive hoarding, however, their possessions give them a false sense of identity.

It will therefore be important to *redefine your identity without clutter*. What is the identity you really want? Who do you want to be? What do you want your life to be about?

*Tip from a hoarding client:*

*Think about what you will realistically use, fix or sell. Save the better quality items and donate or recycle the rest. You will then have space to **DO** the intended activities and develop your true identity.*

# Feelings of safety/security/control

*Keeping things that make us feel safe or in control, like a security blanket or shield*

## **Ask yourself the following questions:**

Are you really in control or are your possessions in control of you?

Does letting go of possessions really mean that you will lose control?

What would happen then?

Are you trying to make sure that someone else doesn't "win"? Are

you really "winning" by hanging on to these things?

*Tip from a hoarding client:*

*"Feeling vulnerable and scared can be part of the process as you break through your "fort" of clutter. When in doubt try to remember your long term goals"*

# Beliefs about usefulness, waste and responsibility

*Keeping things that might be useful, or feeling afraid of wasting items or feeling responsible for using or disposing of an item in a certain way*

## **Ask yourself these questions:**

Do I really need it?

How many do I already have and is that enough?

Do I have enough time to actually use or read this?

Have I used this in the past year?

Does this seem important just because I'm looking at it now?

Is it current or out of date?

Is it of good quality, accurate and/or reliable?

Would I buy it again if I didn't already own it?

Could I get it again if I found I really needed it?

Do I have enough space for this?

Will keeping this help me solve my hoarding problem?

*Tip I from a hoarding client:*

*Experiment with not disposing of things perfectly. For example, throw a food container into the recycling bin without rinsing it. Did the world end?*

*What do other people do? Sometimes we must choose efficiency over perfectionism, especially when we are striving to achieve our personal goals. Try to weigh up the pros and cons in the big scheme of things.*

*Tip II: To dispose of old paperwork, an alternative to shredding (time consuming!) is to mulch up paper in a tub/bath of water until the content is unreadable.*

# Perfectionism/fear of mistakes

*Keeping things because we fear making the wrong decision e.g. discarding something we might need later*

## **Ask yourself the following questions:**

Do I really have to put this in the perfect place?

Do I really have to read everything/remember everything about this before I get rid of it? Why? – What is the evidence to support this thinking?

You may find yourself ***catastrophising*** - for example:

“If I throw this away, I’ll go crazy thinking about it”

“If I put this away and can’t remember where I put it, it will be awful”

“I’ll never forgive myself”

If you catch yourself doing this, stop and ask yourself: Would it really be that awful? Would you never be able to recover if you made a mistake?

Mistakes happen. If you have a lot of clutter to go through, it’s inevitable that at some point you will discard something that has potential value or put something in the wrong place. *Give yourself permission to make mistakes.* The world will not end. Remember your long-term goals.

# Problems with decision making

*Keeping things because we simply can't decide what to do with them*

## **Ask yourself these questions:**

Have I used this in the past year?

Do I have enough time to actually use or read it?

Does this seem important just because i'm looking at it now?

Do I really need it?

Could I get it again if I found I really needed it?

Will not having this help me solve my hoarding problem?

## **And set yourself some rules for letting go – for example:**

If I have not worn this item in the past two years I will donate it to charity.

If a newspaper is more than two weeks old I will recycle it.

If a food item is out of date I will throw it out.

If I can get print this information/document from the internet in the future I will discard it.

Add your own rules here:

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# Elaborative processing

*Keeping things because we can think of many creative ways to use them*

## **Ask yourself the following questions:**

Am I really and truly going to use the object in this way, or is my creativity just getting the better of me? (be honest)

Does this object really represent a wonderful opportunity, or is it just clutter taking up space in my home?

## **Develop some useful skills:**

One way to reduce over-creativity is to learn to speed up the decision-making process. Get a kitchen timer that has an audible alarm. Start off with a reasonable time period to make a decision and then gradually reduce it. An ideal final goal might be one minute or less per item.

*Tip from a hoarding client:*

*Your phone may have a stopwatch or alarm. You could also set a daily alarm as a reminder to do some regular decluttering. It's easy to forget with a busy schedule but a daily alarm can remind you to do your minimum of one minute or one object a day.*

# Problems with memory

*Keeping things lying around as physical reminders of tasks to do or so that you don't lose something*

Try this behavioural experiment to see whether your memory is good enough to find the things that you need after they have been put away. Pick five things and put them somewhere out of sight, to see if you forget them. Put them somewhere that makes logical sense e.g. a document in a file you have created.

Write down the items and where you have put them:

Item Where I put it

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Wait 24 hours and see if you can find the items. Did you find all five items? If so, you may have underestimated your memory and there is no need for you to keep things in sight.

If you didn't find all five items, developing a logical external organisation system will help you to rely less on your memory. Make a list of locations (rooms, cupboards, closets, drawers) and a list of items to be stored in each location. Also make a filing system with a folder and label for each category.

# Reducing acquiring

## **Graded exposure technique:**

The technique may be applied to reduction of acquiring, as illustrated below. Alternatively, the technique can be applied to discarding: Make a list of items to discard from *easiest to most difficult* with predicted distress ratings, then monitor distress ratings after discarding the item. Confidence can be gained by learning that distress levels decline over time.

### Example:

My hierarchy form (in order of easier to harder situation) Situation	PLAN: Predicted distress rating (0-10)	EXPERIMENT: Actual distress rating (add score each day)
Walk through Rundle Mall without buying anything	5	5-5-5-5-4-4-3-3-2- 1
Walk past an op shop	6	6-6-6-5-5-4-4-3- 2-1
Drive past a garage sale	7	5-5-5-5-5-5-4-3-2- 2
Pick up a sale item without buying it	9	8-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1- 0
Walk past a skip without looking in it	10	10-10-9-7-4-3-1-1- 1-0