
Rummaging, Hiding, and Hoarding Behaviors

Persons with dementia experience memory loss, mental confusion, disorientation, impaired judgment and behavioral changes. One of these changes may include “hoarding”. While hoarding is often harmless, it can become a health and safety issue for the person with dementia. Some people are natural “collectors” who have accumulated things that are important to them over the years. They may have difficulty getting rid of items because of the personal meaning they hold. Compulsive hoarders collect many items that they are not able to discard. As the hoarding increases over time, their living areas become unsafe and the behavior may lead to health risks and financial strain.

Hoarding for a person with dementia may be more likely to happen in the early and middle stages of dementia and often stems from trying to have some control in their lives. People with dementia may be driven to search or rummage for something that they believe is missing.

Possible Causes

Psychological or Medical Causes

- Physical changes in the brain cause memory loss, impaired judgment, and confusion.
- Inability to remember taking items, unable to remember where the items were placed or hidden
- Loss of control over behaviors
- Rummaging, hiding, and hoarding are all things an individual does to gain a sense of security. For example, individuals may hoard items out of fear that they may “need” the items some day. Individuals may begin to hide items when they are not able to recognize the people around them any longer. Individuals may rummage through items because seeing and touching the items reminds them that they are there and gives them comfort.

Environmental Causes

- Fear of being robbed or losing items; hiding or hoarding items in an attempt to make them safe.
- Inability to distinguish between items that should be kept or thrown away.
- Lack of stimulation, boredom, or difficulty initiating new activities.

Coping Strategies

Addressing Clutter and Hoarding

- In most cases removing all clutter can cause severe emotional upset, and it is usually not beneficial to remove everything that a person hoards. This is because the items that the person collects give them a sense of security and safety. Also, individuals may have emotional attachments to items that appear to others to be worthless and/or useless.

- When removing clutter:
 - Only remove what is needed to eliminate safety and health hazards. Leave behind as much safe clutter as you can. Organize it in large bins or baskets away from walking pathways, stairs, stoves, and heaters.
 - Give the individual a good reason to part with their items. They may be more willing to let go of something if they are told that the item will be given to a charity, church, family member, etc.
 - Negotiate. Trade a year's worth of newspapers for a month's worth. Trade rotten or expired food for fresh food.
 - Be Creative. Take pictures of items that are given away, and allow the person to keep the pictures. Allow the person to take time to say goodbye to items that you may perceive as worthless.
 - Remove discarded items immediately because the person may rummage through the garbage and bring items back into their home.
 - If the individual agrees to help de-clutter, give them one box of items to sort through at a time. Start slowly and take breaks frequently.
 - Be prepared for the person's reaction and have support for the person and yourself. You may want to involve family, friends, clergy, or a social worker. Have activities planned and ready to divert the person's attention from the removal of their items.
- Reduce the amount of clutter coming into the home by reducing spending money and monitoring purchases. Consider blocking home shopping channels. Stop junk mail and catalog mailings by visiting www.dmachoice.org, www.catalogchoice.org, and www.optoutprescreen.com. Consider getting bills sent to another address, if needed.
- What you view as cluttered and disorganized may help the individual function and cope. Some individuals keep belongings out in the open or in unusual places because they may forget where they are if they cannot see them. If the clutter is not posing a safety or health hazard, then leave it as is.

Make Rummaging Productive

- Restricting access to all drawers and cabinets can be distressing for a person who enjoys rummaging. Many individuals will rummage or constantly reorganize items because they feel a need to be productive.
- Provide the individual with an opportunity to rummage and make rummaging a stimulating activity. This can be done by providing easy access to some closets, drawers, or portable boxes that contain safe items that the individual can rummage in. They can contain random items or be themed: sewing drawer, sports closet, jewelry box, etc.
- If the individual enjoys sorting and organizing items make this an activity. Ask the person to help you fold and sort items like socks, napkins, and scarves. This may help the person fulfill their desire to be productive.

Focus on Safety

- Fire Prevention: Check for and remove items stored or hidden in or on the stove, microwave, radiators, kerosene heaters, etc. Check for overloaded extension cords. Check that smoke alarms have batteries and are in working order.
- Prevent poisonous ingestion: The individual may not be able to recognize things that are harmful to eat. Lock up cleaning fluids, medications, glue products, etc. Check for and throw away rotting food.
- Prevent falls: Ensure that there are clear pathways between rooms. Clear all clutter from stairways. Remove throw rugs.

Protect Valuables

- Put items that cannot be easily replaced in a safe, locked location. These items may include birth certificates, passports, tax records, cash, jewelry, medical records, sentimental photos and letters, etc.
- Get duplicates or “dummies” of items that are commonly misplaced such as glasses, hearing aids, medication, keys, remote controls, cell phones.

Identify and Eliminate Hiding Places

- Identify the hiding places. Common hiding places include under cushions, under the mattress or bed, under carpets, inside shoes, purses, coat pockets, under stove burners, inside washers and dryers, dishwashers, trash compactors, trash bins, sink drains, and garbage disposals.
- Alarms, battery operated wireless doorbells, and other wireless trackers can be attached to items that are frequently misplaced or hidden and can help to find the item and identify where the person is hiding it. If hiding is a serious problem and hiding places cannot be found, surveillance cameras or “nanny cams” can help identify where an individual is hiding items.
- Check hiding places frequently for lost items. Check the trash before you bring it outside, it is common to find “lost” items in the trash.
- Eliminate some common hiding spots by introducing drain traps, disposal strainers, and drain screens, and disconnecting trash compactors and disposals.
- To discourage hiding and rummaging in certain drawers or closets you may need to install hard-to-open latches or locks on the doors. Placing a STOP sign on the drawer or closet, or camouflaging the door with paint or wallpaper so that it blends in with the room may also discourage a person from using that area for hiding or rummaging.
- Turning a cabinet towards the wall or covering it with a sheet can have an “out of sight, out of mind” effect and eliminate hiding, hoarding, and rummaging in that cabinet.
- Many individuals will hide items or rummage in mailboxes. This can be managed by purchasing a lockable mailbox.

Dealing with challenging behavior can be frustrating and overwhelming. You are not alone. For more information about caregiving related concerns, visit the Alzheimer’s Association Caregiver Center at www.alz.org/care or call the 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900.

References

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