

Cluttered lives of hoarders

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Australia is experiencing a hoarding epidemic. Around one million of us are trapped by clutter and suffocated by possessions we just can't be parted from. *Sunday Night* reporter Alex Cullen meets three brave hoarders battling back against this crippling condition, which is tearing their lives apart and heaping misery on those around them. Hoarding, driven by consumerism in the modern world, is about to be officially recognised as a standalone medical condition, offering hope to those who suffer.

The progress of the three extreme hoarders as they begin their brave battle to emerge from the darkness is inspiring.

Following this link to the story recently aired on television:

<http://au.news.yahoo.com/sunday-night/features/article/-/10216214/cluttered-lives-of-warders/>

The Compulsive Hoarding and Acquisition Group (CHAG) Therapy program.

Compulsive hoarding is a disabling clinical problem that remains under-reported by individuals experiencing the disorder, and undertreated by clinicians. It is considered to be present in around 2-5 percent of the community. While hoarding is associated with other psychological difficulties, such as anxiety disorders, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, it is increasingly being recognised as a problem in its own right. Swinburne University has recently begun group treatment for hoarding, led by Prof Michael Kyrios, along with clinical psychologists Dr Christopher Mogan and Dr Richard Moulding.

Compulsive hoarding is where individuals have difficulty discarding items. This leads to the person's living spaces – kitchens, bedrooms, lounge rooms, etc. - becoming cluttered to the point where they can no longer be used for their designated purpose. For example, people may no longer be able to cook in the kitchen, or may not be able to sleep in their beds due to their "stuff" getting in the way. Individuals with hoarding face increased risks at home, particularly dangers such as possible fires, tripping hazards, and difficulties with hygiene.

Individuals with hoarding may save a number of different categories of items. Our own research suggests that the most often saved items are clothes; greeting cards and letters; bills and bank statements; books; magazines; knick-knacks; mementoes and souvenirs; records and tapes; pictures; sentimental objects; recipes; wrapping paper; materials; paper; pens; gifts; stationery and old things. Other items may be more idiosyncratic – including specific electronic equipment; hobby and craft items; household items; information; personal and sentimental items; and items seen as being useful. Some individuals may hoard animals.

Swinburne University's group-treatment program for hoarding is based on the successful individual program developed by Randy Frost and Gail Steketee in the US. Basically, this program aims to help with five basic aspects of hoarding:

- (a) Information about the nature of Hoarding;
- (b) Helping individuals develop skills in organizing and problem-solving;
- (c) Helping individuals learn to tolerate anxiety when dealing with discarding (i.e., "exposure" work);
- (d) Helping individuals change unhelpful ways of thinking that are associated with hoarding (e.g., being responsible for possessions, needing possessions to help their memory, etc.)
- (e) Helping individuals control their acquiring/buying.

We have found that being in a group with other individuals can be very helpful. In particular, individuals with hoarding can often feel quite ashamed of their issues, perhaps refusing to let people into their homes so as to not reveal the hoarding, and it can therefore be very powerful to meet others with the same problem. Group members also help by giving helpful suggestions for dealing with the hoarding, by giving increased insight into the problem through their shared understanding, and by giving encouragement to people dealing with hoarding.

The hoarding program was adapted for Australia by the Swinburne Psychology Clinic with Prof Michael Kyrios' research group - the Brain & Psychological Sciences Research Centre - including psychologists Dr Richard Moulding, Dr Maja Nedeljkovic and Dr Christopher Mogan.

Program Details

The compulsive hoarding group will be open to eight participants and it will be run on a low-cost basis. Medicare rebates may be available for those who would like to participate. The next Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring Group is set to commence October 2011.

More information on Hoarding

Further information on author and host of the American TV show Enough Already, Peter Walsh can be found on his website peterwalshdesign.com/

Useful websites where you can get information or receive treatment:

Anxiety Online

Online treatment for anxiety and related problems (including OCD, depression, social anxiety and trauma.

www.anxietyonline.org.au

Online treatment for OCD

www.ocdstop.org.au

The Swinburne Psychology Clinic for individual and group treatment

www.swinburne.edu.au/lss/psychology/pc/

The Swinburne Psychology Clinic compulsive hoarding and acquisition group (CHAG) program (more information below)

www.swinburne.edu.au/lss/psychology/pc/compulsive-hoarding-group.html

The Swinburne Psychology Clinic OCD Group program

www.swinburne.edu.au/lss/psychology/pc/ocd-stop-group.html

International OCD Foundation

An international website that includes useful information about hoarding.

www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding/

Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria

A local Victorian Consumer group for people with anxiety, OCD, and hoarding problems. This group may also be able to put you in touch with relevant consumer groups from other states.

www.arcvic.org.au/