

The Compulsive Keeper

Putting things away after the fair reminded me of how stuff just seems to multiply and collect. Statements such as, “We might need that someday,” repeatedly come to mind.

Yes, we were sorting through things from a specific event. Yet it reminded me how we tend to “over keep” things, especially in our own personal living spaces. Things accumulate with little effort. Without some self-control, our homes can be reduced to pathways or overstuffed drawers and closets. Then it becomes an overwhelming task when we really get the urge to purge.

How do we know if our ‘collections’ have gotten out-of-control? A collector is proud to show off their collections and will keep them neat and organized. However, if a large group of unrelated items is stashed away out-of-sight, we might be leaning toward the cluttered category. If it is in plain sight and in a state of disarray, we could be on the verge of hoarding.

Hoarding can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, or economic status. It often starts in adolescence and gets progressively worse with age. It’s usually a personal and private behavior making it difficult for others to know the seriousness of the situation.

Individuals are more likely to hoard if they have a family member who keeps everything. Often these individuals are withdrawn from society because they are isolated or lonely. They may struggle with obsessiveness and worry about making the right decision whether to keep something or not. The process of trying to decide whether to keep or dispose creates distress, so they may avoid making any decision at all. Thus, everything is kept.

Other characteristics that can indicate a tendency to hoarding include:

- Difficulty or anxiety with letting go of possessions, regardless of their value.
- Unable to find important papers or money in the clutter.
- Buying things because they are seen as a bargain with a desire to stock up.
- Not inviting family and friends to their home due to shame or embarrassment.
- Refusing to let people into their homes to do needed repairs.

Compulsive keepers often have a poor sense of time. They may be late or absent frequently in the workplace. Missing important deadlines and a reduction of productivity are other signs that often create havoc for businesses.

How can we support a family member or friend who has stuff they can’t seem to deal with? Even though we might want to help clear out some clutter, we need to ask first and develop trust with the compulsive keeper. They need to be ready to make some lifestyle changes.

Be sympathetic, listen, and try to understand the emotion and meaning behind all of the things they have chosen to keep. If safety is an issue, work together to create ways to make doorways and hallways safe and clear. Celebrate the successful small steps.

We all have different standards as to what is clutter and what is not. If you were to step into my office right now, you would likely question my clutter status. Yes, it’s time for me to do some serious housecleaning!

More information on clutter control is available through K-State Research and Extension Southwind offices, and by contacting Barbara at 620-625-8620 or by email to bstockeb@ksu.edu.

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