

Hoarder or Historian?

The extra time at home has given me the excuse to review things in storage. This past weekend, I unpacked a shoe box that contained some childhood items. Let's examine the a few of the box contents to determine if I am a hoarder or a historian.

Photos - If photos are relevant to your family and record key family moments, these are worth saving. Take a moment to label with names and dates (use full names like "Grandma Margaret Morrison" rather than "Grandma.") If the photos feature unidentifiable events or people - either discard or make up a story if you plan to keep (just kidding). Rather than stuff photos back in a box, find a scrapbook or photo album and select the best photos to keep. Engage other family members to help identify photos - if you have duplicate photos, mail them to your family! Consider creating electronic copies (label with names and dates).

Paper documents - My box contained samples of school work and reports. Let's face it, a hoarder keeps every report card while a historian might have one or two end of the year reports that summarizes the school experience. Trust me, your kids don't care what grade you received in 5th grade math.

If you grew up in Kansas, you likely created a Kansas day highlight book that featured color sheets of the state flag, seal, bird, mascot, etc. I found my first grade booklet that featured fine coloring skills (if I do say so myself). As a historian, I chose to archive it at the county landfill.

K-State Research and Extension has a publication called "Hoarding: The Impact of Compulsive Keepers." It cites that between 700,000 and 1.4 million people in the United States exhibit compulsive hoarding behavior. Hoarding is defined by the Mayo Clinic as the excessive collection of items, along with the inability to discard them.

When should you be concerned about yourself or others? Hoarding can create personal complications that include unsanitary living conditions, posing health risks. Hoarding can interfere with performing daily tasks such as bathing and cooking. Above all, the clutter is a safety and fire hazard.

The worst thing to do is to go into the hoarder's home and clean it up. The hoarder will just revert to old habits or even worse. Social supports need to be in place to help a hoarder deal with the problem.

If you identify someone who is a hoarder, be patient. This situation did not happen overnight. It takes time to learn new skills and strategies to cope with a hoarding disorder.

Coaching is an important skill to have when dealing with people who hoard. Often family members do not make good coaches. Here are some coaching skills to consider (and why I didn't have any of my family members help me sort through my box):

- Listen without making a judgment.
- Treat people who hoard as you would like to be treated, with respect and dignity.

- Focus on the person's good qualities, not the mess. Find ways to draw out his or her best assets and not focus on faults.
- Recognize small steps of progress in eliminating clutter.
- Remember that good coaches help shape the decision so it's easier to make; they do not make the decision for the person.

I still have more boxes and a few paper files to organize. I will use historian skills but I will have the trash bag(s) handy. I'm celebrating progress, one box/file at a time.

Helping families and community partners connect with resources is a key component of K-State Research and Extension. Our office is open by appointment only, please contact us at 221-5450 or 441-4565 and we'll help.

Source: Hoarding: The Impact of Compulsive Keepers, Denise Dias, K-State Research and Extension

K-State Research and Extension — all in-person events have been canceled through July 4

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