

Excess baggage

Insights into hoarding disorder reveal why we all can find it hard to throw things away, says Elizabeth Landau

ON 21 March 1947, police arrived at a home in New York's Harlem district, after a neighbour called convinced there was a dead body inside. Confronted by walls of newspapers and other junk, officers had difficulty getting in. One patrolman finally squeezed through a second floor window and found a warren of twisting passageways lined with bric-a-brac, some armed with booby traps. After scaling a mountain of junk he discovered the emaciated body of 65-year-old Homer Collyer. More than two weeks later, as the clean-up continued, the corpse of his brother Langley was unearthed some 3 metres from where Homer had died.

Amassing more than 150 tonnes of stuff, including 14 grand pianos, the Collyers became a notorious example of hoarding. But if the craze for decluttering tells us anything, it's that many of us find it difficult to throw things away. Despite the feeling of catharsis that dumping our junk can bring, our possessions often outgrow our homes: around 10 per cent of US families, for example, rent a unit in one of the country's nearly 53,000 self-storage facilities. And for up to one in 20 of us, hoarding is a diagnosable psychological disorder (see "Do you have a hoarding problem", page 36).

But you needn't be sleeping on newspapers or wading through piles of clothes to have experienced the pain of letting go. Why can it hurt so much to get rid of stuff you will never need again? Researchers investigating what's going on inside the minds of people with hoarding disorder have uncovered some intriguing paradoxes. Their findings can also help those of us who would like to better understand our motives for amassing clutter – or identify strategies to get rid of it.

It's tempting to think of hoarding as a modern problem – a regrettable by-product of consumerist culture. In fact, it has ancient

roots. Many animals stockpile food to prepare for harsh winters or guard against theft by other animals. Likewise, our prehistoric hunter-gatherer ancestors benefited from hiding supplies so that wild animals and other bands of early humans wouldn't get to them. Archaeologists have uncovered such stashes dating back almost 10,000 years, containing food, jewellery and more. "I suspect that any culture where there's a large number of relatively inexpensive, easily accessible things will have a significant hoarding problem," says Randy Frost at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Reality TV may have brought hoarding to public attention recently, but it's almost 25 years since Frost helped pioneer research in the field when he placed an advertisement in a newspaper calling for chronic savers and pack rats. We now know that between 2 and 6 per cent of people grapple with hoarding disorder. Most are diagnosed in middle age, and there is some evidence that the tendency to hoard increases as we age. However, hoarding behaviours are thought to begin quite early, even in adolescence. "Often, we finally see people in treatment when they're 50 [or so], but they've been hoarding for decades,



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Few can rival the notorious Collyer brothers when it comes to clutter

OLIVER CULMANN/TENDANCE FLOUE



and that means that they have a huge volume of stuff and the problem is severe,” said Jessica Grisham from the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia.

Until recently, hoarding disorder was seen as part of obsessive compulsive disorder. But there are key differences. People with OCD go through their daily lives haunted by negative thoughts, which influence their behaviour. Hoarding, by contrast, includes positive emotions. “In addition to the anxiety and distress people feel when throwing things away, there’s also this kind of addictive element, a pleasurable side of hoarding that you don’t see in OCD,” says Grisham. “People who hoard often like their stuff, they feel pleasure, joy and happiness and love toward their possessions.” The growing realisation that this is not the same as OCD meant that in 2013, hoarding got a separate classification in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

“Despite the clutter, they tend to have perfectionist qualities”

Mental Disorders, the standard guidebook for mental health professionals.

Brain studies reinforce the idea that hoarding involves a distinct pattern of thinking. Only small studies have been done so far, but there is clear evidence that people with hoarding problems show different kinds of brain activation during decision-making tasks compared with individuals with OCD and those without either condition. In particular, regions of the brain responsible for understanding how important something is relative to something else “get turned all the way up” in people with hoarding problems, says David Tolin at the Institute of Living, a psychiatric hospital in Hartford, Connecticut. “The brain is not functioning in a way that is conducive to making rapid, intuitive decisions, and instead the person has to think really hard about everything.”

Tolin and his colleagues used fMRI to explore what happens inside the brains of people with hoarding disorder when asked to decide whether to keep or discard their own letters and papers and others that did not belong to them. The team found excess activity in key frontal lobe areas involved in decision-making, such as those related to assigning values and making value judgements – but only when volunteers were making decisions about their own stuff. We may all have this problem to some extent. Since the 1980s, ➤

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