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Getting Organized

An e-newsletter of organizing tips for faculty members. April 2006.

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"There are always flowers for those who want to see them."

-- Henri Matisse

→ Some pages will open in a new browser window. M. D. Anderson does not endorse external sites.

Editor's Note

I recently attended the National Association of Professional Organizers and the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization conferences, and I picked up some great information for you. Since there was so much good information to be shared, I'm including tidbits in both the April and May newsletters.

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Research Studies

Chronic disorganization and hoarding are the subject of two research studies, one on elderly women and the other on compulsive hoarding. Hoarding is the compulsion to keep everything and the inability to throw anything away. Severity of the issue ranges from excessive clutter in a couple of rooms to having unuseable rooms due to severe clutter.

Elderly Women: Cluttering/Hoarding, Decision-Making

The study on elderly women concluded that most hoarding and cluttering behaviors in the elderly are linked to "gross self-neglect," according to *Monika Pettross*, the doctoral student who did the study. Nearly 88 percent of them were either diagnosed with depression in the past or currently under treatment, and the group also were currently or had been treated for anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, ADD and ADHD. Pettross will conduct a larger study with men and women this fall.

Pettross' research showed that this group of individuals experienced issues with decision-making, such as avoidance or waffling. In some cases a decision was made, but there was no follow through or the decision was rescinded. Issues with decision-making were linked to many factors, including the fear of making a mistake, an inability to prioritize, and struggling with emotional and logical decisions about an item.

Compulsive Hoarding: Diagnosis, Family Influence, What to Do

Dr. Randy Frost of Smith University has studied compulsive hoarders, and he and his collaborators have compiled diagnostic criteria for hoarding, which include:

- Accumulation of possessions in active living areas
 - This can be any room in the house, the office, the yard, or even the car.

- Reluctance to part with any item, even if it has little value
- The clutter causes distress or interference with normal, everyday life or poses a health or safety risk
- Compulsive hoarding must have been present for at least six months
→ Clutter from a recent move or home repair doesn't count.

Hoarding is manifested by compulsive acquisition, compulsive saving, and disorganization. "We are a culture dominated by possessions," Frost said. Compulsive acquisition comes from buying and from collecting free things, such as hotel soaps. If someone never throws anything away -- such as mail, newspapers, and food containers -- that is what Frost termed "passive acquisition."

Hoarders save things for the same reasons we all do, but their saving becomes a compulsion, said Frost. They save things because of sentimental value, a potential need for it, or "it's too pretty to throw away." One of Frost's clients had an idea to save toilet paper rolls for an art project, but she never acted on the project. "The idea gives things value and makes it valuable," he said.

Hoarders have trouble making decisions about everything and will never put their stuff out of sight, said Frost. Hoarders will "churn" their stacks, which is when they sit down to "get organized" and start going through the papers. However, the value goes up every time they touch an item. In the end, nothing is tossed.

"Hoarders also believe they have poor memory, and they have a lack of confidence in their memory," said Frost. Since they "have to memorize everything, it causes them stress."

According to Frost, hoarding behavior usually begins at age 13 and slowly becomes worse over time. Frost's research shows links between hoarding and family influence, especially with first-degree relatives, but so far, they are not certain if hoarding is a problem of poor modeling or genes.

Much like Pettross' research, Frost has found that hoarders have other issues, such as other OCD symptoms, social phobias, depression, personality disorders, ADHD, and dementia. Those with hoarding issues should talk to a therapist as well as a professional organizer who specializes in chronic disorganization.

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Compulsive Shopping & Acquisition: *Looking for Love in All the Wrong Retail Places*

Society giggles at shopping, but compulsive shopping can become a serious issue, said *Lynne Gilberg*, a professional organizer who spoke on the issue. "They are looking for the magic," she said. "They seek control by surrounding themselves with desirable things."

She outlined four types of compulsive shoppers:

- Driver -- Uses possessions as proof of competence
- Amiable -- Possessions bolster self-esteem or they use things to "bribe" other people for attention
- Analytical -- Uses possessions to control their environment
- Expressive -- Uses shopping and purchases to elevate their mood

Both affluent and non-affluent people can be compulsive shoppers, said Gilberg. People with more money are able to cover it up longer than someone who is not as wealthy. Many times compulsive

shoppers return from shopping and drop the bags on the floor, never looking at them again. They also may not want to look at the bills and stop opening their mail. For them, the thrill was making the decision to buy, and it's literally a case of "shop until you drop."

"It's a short-term high," said Gilberg. "They may be paralyzed to make choices in other areas of their lives, but they can make choices while shopping."

Suggested treatments for compulsive shopping are psychotherapy, group therapy, seeking help from financial counseling services, and hiring a professional organizer to clear out the space. For those who want to leave a simpler life, check out [Simplicity Circles](#), part of the volunteer simplicity movement.

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Cool New Products

And speaking of compulsive shopping, here are a few new products designed to make your life more organized:

Rubbermaid Cedar Totes -- Rubbermaid's Cedar Storage line has imbedded cedar chips into the plastic, which makes it resistant to insects. The totes, which smell like cedar, should be available at Target and Lowe's, according to the company reps.

Post-It Sortable Cards -- These [index cards](#) can stick to any surface, which is great when you're working a project, writing a paper, or brainstorming. The best thing is the cards do not stick to each other. They are available in three sizes and several colors.

Family Facts -- Tired of writing notes to your child's school? Family Facts has a [school notepad](#), and parents just have to fill in the blanks, check a couple of boxes, and sign it. Presto -- you have a note for an absence, an early pick-up or a tardy. One pad of 50 sheets is \$8 on the company's website. The company also have a caregiver check sheet, forms for menu and shopping planning, and a family organizer.

Neatnix -- This [company](#) offers a variety of organizing products. The [Fold N' Stax](#) are thin sheets of plastic that slide in between your folded clothes and help you slide out the sweater you need without causing the whole stack to fall over.

Other interesting items include:

- [Basket Liners](#), a plastic bin that goes inside your wire baskets (like the Elfa shelving from the Container Store)
- [Stuff Bucket](#), colorful bags for kids and crafters who want to go portable
- [Collapsibles](#), canvas storage boxes that can be unzipped and put away when not needed

M.O. Inc. -- Created by Smead and r+h, [M.O.](#) has a line of stylish organizing supplies aimed at the small and home office market. Their products come in a variety of soothing colors with names like grass, orchid, and bark, and several items were featured in *Real Simple* magazine. If your home office needs style, M.O. is for you.

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A Little Spring Cleaning

Earth Day: *Go Green!*

April 22 was Earth Day, and you can recycle anything: newspaper, glass, magazines, old paint, and even your old computer. Many of us are good at collecting things to recycle but then never follow through. It can't be recycled unless it gets to the recycling center. Make a "spring resolution" to take your items to the center as part of your spring cleaning.

For more information on how to recycle in your area, check out these websites:

- [Houston](#)
- [Bellaire](#)
- [Smithville/Bastrop](#)

Clean Up Your Finances

Now that tax season is over, it's time to clean up all those bills and receipts. Here's an article from MSN on [spring cleaning your finances](#).

Got Clutter?

I have developed 15-minute, 30-minute and 45-minute presentations on organizing and time management. Moving to a new building? I also have a 15-minute presentation on preparing for a move for your department.

I also do one-on-one sessions in your office and help you come up with a solution. To schedule a presentation or a one-on-one appointment, call (713) 792-8061 or e-mail [Janice Simon](mailto:jsimon@mdanderson.org) (jsimon@mdanderson.org).

Happy Organizing!

-- Janice

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