

## BEFORE WE BEGIN

*Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.*

Albert Einstein

### INTRODUCTION

You didn't start out wanting to become a person who hoards. Nobody does. It probably crept up on you, seeming more or less like an accident, and now you don't know how you went from being a carefree child to being inundated with piles of things you don't use and can't manage. Hoarding begins as an attempt to solve a problem; over time, the solution mushroomed into a much bigger problem.

This book has been written for the many people who hoard who struggle with this condition every day and hope for a miracle that will change the behavior that undermines all their aspirations, comfort, safety, and relationships. People who hoard came to my *Eliminate Clutter* and *Time Management* classes for years looking for solutions that organizing alone can never give them. This book will explain why simply organizing your things or getting more storage or containers fails to solve the problem, what will enable you to change this counter-productive behavior, and how to stay hoarding-free for the rest of your life.

Along the way, you may experience a remarkable event – by changing your thinking and emotions so that you can stop hoarding, the rest of your life will become amazingly better as well, truly a transformation. How does this happen? Because **you can't stop hoarding unless you change the thoughts and feelings that sustain it, and once you do that, a miracle occurs.** To no longer live in fear, to not be dominated by compulsions or rituals, to be free from depression, resentment, anger – these changes are the greatest miracle of all. And as wonderful as it will be to live in a harmonious, nurturing, welcoming environment, even better will be the peace that comes from freeing yourself from the thoughts and feelings that perpetuate hoarding and create other distress as well.

You might wonder who you will be when you are no longer the person who wants to control things, is constantly depressed, angry at others, or struggling with a host of other negative feelings that have been part of your life for so long that you can't remember thinking or feeling otherwise. You will be who you were meant to be all along, someone who has choices and opportunities that aren't currently possible. You will be able to enjoy life's richness, glory in the beauty all around, and care for and value yourself and your abilities and talents. That hole-in-the-heart feeling that you are currently trying to fill with things will be replaced with a sense of wholeness and satisfaction.

This transformation won't be easy – change never is. It is the hardest, most worthwhile work you will ever do. It won't be quick – deep change needs time to take root and become enduring. But if you persist and consistently work on it, transformation will happen, and the entire rest of your life will be unimaginably better as a result.

### GETTING THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

*Reading without reflecting is like eating without digesting.*

Edmund Burke

**The first task to overcome hoarding is to FIND A SAFE PLACE TO KEEP THIS BOOK SO IT WON'T BE LOST AMONGST OTHER BELONGINGS AND YOU WILL BE ABLE TO FIND IT EASILY EVERY DAY.** The book is a step-by-step guide to help you through the change process, so you need it to be continuously available. The safest place to keep it might be in a bag on a doorknob, on a hook on the wall, in a 'safe zone', or some other foolproof arrangement.

I will store my book \_\_\_\_\_ (location) to keep it safe and accessible. (Filling in blanks like this throughout the text will help you commit to a particular strategy, reinforce the commitment by putting it in writing, and will help you overcome hoarding. **The more that you interact with the text – filling in blanks, highlighting or underlining, making comments in the margins, and writing in a journal about what you have read – the more effectively it will help you.**)

Keep a pen or pencil with the book and write your responses directly in it. You will get the most benefit from it if you interact with it constantly as you read. Highlight text that seems particularly applicable or suggestions that you want to implement. Mark insights that resonate with your life experience. Put tape flags on pages you want to be able to find easily. Mark anything you think is an error or unclear and please email me about it. I love answering questions – questions keep me inspired and working and pointing out errors is doing a FAVOR for me and future readers.

**The most important thing about using this book to recover from hoarding is that DOING THE EXERCISES and USING THE STRATEGIES is essential.** Merely reading this book or any other on the subject, even if you get many insights, will not be enough. Books like this can only help if you employ the strategies, do the exercises, and put into practice the insights that you gain from them. Reading this book several times will be beneficial – each time you will understand more, apply more, and make more progress. Picking a consistent time each day to study your book and do the exercises, write your thoughts about the material, and try out new strategies will increase the likelihood that you will do what is needed to change.

My best time to study this book, do the exercises, and practice new strategies is between \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_ AM/PM. Plan on at least half an hour per day of study to make progress on hoarding – this is little enough for something that has such a major impact on your life.

The timing for exercises has been carefully worked out. Even if you don't see the point of doing an exercise exactly where it has been specified, please trust that there is a good reason to do them when they are listed. Hopefully the value of this discipline will become clear as you go through the book. Leaving all the exercises to do at the end will give you less insight and benefit than doing them where indicated.

People often read material like this without seeing how it applies to them. It will be worthwhile to look at the statements in each paragraph as being relevant to you, as offering guideposts to help you transform your life. **Start with the assumption that all the material applies to you.** Skip nothing. Anything that clearly doesn't apply can be dropped later. Many suggestions throughout the text have blanks in front of them to either check off those that you want to try or,

better, put a 1, 2, or 3 in front of the idea for strategies you want to use immediately, those to use somewhat later, and those that you will try last. Better yet would be listing the ideas that you marked as 1's on your daily to-do list, and to repeat listing the activity on your to-do list each day until it becomes a habit, then add a new strategy.

**You will get the most benefit from this book by studying it in small stages, at each point stopping to reflect on any new insights you gain, and then doing the exercises.** Pausing after each paragraph to reflect on how the material applies to your life and situation might give the best results. Writing out or talking with someone about how these ideas apply to your behavior will give even more benefit. Small persistent, frequent, sustained efforts are most effective for changing long-standing thoughts or emotions and weakening their grip on your life and actions. **Overcoming hoarding isn't just a matter of clearing out the piles but of clearing out the thoughts and emotions that allow the piles to exist.**

Recovery is a slow process and instead of looking for big, sweeping changes, look for many little changes upon which you can build. **Give yourself credit for every tiny improvement** in thinking, feeling and doing – noting each small accomplishment will help balance the harsh, judgmental feelings you probably have. Putting up a big chart showing your accomplishments on a wall where you can see it, inside a closet or cabinet door, or as a list on your cell phone or the inside covers of the book, is a valuable way to counter the discouragement that otherwise might come from only seeing slow progress at first (it does speed up as you go on). List acquiring and reading this book as a major step on this journey. I will post my Recovery from Hoarding Accomplishments list on \_\_\_\_\_.

The material in each chapter assumes that the reader has absorbed and understood the material in the preceding chapters. To keep the book length as short as possible (thus keeping costs down), repetitions have been kept to a minimum. If something doesn't make sense or doesn't seem to follow, checking the Table of Contents or looking through previous chapters may reveal the assumptions that underlie the assertion. To make finding ideas easier, topic text and essential concepts have been bolded in many paragraphs, at least when an idea is first introduced.

**You need to read, reflect on, and respond to six chapters of important material before starting the chapters on stopping new things from coming in and how to clear things out and organize what remains.** I hope your patience won't be over-stretched, but the early material is crucial to the success of clearing out and organizing. Transforming your thinking and emotions is essential to being able to give things up and to stop acquiring excess. Skipping ahead isn't beneficial in most situations. However, if you are experiencing an immediate hoarding-related crisis such as bankruptcy, eviction, child removal or family separation or others, skip to Chapter Two to get help to cope with the situation. Follow the instructions in it carefully while returning to the other chapters as often as possible.

**IMPORTANT: One key step to take from the very beginning is to do everything you can to prevent acquiring more belongings, other than food or medicine, while studying this book** (probably at least one year). Particularly avoid getting more of your favorite hoarded objects during this time. (Reasonable exceptions might be getting a filing cabinet, bookcases, or other essentials for becoming organized.) Anything you really want but are refraining from acquiring

during this period can be put on a list for consideration for when this acquiring moratorium is complete. If not acquiring is a struggle (which wouldn't be surprising), write about the feelings that come up and work with the relaxation practice described on the last page or any other relaxation method that works for you. If you slip and acquire unnecessarily, double up your study of and use of strategies for the thoughts or emotions that lead to acquiring. As hard as this may sound at first, you can do it and your life will become richer as a result.

I commit to myself to avoid unnecessary acquisition for the coming year.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initials) \_\_\_\_\_ (date)

Another key step is to **swear off criticizing and judging yourself**. Most people who hoard constantly criticize themselves for hoarding, for being unable to stop acquiring, or for not getting organized or clearing things out. There's no benefit to this – no one gets better by nagging, even if you nag yourself. Self-criticism is a barrier to progress, one more source of depression and anxiety. As hard as it may be to change this likely deeply embedded habit, recognize that you have the right to feel good about yourself, and that you are far more likely to make progress when you are compassionate, gentle and understanding with yourself. As harmful as beating yourself up is, this probably indicates a lower level of denial, and to that extent, is a good sign for recovery (even though self-criticism must stop).

Giving up criticizing yourself requires becoming more relaxed. The more tense your body is, the harder changing your thoughts and feelings will be, key steps to overcoming hoarding. **The earlier you start using some form of daily conscious relaxation, whether the version at the back of this book or any other system, the sooner you will experience constructive change.** Other effective forms of relaxation include meditation, chanting, yoga, Sufi dancing, massage, or any activity that focuses your awareness on the present moment and your body. Affirmations also help many people. You may not see the correlation between relaxation and overcoming hoarding now, but in time the results will be clear.

I commit to:

- \_\_\_ giving up harsh judgments and criticisms about myself,
- \_\_\_ avoiding applying the word 'should' to myself or my behavior.
- \_\_\_ **being forgiving and compassionate with myself** while still working to create a better way of life and overcome hoarding, \_\_\_\_\_ (initials) \_\_\_\_\_ (date)
- \_\_\_ practicing relaxation every day at \_\_\_\_ AM/PM (20 minutes per session).

## HELP FOR TOUGH SPOTS

A word of **caution**: if you do an exercise or employ a strategy and it makes your problems worse or triggers depression or anxiety, SKIP or STOP the activity and try to understand what is causing the problem. Below are some ideas to consider if you have trouble with any activity:

- How important is the activity to overcoming hoarding? If it is central, (such as the Moment of Truth questions or relaxing), then efforts to overcome the barrier are needed; if it's not central, perhaps another activity would be better. (you can contact me for help with this: [gloria.valoris@gmail.com](mailto:gloria.valoris@gmail.com))
- Is there a way to modify the activity to make it less stressful for you?
- Do you need to do the activity in smaller chunks?

- Do you need a different perspective, expectation, or analysis of a situation? Would relaxation or affirmations reduce your discomfort?
- Would partnering with a friend make the activity easier for you? Or talking it out in a support group, such as Clutterers Anonymous? Or with a therapist?
- Would it be best to leave an exercise or strategy until later in the process?
- Would other strategies accomplish the same goal with less distress?

Overcoming hoarding is tough so **use every source of support available**, but some activities may just be too challenging, so another approach may be essential. Staying safe and improving your emotional outlook are more important than anything else.

While recovering from hoarding, you may be assailed by feelings of regret or guilt. These emotions, along with all other negative emotions we will discuss, need to be cast aside. **The past is gone and mistakes can't be undone so engaging in regret is as wasteful as all other negative emotions.** You have better things to do with your life, like making the rest of it as good as possible (it will become vastly better as you overcome hoarding).

Although admitting or even considering that you have a problem with hoarding has taken much courage, actually changing and overcoming hoarding will take even greater courage. You will need to confront longstanding thoughts, beliefs, emotions, traits, and habits, and then, harder still, change them. However, as challenging as doing this work may be, it is much better than continuing to live with hoarding.

As you recover from hoarding, you will often need to balance opposing states:

- being in denial vs. being overwhelmed by regret or guilt
- being too hard vs. not pushing yourself enough
- having the drive essential for the intense work of changing your thinking and clearing out vs. being relaxed enough to get insights and make good decisions
- being aware of your feelings vs. being controlled by them
- being concerned for the feelings and needs of others and how hoarding impacts them vs. losing track of your own needs (hoarding not being among them)

Being aware that opposing urges are usually tugging on you may help you stay calm, avoid self-recrimination, and be patient with the process of change. As with most areas of life, balance is the key to mental health, progress, and good feelings.

This book hasn't been written for family members of people who hoard. Although they too greatly need support, the focus here is on the person who is hoarding. Several books for families of people who hoard are listed in the Reading Guide on my website.

This book doesn't cover animal hoarding. I have no personal experience working with this problem and can't write about an area of which I have no direct knowledge. However, I believe the dynamics are similar and the book will provide the tools needed to free yourself (and the animals!) from this obsession.

To keep the cost of the book as low as possible, many elements developed for it were left out. However, these are available for free on my website:

**[www.optimalorganizations.com/hoarding/toc.htm](http://www.optimalorganizations.com/hoarding/toc.htm)**

Rather than use passwords for the material, I have omitted link buttons so that you must click on either the Exercises Index link or the Appendix Index at the bottom of the Table of Contents page for links to supplementary material, or type in the name of the desired pages at the end of my web address to access it. You can print out clean copies of the exercises (your answers will likely change over time), go to the Reading List (updated as I become aware of new resources), or find many other additional resources.

## SHARING

**Your experiences and insights while recovering from hoarding are invaluable knowledge that can benefit others. PLEASE, SHARE whatever you learn or struggle with so that the body of knowledge regarding hoarding can grow, easing treatment and recovery for the many people who hoard still needing help.** Email me with what works and what doesn't. Every discovery you make is a contribution to helping others. This field is quite young that all treatments are still evolving.

Please email me your thoughts about how to improve the next edition of the book, your experiences using the material to change your life, improvements needed to the website, or any other methods of reaching people who want to break free from the snares of hoarding. You can reach me at

**[gloria.valoris@gmail.com](mailto:gloria.valoris@gmail.com)**

**Please don't put my email address on any mailing lists or use it for any purpose except those specified above.** I am also happy to answer questions regarding the material, recovery, or organizing. Questions from readers often become the basis for my monthly newsletter (anonymously of course). Asking questions helps you and others because the question may identify an area that needs to be made clearer or needs more explanation or examples, or maybe hasn't even been covered. So please, consider that you are doing others a service when you ask questions. **Chances are, whatever concerns you is also a concern for others** – they just haven't articulated it yet.

## HOARDING ON TELEVISION

*No one would choose this.* Person who hoards on *Hoarding: Buried Alive* program

Watching the TV programs on hoarding offers both advantages and disadvantages. These programs have done enormous good in spreading the word that:

- hoarding is a common and significant problem that takes many forms,
- hoarding is common in people who are not elderly,
- a multi-pronged approach is essential,
- help is available,
- change is possible,
- relationships with family and friends can aid recovery, and
- follow-up therapy (aftercare) is important.

The downside of these shows is that

- They sensationalize situations, especially episodes which prioritize emotionality over understanding. This may make for good television but it's a therapeutic disservice to people who hoard and their families.
- The therapeutic, organizing, and support staff is of highly varied experience and quality (hence the importance of screening such people as we will discuss in Chapter Seven) and seems to be declining.
- In many cases (most?), not enough is done to help the person who hoards change or challenge his thinking about his belongings.
- The family members aren't given enough help to understand hoarding.
- Clear-outs are conducted before people who hoard reach sufficient understanding and commitment (as demonstrated by the people who rummage through the bags of belongings already put in the trash).

While watching these programs you will see people who successfully overcome hoarding, and some who are unsuccessful. Remember that most people who do use the help given make major strides in solving their problem. Watching these programs may provide insights into your own situation, but caution is needed to avoid over-generalizing, especially regarding pessimistic outcomes. Also, some people whose problems were aired on national TV experienced major adverse impacts in other areas of their lives as a result. Anyone considering applying to be on one of those shows should think carefully about potentially serious effects on their career or relationships, reactions from public officials or landlords, or other fallout that could ensue.