

One person's clutter is another's disorder

By Tenley Woodman | Sunday, August 22, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Lifestyle

Childhood trauma is common among hoarders, according to Boston University School of Social Work's Compulsive Hoarding Research Project.

"Hoarding starts in the teenage years. You can see the beginnings of clutter, but not enough to create a clinical problem," said Gail Steketee, dean of BU's School of Social Work. "By the time you are in your 30s, you have accumulated a lot of things and that can cause a problem.

"We have to keep in mind it is a spectrum - from mild to severe, and life-threatening," said Steketee, co-author of "Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things."

Hoarding is also linked to obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), but it is not the only factor.

"There's a small minority that have hoarding because of OCD. They feel like that if they don't save something, something bad will happen," said Dr. Michael Jenike, founder of the OCD research clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital.

The Compulsive Hoarding Research Project at BU found that approximately 19 to 25 percent of people with OCD engage in hoarding.

Depression can be a compounding factor.

"The rate of depression is remarkably high among people who are hoarders. It does occur in some 50 percent of people who seek treatment. Much higher than people we see in the anxiety disorder," Steketee said.

"You could help the depression with meds, but it wouldn't change the hoarding," Jenike said. "I think it's a thing with all of our disorders, we don't know why it appears when it does."

While part of the inspectional services team at the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, case worker Jesse Edsell-Vetter recognized that a number of clients were in danger of losing their housing due to hoarding. In 2006, he spearheaded MBHP's sanitation and hoarding initiative.

"We focus on intervention and use cognitive behavioral techniques to help them learn how to organize and discard things," Edsell-Vetter said. "We also help them connect with therapists. We know if you only address the clutter, you are not addressing the underlying aspects of the disorder. It's like an iceberg."

Experts insist a multi-disciplined approach involving mental-health professionals and social workers is the only effective way to treat hoarding.

BU's Compulsive Hoarding Research Project found that even after a successful clean-out, hoarders ultimately relapse within a matter of months.

Communities across Massachusetts are forming hoarding task forces to combat the problem. But there is more demand than manpower.

"There's not nearly enough professional capacity to address hoarding," said Edsell-Vetter. "There just aren't enough people trained."

Edsell-Vetter is currently the only member of MBHP staff who works on the hoarding caseload. Last year, Edsell-Vetter had 76 cases, each requiring a weekly visit at minimum.

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