

## Animal Hoarding: An Overlooked and Misunderstood Problem

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When most people hear animal hoarding, they recall shocking news stories or imagine the “crazy cat lady.” They immediately side with the plight of the rescued animals, but rarely do they imagine what the lives of the hoarder must be like, or what led to the hoarding. The tragedy of animal hoarding is that most animal hoarders suffer the same fate as object hoarders—they fall victim to their good intentions and end up emotionally overwhelmed, socially isolated and ultimately alienated from family and friends. The problem of animal hoarding causes great suffering for both the animals and humans. When discovered, it also poses great expense for local animal shelters and may even necessitate regional and national efforts to find homes for a large number of animals.

No one really knows how many animal hoarders there are, but we do know that reports of animal hoarding in the media, to animal control and law enforcement agencies has increased five-fold in the past decade. We know that approximately 40% of object hoarders also hoard animals. We know that hundreds of thousands of animals are affected by animal hoarding each year and that the Internet may make it easier for hoarders to engage in animal rescue. We also know, that like object hoarding, that this problem is under-reported and hidden because animal hoarders, like object hoarders, tend to only come to the attention of mental health professionals and animal control authorities once others complain. Researchers, animal control authorities, veterinarians and mental health professionals have recently been combining their efforts to understand this disorder by forming the Hoarding Animals Research Consortium (HARC) at Tufts Veterinary School.

Animal hoarders are similar to object hoarders. They have problems with three areas that result in hoarding, problems with acquiring objects or animals, problems with how they handle and manage their possessions and problems getting rid of objects or animals. Compulsive reading of animal adoption websites, visiting shelters on euthanasia days, or searching the alley for stray animals can each lead to acquiring too many pets. Frequently hoarders engage in acquisition behaviors because they are imagining all the wonderful ways in which they can save or rescue the pets that they have in their care. They have every intention to care for their pets but difficulties with organization, attention and focus end up making it easy for animal hoarders to keep their living spaces very messy with animal waste and clutter. Many hoarders have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Hoarders have a hard time letting go of their objects or animals because they have a terrible time making even simple decisions, e.g., Is this dog my favorite or should I adopt him out? They also may have subtle memory problems and feel that they cannot trust their recall; therefore they keep things in order to preserve memories.

Hoarders also have an intense emotional attachment to the things, or animals, that they hoard. Hoarding helps them avoid the pain of letting go of things that seem very special, even though the clutter of things or animals prevents comfortable living. Many object hoarders also believe that their things they hoard should be saved for some special future event, even though the event never

happens. This is true, also, for animal hoarders. They imagine the wonderful way in which they will heal sick pets, love and nurture their pets while overlooking the terrible effects of having too many animals. Most of the hoarders that I treat also confuse their good intention to manage or reduce their clutter with the actual act of organizing or discarding their clutter. They churn through their piles of junk, and then feel as though they have accomplished something significant, even though an objective outside observer would be unable to discern any improvement. Animal hoarders do the same thing. They clear out a small area of their home from animal waste, or find a special container for pet food, but fail to address the fact that their home, furniture and lives are destroyed by having too many animals.

Animal hoarding may have a different trigger for their hoarding than object hoarders. Studies on the prevalence rate for animal hoarding show that about 40% of object hoarders also hoard animals. Studies on animal hoarders show that their animal hoarding frequently begins after a difficult life event, such as illness, disability or the death of a significant other. Object hoarders do not seem to have any life event triggers and their hoarding problems can begin during their teenage or young adult years, although their hoarding may not come to the attention of others until their middle or senior years. Object hoarders are more likely to have interpersonal styles and disorders that cause them to prefer being alone and make them less likely to have lots of friends, date or marry. Most object hoarders I treat have few friends and those who know them would say that they seem to care for their objects more than people.

Animal hoarders, on the other hand, seem to seek out social relationships with animals and people. They view their animals as being the sole source, or the major source, of love in their lives and they emphasize how much they give and receive love from their animals. The animal hoarders that I treat all seem to be people who are beloved by their family and friends and who have great capacity to give love. It seems that for many animal hoarders, the animals they keep become a way to guarantee a conflict free love relationship in their lives. They often refer to their animals as "their babies" and confuse their good intention to love animals with the actual reality of their inability to provide a safe, clean and healthy home for the animals. Many animal hoarders view themselves as being a rescue service for the animals that others reject. Their hoarding may give them a special role as a person who saves the animals that are unloved by others. Their hoarding provides them a special identity that helps them feel special, loved and important. Consequently animal hoarders feel unable to give up their animals for adoption because they falsely believe that no one else will provide the intense love that they feel for the animals. This is despite the fact that the hoarder is unable to provide for adequate food, shelter, safety or veterinary care for the animals.

Animal hoarding is especially sad because it results in the neglect of animals. Everyone suffers when there is animal hoarding, the animals, the hoarder and those who love the hoarder. Frequently the hoarder is neglecting their health, nutrition and social life because all their time, money and energy are spent on caring for their animals. They are emotionally overwhelmed and trapped by their indecision, sense of responsibility for the animals and are frequently sleep deprived because their animals keep them awake. They are also overwhelmed by animal waste and can suffer health problems created by inhalation of ammonia, fleas, ticks and other animal born illnesses. The animals suffer the same fate as their owners: poor health, malnutrition, disease and even death. They are stressed by having frequent fights over food; territory or mating because they live in crowded conditions and usually are not spayed or neutered. Pets who live in healthy

homes, or in the wild, have the option to retreat when they are stressed or attacked. Hoarded animals never have this option. Although both types of hoarding lead to sad outcomes, such as family conflict, social isolation, or even the death of the hoarder by becoming trapped in their clutter, the saddest outcome of all is that hoarded animals are victims living, and even dying, in an environment of neglect, filth and the stress of crowding. They are unfortunate innocent prisoners of the well-intentioned but misguided love of those who hoard them. Everyone aches when they see and hear stories of animal hoarding because the animals are innocent victims living tragic lives in tandem with people who are equally trapped in their hoarding pattern.

Animal hoarders, and object hoarders, rarely seek treatment unless those who love them motivate them to get treatment. Their inability to make decisions, stop acquisition behaviors and trust others with their animals keeps them stuck. Many animal hoarders have few alternative activities to help them feel productive since their lives are consumed with vain attempts at animal care. Simply removing all the animals from a hoarder's home will not teach them new ways to manage their lives and prevent additional hoarding. We know from object hoarders that simply cleaning out a person's home only provides more open space to refill with clutter. Animal Control reports indicate that animal hoarders who have their animals removed are at risk for becoming repeat animal hoarders without treatment. Unless the person engages in cognitive behavioral treatment designed to help them address the things that lead to and maintain hoarding, then they will be likely to make the same mistakes again. Treatment outcome research on object hoarders shows that they can eliminate or decrease hoarding with the proper cognitive behavioral therapy. We have every reason to believe that this is true for animal hoarders. We just do not have the research studies to prove it yet.

Treatment for animal hoarders will usually involve coordinating intervention with local or regional animal shelters and animal control officers to make it harder for the hoarder to rescue or adopt extra animals once the difficult decision to give up animals has been made. It also helps to have the family and friends become involved in treatment so that the hoarder can quickly develop or maintain satisfying relationships that provide opportunities to give and receive the love that their animals offered. Simply trying to confront a hoarder with all of their mistakes and the terrible state of their animals and home will only make them feel defensive and rehearse all their reasons for being a hoarder. Family and friends usually need the help of a therapist to learn to how to be helpful, rather than bludgeon the hoarder with their confrontations, since they are often furious and horrified by the hoarder's behavior.

For more information, visit:

<http://www.Tufts.edu/vet/hoarding>

<http://www.animal.discovery.com/tv/confessions-animal-hoarding>