

At Home with Hoarders

By
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All Right Organizing

My work as a professional organizer allows me the opportunity to see how people live and work and to get a first hand perspective of what they face in their daily environs. Prior to accepting a new client, an interview provides me with some insight into what led the individual to contact me and to what they wish gain from our working together. Most often, the individual will relate either an ongoing organizational dilemma such as filing or organizing their children's things; or some situational circumstance like the addition of a new baby, a job change or a move. Upon arrival, I begin by taking a tour of their home or office. This allows me the opportunity to follow them step-by-step through their individual processes so that I can see for myself exactly how their environment is working (or not) for them – some challenges are the physical limitations of space, other the lack of organizational systems. Ultimately, clients are looking to install or restore order so that they may continue on with their lives - more efficiently, less cluttered and with a renewed feeling of control. On occasion, however, it is something different.

Early on in my career, following a group meeting I had facilitated in which participants shared their challenges with home-organization and de-cluttering, I was approached by a soft-spoken and well-dressed woman. This woman, I will call her Eva, confessed to me the reason that had caused her to drive over an hour to join our group that day. She was being threatened with possible eviction from the apartment she had lived in for 11 years after receiving a maintenance repair visit that had led to a warning from the building manager. Eva became my first “hoarding” client.

Not all professional organizers choose to work with hoarders and, I must admit, it is an eye-opening experience. Although I receive ongoing training via my professional association - [NAPO](#) - regarding such issues, I learn something new about understanding hoarders with every undertaking.

Upon my first visit to Eva's home, she welcomed me at the door with the warning that I was her only visitor in over 5 years. As I navigated my way through stacks of paper and boxes, my feet never actually touching the surface of the floor, I could see the embarrassment and feel the anxiety radiating from her. I thought that we might start by sitting with a cup of tea and discussing her organizing issues and goals. I was mistaken. Not only was there nowhere to sit – not in the living room, dining room, kitchen or bedroom – she hadn't used her kitchen in over a year and could not heat a cup of water, let alone find a clean cup or a teabag. She explained that since her bout with cancer and the death of her father over 5 years prior, her home life had gotten out of control. Her children would no longer visit with the grandchildren; she ate out for every meal and spent as much time away from her apartment as possible. I realized two things that day. First, there is often (although not always) a major life event that to which a hoarding situation can be traced. Second, and more practically for me as an organizer, is to expect that no appliances or conveniences will be safely or sanitarily usable. A sad but important lesson, as expecting these things only added to my client's feelings of guilt and embarrassment.

According to the [Institute for Challenging Disorganization](#) (ICD) there are four categories used to assess the degree of clutter in an environment: Structure, Animals/Pests, Household Functions and Health & Safety. In regard to these categories, environments may be assessed as “low” and “guarded” - levels that are typical of an average and safely functioning environment - to “elevated,” “high” or “severe” hoarding conditions. With the exception of animal evidence, Eva's situation qualified as severe. Since then, the circumstances that I encounter that are within these high levels add up to a little more than twenty five percent of my clients.

These jobs are invariably accompanied by challenges for me as an organizer. Some, unique to the individual situation, and others, that are more predictable. For instance, my hoarding clients frequently own more than one pet. The unfortunate yet corresponding truth is that they seldom own a working vacuum. I have entered homes to find out that what at first seem like houseplants, are actually vines growing in from the outside. More often than not, my work uncovers plumbing leaks in areas that have long been inaccessible. Many of my clients sleep on couches or chairs because they cannot reach their beds. I have come to expect the unexpected and arrive dressed and ready for all types of temperatures and conditions. I have also learned to let go of my own desire for completion or perfection and arm myself, rather, with patience and compassion, realizing that the road back from hoarding is proportionate to the road by which one arrived.

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