

**Questions  
&  
Answers  
About  
Compulsive  
Hoarding**

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**Obsessive Compulsive Foundation, Inc.**



## What is compulsive hoarding?

Compulsive hoarding is a disorder characterized by difficulty discarding items that appear to most people to have little or no value. This leads to such an accumulation of clutter that living and workspaces cannot be used for their intended purposes. The clutter can result in serious threats to the health and safety of the sufferer and those who live with the hoarder or nearby. Often people with compulsive hoarding also acquire too many items – either free or purchased.

In order to meet criteria for a diagnosis of compulsive hoarding, a person must experience significant distress and/or impairment in functioning as a result of his/her hoarding behavior. Common types of functional impairment include: fire or health hazards caused by excessive clutter; infestations, inability to have guests over to the home, inability to prepare or eat food in the home, inability to find important possessions because of clutter; inability to finish tasks on time, and interpersonal conflicts caused by the clutter.

Not all hoarding is compulsive. Hoarding and saving behaviors can be seen in people with various neuropsychiatric disorders, such as psychotic disorders, dementia, eating disorders, autism, and developmental disabilities, as well as in people with no psychiatric disorder. However, it is most frequently associated with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Between 25-40% of people with OCD have compulsive hoarding symptoms. It is not clear at this point whether compulsive hoarding is part of OCD or whether it is a separate disorder that is common in people who have OCD.

### **Compulsive hoarding is typically driven by excessive concerns or fears of:**

- Discarding valuable items that might be needed or useful someday
- Losing important information
- Making a mistake
- Being wasteful

- Losing something that reminds a person of a loved one
- Not being able to do things as completely or as well as one would like

**Typical behaviors seen in compulsive hoarding include:**

- Saving far more items than are needed or can be used
- Acquisition of more items than can be used
- Avoidance of throwing things away
- Avoidance of making decisions
- Avoidance of putting possessions in appropriate storage areas, such as closets, drawers, or files
- Pervasive slowness or lateness in completing tasks

**What are some other symptoms of compulsive hoarding?**

Compulsive hoarding is part of a discrete clinical syndrome that also includes indecisiveness, perfectionism, procrastination, difficulty organizing tasks, and avoidance behaviors.

**How disabling is compulsive hoarding?**

Compared to people with non-hoarding OCD, those with compulsive hoarding typically show:

- More functional impairment
- More social and family disability
- More severe anxiety and depression symptoms
- Older age when presenting for treatment
- Poor insight into the severity of the problem

The clutter that accumulates in the homes of people who hoard is often a serious fire risk. These homes are also frequently vulnerable to infestation from rodents, insects, and molds, which can put the inhabitants of the home at risk for various health prob-

lems, including asthma, allergies and infections.

Family members are often frustrated by the gradual worsening of symptoms and the extent of the person's impairment. They often want very much to help but feel powerless to do so. They may become angry at the person's inability to clean or discard clutter, not understanding that this is not possible without treatment.

## **Are people with compulsive hoarding just lazy?**

No. Compulsive hoarding is not due to laziness or weakness of character, nor is it due simply to disorganization. Rather, compulsive hoarding may be due to distinct brain abnormalities that will not improve without treatment. People with this problem are often acutely aware that the degree of clutter in their home is socially unacceptable and often believe that others will think them lazy or even crazy. Not surprisingly, they are frequently secretive about their problems and will often isolate themselves from family and loved ones. This may also be why they are reluctant to seek treatment.

## **How many people suffer from compulsive hoarding in the United States?**

The true prevalence is unknown, but it is estimated that up to 1.2 million people suffer from compulsive hoarding in the USA.

## **What causes compulsive hoarding?**

Compulsive hoarding may be hereditary. Up to 85% of people with compulsive hoarding can identify another family member who has this problem. Abnormal brain development and brain lesions may also play a role. Compulsive hoarding can begin after brain damage, such as strokes, surgery, injuries, or infections. Family experiences and psychological factors may also play a role in the development of hoarding and emotional stress may heighten symptoms.

Research indicates that people with compulsive hoarding have unique abnormalities of brain function that are different from those seen in people with non-hoarding OCD and those with no psychiatric problems. However, we do not yet fully know what causes these brain abnormalities.

All people with significant hoarding behaviors should receive a thorough assessment which can evaluate possible causes of hoarding behavior, determine the correct diagnosis, and develop an appropriate treatment plan.

## **What is the age of onset of compulsive hoarding?**

People with compulsive hoarding who participate in research and treatment studies have an average age near 50. Onset typically occurs during teenage years, but may occur later in life, after brain damage, a traumatic life event or episode of depression.

Regardless of the age of onset, there is usually a significant time lag of many years between the onset of symptoms and when a person first seeks treatment.

## **What is the course of compulsive hoarding?**

Compulsive hoarding tends to be a chronic disorder. Left untreated, it usually worsens gradually over time.

## **What treatments are available for compulsive hoarding?**

**Cognitive-behavior therapy** (CBT) using the technique of exposure and response prevention appears to improve compulsive hoarding symptoms. This technique decreases excessive fears of making decisions, losing important possessions, throwing things away, and organizing saved items out of sight, by gradual exposure to tasks that provoke these fears. People with compulsive hoarding problems are encouraged to resist their urges to engage in their usual behaviors, such as postponing decision making, saving things “just in case,” or putting things in piles

rather than storing them. This ultimately results in a decrease in anxiety, avoidance, and compulsive behaviors, and changes the way people with compulsive hoarding think about their possessions.

CBT for compulsive hoarding can be effectively done either in someone's home or in a therapist's office.

**Medication** – Drugs with potent effects on the brain chemical serotonin seem most effective. Serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SRI's) are highly effective and FDA-approved for treatment of OCD, but it is not clear whether they are as effective for compulsive hoarding as for other OCD symptoms. Very few studies have tested SRI's or other medications specifically for the treatment of compulsive hoarding. Some studies have found that SRI's are beneficial for compulsive hoarding, while others found that hoarding symptoms were associated with poor response to SRI's.

If someone does not have an adequate response to SRI's, adding other types of medications can often help to improve response. New medications and new combinations of medications are always being tried, giving reason for greater hope in the future.

A combination of medication and CBT appears to be the most effective treatment regimen for most people with compulsive hoarding.

**For more information about compulsive hoarding, go to [www.ocfoundation.org](http://www.ocfoundation.org) and click on the Compulsive Hoarding section.**

**DISCLAIMER:** The information contained in this publication is not intended to provide medical advice. This information is intended only to keep you informed. It is strongly advised that you check any medications or treatments with a qualified mental health provider.

## COMPLIANCE FOR SOLICITATION REGULATIONS

The Obsessive Compulsive Foundation, Inc. (“OCF”) is a Connecticut not-for-profit corporation. Its mission is to educate the public and professional communities about Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (“OCD”) and related disorders; to educate and train mental health professionals in the latest treatment of OCD and related disorders; to provide assistance to individuals with OCD and related disorders, and their family and friends; and to support research into the causes and effective treatment of OCD and related disorders. The OCF’s principal place of business is 676 State Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06511-6508. The information enclosed herein describes one or more of the OCF’s activities. Your gift is tax deductible as a charitable contribution. Contributions received by OCF do not inure to the benefit of its officers, directors or any specific individual.

A copy of OCF’s most recent financial report is available upon request and may be obtained at no cost by writing to OCF at P.O. Box 9573, New Haven, Connecticut 06535-0573 or by contacting its Executive Director at (203) 401-2074. If you are a resident of one of the following states, you may obtain information directly as follows: **Florida:** A COPY OF THE OFFICIAL REGISTRATION AND FINANCIAL INFORMATION MAY BE OBTAINED FROM THE FLORIDA DIVISION OF CONSUMER SERVICES BY CALLING TOLL FREE WITHIN THE STATE (800) 435-7352, OR (850) 488-2221 IF CALLING FROM OUTSIDE FLORIDA. OCF’S REGISTRATION NUMBER IN FLORIDA IS CH8507. **Maryland:** A copy of the documents and information submitted by OCF pursuant to the Maryland Charitable Solicitations Act are available for the cost of copies and postage from the Secretary of State, State House, Annapolis, MD 21401. Telephone (401) 974-5534. OCF’s registration number in Maryland is 5015. **Mississippi:** The official registration and financial information of OCF may be obtained from the Mississippi Secretary of State’s office by calling (888) 236-6167. OCF’s registration number in Mississippi is C1143. **New Jersey:** INFORMATION FILED WITH THE ATTORNEY GENERAL CONCERNING THIS CHARITABLE SOLICITATION MAY BE OBTAINED FROM THE

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY BY CALLING (973) 504-6215. OCF's registration number in New Jersey is CH1461800. **New York:** A copy of the most recent annual report filed by OCF with the New York Secretary of State may be obtained by writing to Charities Bureau, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271, Telephone (518) 486-9797. OCF's registration number in New York is 66211. **North Carolina:** A COPY OF THE LICENSE TO SOLICIT CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS AS A CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION OR SPONSOR AND FINANCIAL INFORMATION MAY BE OBTAINED FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES, SOLICITATION LICENSING BRANCH, BY CALLING (919) 733-4510. OCF's registration number in North Carolina is SL002059. **Pennsylvania:** A copy of the official registration and financial information may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free within Pennsylvania (800) 732-0999. OCF's registration number in Pennsylvania is 15687. **Virginia:** A copy of the OCF's most recent financial statement is available upon request from the State Division of Consumer Affairs in the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services at (804) 786-2373. **Washington:** Additional financial disclosure information may be obtained by contacting the Secretary of State toll free within Washington at (800) 332-GIVE. OCF's registration number in Washington is 6363. **West Virginia:** West Virginia residents may obtain a summary of the registration and financial documents from the Secretary of State, State Capitol, Charleston, West Virginia 25305.

**REGISTRATION WITH A STATE AGENCY DOES NOT CONSTITUTE OR IMPLY ENDORSEMENT, APPROVAL OR RECOMMENDATION BY THAT STATE.**

**THE OCF DOES NOT HAVE A PROFESSIONAL SOLICITOR. ONE HUNDRED PERCENT OF EVERY CONTRIBUTION IS RECEIVED BY THE OCF. DONATIONS WILL BE USED TO UNDERWRITE THE OCF'S PROGRAMS, ACTIVITIES AND OPERATIONS AS WELL AS FOR RESEARCH.**

## What is the Obsessive Compulsive Foundation?

The Obsessive Compulsive Foundation (OCF) is a not-for-profit mental health organization. Its mission is to increase research into, treatment for and understanding of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and the OC spectrum disorders. The

OCF's resources and activities include:

- The bimonthly OCD Newsletter
- Web site: [www.ocfoundation.org](http://www.ocfoundation.org)
  - *Organized Chaos*, a webzine for teens and young adults
  - Compulsive Hoarding section on the main web site
- Annual three-day conference
- Promotion of support groups and OCF affiliates
- Behavior Therapy Institutes for training mental health professionals to treat OCD
- OCF Research Awards
- The OCF Genetics Collaborative
- Distribution of articles, pamphlets, books and tapes about OCD and related disorders

## What can I do to help?

Join the OC Foundation and become a partner in our efforts to eradicate OCD, OC spectrum disorders and compulsive hoarding. The Foundation needs your help to continue its vital education and service programs and to support research in this field.



# Membership Application

Please fill out the form and return it to:

OC FOUNDATION, INC.

**P.O. Box 9573, New Haven, CT 06535-9573**

- I would like to become a member of the OC Foundation, Inc.
- I would like to renew my membership.

**Payable in U.S. dollars by check, money order or  
Visa / MC / Amex / Discover**

- US \$45 Individual membership
- US \$50 Canadian and Mexican Individual membership
- US \$55 Outside North America Individual membership
- US \$65 Family membership
- US \$70 Canadian and Mexican Family membership
- US \$75 Outside North America Family membership
- US \$85 Professional membership
- US \$90 Canadian and Mexican Professional membership
- US \$95 Outside North America Professional membership
- I would like to give a Gift to support the Foundation's operations and programs \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- I would like to give a Gift for OCF Research Fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_

## CREDIT CARD PAYMENT AUTHORIZATION

Check credit card company below:

- Visa  Mastercard  American Express  Discover

CARD #

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Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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- Check here if your company matches gifts and enclose matching gift form.
- I would like to become a member of my local OCF affiliate.
  - Greater Boston, MA  Jacksonville, FL
  - Central New Jersey  OCF of Western PA
  - Central New York  Philadelphia, PA
  - Chicago  San Francisco Bay Area
  - Fundacion Obsesivo Compulsivo de Puerto Rico
- I would like to receive mailings from the nearest affiliate.



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