

# BLIND

to



# CLUTTER

*written for Menews by Lilian Wu*

Think it's impossible for someone to be blissfully unaware of a decomposing body in their house? You might be surprised. In one of the episodes (House of Hoarders) from Season 11 of CSI: Las Vegas, Marta Santiago was suspected of foul play when a corpse was found buried under tons of debris and clutter in her home.

Filled from floor to ceiling with assorted items, the woman's house is a hoarder's paradise but is a potential fire hazard and a danger to anyone who enters. Marta was diagnosed as a "Level 5 Hoarder" – a compulsive hoarding condition that causes clutter blindness, making her apparently oblivious to the presence of the corpse.

### *What is Compulsive Hoarding?*

Dr Lee Cheng, Senior Consultant Psychiatrist, Vice Chairman, Medical Board (Clinical), Institute of Mental Health defines it "as **a subtype of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)**... characterised by excessive acquisition of items, inability to discard apparently useless items, and excessive clutter."

A compulsive hoarder will form such a strong emotional attachment to their possessions that discarding them will cause a high degree of discomfort or anxiety, because they only feel safe when surrounded by their belongings. They could be overwhelmed by the amount of clutter they have accumulated, but they will view anyone who tries to touch or throw away their "security blanket" with suspicion or resentment.

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It's a gradual process that often starts from childhood and does not become a serious problem until the hoarder reaches adulthood.

### *Why Do People Hoard?*

Most of us keep stuff that has sentimental value. In fact, I bet some of you out there have storerooms or wardrobes cluttered with things that you don't even need any more. A hoarder, on the other hand, accumulates numerous possessions for the following reasons:

**They are afraid of throwing something away** because they think they might need it someday, and they have difficulty distinguishing what is important or not so everything is important to them.

**They avoid dealing with their uncomfortable feelings** so they tend to procrastinate. Instead of deciding what to do with an item now; they will make empty promises to deal with it later and never do.

**They become more emotionally attached to the item over time**, which naturally makes it even more difficult for them to get rid of it.

**They're afraid of forgetting where they put something**, so everything has to be out in the open where they can see it.

**Amassing things makes them feel secure and in control**, especially after a traumatic event in their lives like the loss of a loved one.

Things add up because **hoarders will feel distraught until they acquire something** that they had set their heart on.

The desire to hoard may be due to abnormalities in brain function but it's not clear what causes them, except for the possibility of genetics.



*Photo courtesy of IMH*

**"Compulsive hoarding may run in families. In an American psychiatric journal, it was reported that when one female identical twin demonstrated compulsive hoarding behaviour, more than half the time her twin shared similar symptoms."**

**- Dr Lee Cheng (above)**

To put a clearer spin on the cluttered world of hoarding, the Institute for Challenging Disorganisation identified five levels that measure the degree of cluttering and disorder: Green, Blue, Yellow, Orange and Red with Red being the most serious level of all.

### *Problems Caused by Hoarding*

Excessive hoarding leads to a number of problems for both hoarders and their family members. For starters, the sheer amount of clutter means that there is an increased risk of fire. Hygiene conditions could also be compromised

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when sanitary conditions are not maintained. Living standards dip too when the clutter starts taking over living space, impairing the hoarder's ability to carry out daily activities such as sleeping on an actual bed. After some time, the hoarder will run out of space and resort to piling up stuff around entrances.

Hoarding doesn't just affect a person's environment; it could be detrimental to family relationships as well. Due to the strong attachment for their possessions, hoarders are often resistant or violent to well-meaning efforts to help them 'declutter'.

Friends and family, on the other hand, may not fully understand the reason behind the hoarding – thus alienating the hoarder in the process. It's a vicious process that gives hoarders little comfort, which in turn leads them to accumulate even more clutter so as to feel better about themselves.

On the financial front; while some hoarders are able to hold down a job, there are some with empty bank accounts. Randy Frost, professor of psychology at Smith College and author of "Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things", explains on CreditCards.com that hoarders rack up on their credit card debt because they buy compulsively with the help of their numerous credit cards. As a result of all the bills stacking up, the hoarder is plunged into financial crises, which puts emotional stress on their family members and friends as well.

"It is important to involve the family in the management of patients with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder," Dr Lee Cheng says, "family members are often ignorant about the disorder and may be drawn into the patient's rituals. Also, studies have shown that up to 55% experienced family conflict resulting from their condition."

*When The Brain Goes Wrong*