

Hoarding Intervention Essentials

The following outline defines the critical components of a successful hoarding intervention and provides suggestions for taking each step “along the road to clean-up.”

1. Building Trust

- Any changes you make in a senior’s home can provoke anxiety and agitation, even when dementia or mental illness are not present.
- It is essential to build trust with the client before suggesting or attempting to make any changes at all.

Strategies

- Listen to your client's ideas and plans for their belongings
- Encourage them to voice their hopes—realistic or not—and accommodate them if possible.
- Offer to help client deal with excess items by donating them, selling them, sending them to loved ones.
- Ask client what he or she would like to do that the clutter is making impossible, e.g. using the stove.
- Set goals based on what the client wants to do. Focus on quality-of-life improvements.
- Consider removing the client from the premises. Ask family members to take the client out for the day or occupy him with other activities to help workers complete the job without interference.

2. Assessing the Client

- Assess state of mind
 - Does your presence make him anxious or apprehensive?
 - Is she alert and aware of the state of her surroundings?
 - Does he have mental health issues that could prevent you from completing the work?
 - Is she cooperative and willing to listen to reason?
 - Does he have concerns about the intervention that can be addressed before you begin?
- Assess clutter's interference with activities of daily living
 - Using refrigerator, stove, sink & counters.
 - Eating at the table
 - Safe movement in the home
 - Answering the door

- Exiting home quickly
- Sitting on sofas and chairs
- Sleeping in bed
- Cleaning and laundry
- Finding important items (e.g. bills, medicine)
- Use the ADL assessment to help the client realize how clutter impedes their functioning.
- Mark the severity of interference to prioritize work to be done.
- Conduct a follow-up ADL assessment to measure success of intervention.

3. Assessing the Dwelling

- Using formal tools to assess the condition of the dwelling will help you create and implement a plan for making the home inhabitable again.
- Documenting **health code violations** will help convince clients and families that intervention is necessary to insure safety and prevent eviction.

Walkways, Stairwells, and Exits

- Doors to public hallways blocked
- Walkways or stairwells obscured
- Fire escapes blocked
- Unsanitary condition outside dwelling unit
- Safety hazards due to structural damage (loose floorboards, damaged walls not securing railings, etc.)

Kitchen and Bathroom

- Insufficient hot or cold water (quantity, pressure, temp) for 24+ hours.
- Non-working stove
- Combustibles in or near stove or radiator
- Rotten food
- Non-working toilet
- Non-working bathtub or shower
- Non-working sink
- Unsanitary conditions

General

- Accumulation of waste matter in dwelling unit
- Insect and rodent infestation
- Non-working electrical outlets or overloading
- Non-working smoke detector
- Combustibles near radiator
- Improper storage of combustible materials
- Preventing owner or agent from entering for repairs
- Animal hoarding or unsanitary conditions due to poor animal care

4. Setting Goals

- Motivate client by helping them be realistic. Some will de-clutter only if they face eviction or cannot go home from the hospital until clutter is removed. Gentle but firm pressure is appropriate when home and health are at stake.
- Let go of ideal notions of cleanliness. Your client may value items that appear worthless. Parting with belongings -- even a used paper cup -- can cause distress.

5. Creating a Plan

- Be creative and negotiate. *Examples:* Suggest that the client keep last year's issues of a magazine but throw away the 20-year collection. Consider photographing belongings to help the client part with them and preserve memories.
- Focus on fall and fire prevention
 - Observe and ask how your client moves around the house. Make sure their "props" are stable.
 - Free pathways of debris, loose cords, scatter rugs, and other tripping hazards.
 - Make sure client has a smoke alarm that is tested monthly.
 - Relocate belongings away from heat sources.
- Try to work at the client's pace
 - Start with short working periods. Some clients cannot tolerate more than a few minutes at a time when they begin the de-cluttering process.
 - Keep in mind that the eviction process usually proceeds more quickly than the client's de-cluttering pace.

6. Enlisting Help

- Hire cleaners who are experienced with seniors and/or clutter removal.
- Consider hiring a professional organizer to help arrange belongings and distribute or donate excess items.
- Explain the sensitivity of the work to all helpers.
- If client is present, introduce the workers and assure client that they have his or her best interests in mind.

7. Following Up

- Clients with clutter issues often cannot maintain the safe and healthy environment they need.
- Arrange for regular cleaning, home care, and/or mental health services to avoid relapse.