



A Rochester area psychologist shares his insights into the causes of hoarding and the best way to treat the obsessive compulsive disorder

By Amy Cavalier

Clutter can create stress, health hazards and unsanitary living conditions. For some of us, the problem may be relegated to one area such as the attic or basement.

"There are definitely people who could just use a hand with getting or-

ganized," says Mark Larson, a clinical psychologist. "We all tend to let things pile up sometimes. There's a fundamental difference between that and someone whose possessions become so overwhelming that it begins to influence their lives in significant ways."

In some cases, clutter can evolve into a much more serious problem. Experts estimate that as much as 2 percent of the population meets the criteria for hoarding.

"Attorneys, surgeons, business executives — some very bright and

successful people that you'd never suspect have this problem. Sometimes they're the life of the party, but nobody's ever been invited to their home," says San Francisco psychologist Michael A. Tompkins in a recent article in "The Wall Street Journal." Tompkins

A place for everything and everything in its place

Being disorganized can be the cause of stress, dangerous living conditions, and at its worst, can turn into hoarding. Two Rochester area professional organizers share their tips on keeping up with your clutter.

Do you ever feel like you just never have enough room for all of your belongings? Maybe you need to file the boxes of paperwork accumulating in your office or get the attic, basement or garage organized. For many pack rats, that has even spilled over into the need for a self-storage unit.

According to the Self Storage Association, an industry advocacy group, square footage of rentable storage has increased 740 percent in the past two decades; a billion square feet of storage space was created between 1998 and 2005; and there are now 6.8 square feet of storage for every man, woman and child in America.

It begs the question — Do we really need all that stuff?

"Clutter can produce anxiety," Tracy Roach of Rochester says. "It's

hard to locate things you might need. It's also difficult to work in a space you don't feel comfortable in."

Roach founded her own professional organizing business, "From Anxious to Amazing," last year.

"The United States is one of the only countries in the world that I could have a decluttering business," she says. "Our culture is pretty materialistic and there's always going to be people in the U.S. who have way more than they need or will ever use."

Roach says she realized her passion for professional organization while helping her grandmother tackle some hoarding tendencies.

"It just gave me a sense of satisfaction knowing I was keeping her safe and I could tell that it was a big relief to her to not have so much stuff around," she says.

Diane Zielinski of Gates admits she's been a clutter bug herself.

"I've lived with Christmas ornaments hidden behind my pillow shams in my guest room, or having to read every page of the newspaper before I could throw it out," she said.

Zielinski founded her business "Gentle Decluttering" about five years ago after she led a class on the "Spirituality of Clutter" and more than 25 people showed up.

"I was surprised because up until then, people had all lived in shame with their clutter," Zielinski says. "They simply would not let people in the front door."

Now she works with clients one-on-one. She also offers classes such as "What to do with mother's things," to be offered for free at Scottsville Public Library on January 21, and runs a Clutter Bug support group which meets once a month in Gates. Zielinski shares information about recycling opportunities, and hazardous and medical waste days which are offered periodically through Monroe County on her website and in her newsletter.

Zielinski says one of the reasons people don't want to get rid of things is that many items contain sentimental value.

"They can remember when they wore it,

when they read it or when their child made it for them, so I try to help them get the idea that they can save some of these items, but they don't need to save them all," she says.

Another cause for clutter is children who have moved out of the home but their parents continue to maintain their "museum," says Zielinski. Her solution? Pass all those trophies and mementos onto your grandchildren so they can see what their parents were up to when they were youth.

Take books and magazines to your dentist's office or bring unwanted clothing to your local clothing pantry or charity. Roach says tax write-offs for donations to charity can add up. If you're saving something you think might be valuable, Zielinski recommends checking on eBay to see if they truly have value or not.

Decluttering is like training for a marathon, Zielinski says.

"You don't start the first day with 25 miles; you let your muscles grow stronger," she says. "What I tell people is to start with the easiest clutter for you to get rid of emotionally. Don't start with family photos. Start with the really smelly old sneakers with holes or the old clothes that you haven't worn in 20 years."

Set a goal of getting rid of 10 things a week.



Roach



Zielinski



Larson

is author of "Digging Out," a book aimed at helping families of hoarders.

The A&E Show "Hoarders" has drawn attention to extreme situations and has shed light on an issue which was, up until recent years, a secret that many people kept in their families. Unfortunately, psychologist Larson says, the show presents an unrealistic scenario for those struggling with hoarding.

"We can't just have a television show swoop in and fix it for us, not to mention they don't have the time to address the underlying problem," he says. "Oftentimes they can help someone clean out a house, but then it may fill up again."

Larson has his own private practice where he deals with a gamut of different anxiety disorders such as panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Hoarding is a subset of OCD. For the person struggling with hoarding, it can lead to divorce, alienation from other family members, and guilt and shame which can cause people to become isolated, he says.

"They're certainly not hosting dinner parties, and they might not even be willing to let repair people into their homes," he says.

Larson says there is not one specific reason that causes hoarding.

"The question that people always want the answer to is, is it nature or nurture?" he says. "Is it something you learn from your parents growing up, or is this something you were born with? As is true with most psychiatric disorders, the truth is somewhere in the middle."

In some cases, Larson says, hoarding is a learned behavior, but there may be a "genetic component" as well.

"The bottom line is, not all hoard-

ers are created equally," Larson adds.

For some, messiness is a habit they picked up as a kid that stuck with them into adulthood. For others, hoarding is a response to traumatic or stressful circumstances, such as a death or an abusive relationship, or it could be secondary to an issue such as alcoholism.

"One of the difficulties not only with identifying hoarders, but also with treating them, is that they often don't want to change," he says. "They're not terribly concerned by their situation."

Hoarders have trouble realizing the scope of their problem, says Larson, and may defend themselves by saying they "just need to get organized."

"They can sometimes live with a fair amount of guilt and shame that they don't want to be brought out into the light," he says. "They may know their patterns are unusual and they may be, for example, embarrassed to have someone over to their house, but that doesn't mean they want to get treated for it."

A spouse who's threatening to leave or a landlord threatening eviction may trigger a hoarder to seek help, says Larson. One of the biggest mistakes family members make is trying to "brow beat" the person into changing or coming in to try to clean up the mess themselves.

"The kids convince the parent to go away for a couple of days and they come home and the entire place has been cleaned out," Larson says. "You would think that on one level you're doing a good thing, but that stuff is very important to the person who has the clutter, and it can really feel like a violation."

Instead, Larson advises families of hoarders to be supportive and encourage them to seek help from a professional, whether it's a mental health professional, an organizer or both. The Mental Health Association of Rochester offers hoarding support groups for people struggling with this problem.

The more you can declutter, the easier it is to organize, says Zielinski.

"If you're overwhelmed with things, it's difficult to decide where to put them if there's literally no room anywhere," she says.

Decluttering can actually save you money in the long-run, Zielinski says, because you'll be able to find the things you need rather than going out and buying them again because they are lost in the mess.

"So you add a few extra bags to the landfill," she says, "a worse problem is turning your own home into a landfill."

Paperwork is one of the biggest causes of clutter. Zielinski suggests checking with Classified Shredding Service, a division of Lifetime Assistance which offers Community Shredding days twice a year where members of the public can bring in up to three boxes of papers to be confidentially disposed of.

Another reason people resist cleaning out, Roach says, is because they don't want to see their stuff going to waste.

"For some people, it's essential that their stuff goes to a good home and doesn't get thrown out," she says.

That's where "freecycling" can come into play, says Roach. Freecycle.org is a network made up of 4,991 groups with 8,825,077 members around the world. The nonprofit movement assists with people giving and getting stuff for free in their own towns with the goal of diverting trash from

landfills. Roach also has a link on her website, www.fromanxioustoamazing.com, to the Monroe County recycling website.

"Many of my clients don't know exactly what can be recycled," she says. "For example, Monroe County residents can now recycle plastic containers numbered one through seven, instead of just one and two."

You may also be able to make some money with jewelry and coin exchanges, or Half.com, an eBay company through which you can sell DVDs or books, Roach says.

Two of the most useful tools for organizing, Roach says, are clear plastic bins and a label maker.

"You can see what's in them; they're easy to stack, and you can get the ones that are small enough to hide in a closet," she says.

Whether you seek out the help of a professional or tackle your organizing to-do list on your own, the rewards of clearing out the clutter will be worth it.

"If you're organized, it's much easier to do everything," says Roach. "It's easier to pay bills, you're more comfortable having friends over, it's easier to schedule things and keep a schedule."

For more information:

Gentle Decluttering: www.gentledecluttering.com

From Anxious to Amazing: <http://www.fromanxioustoamazing.com/>