

# Facts on Hoarding and Older Adults

Do you know an older adult whose home is so full of items that there is just a path from room to room? Do the stacks of items interfere with day-to-day living? Is there a safety hazard? If so, the older adult has a hoarding problem. In some cases, hoarding is not related to a mental disorder. It is a different lifestyle. However, in some cases, hoarding is linked to dementia, depression, alcoholism or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Some of the personality traits of a hoarder are:

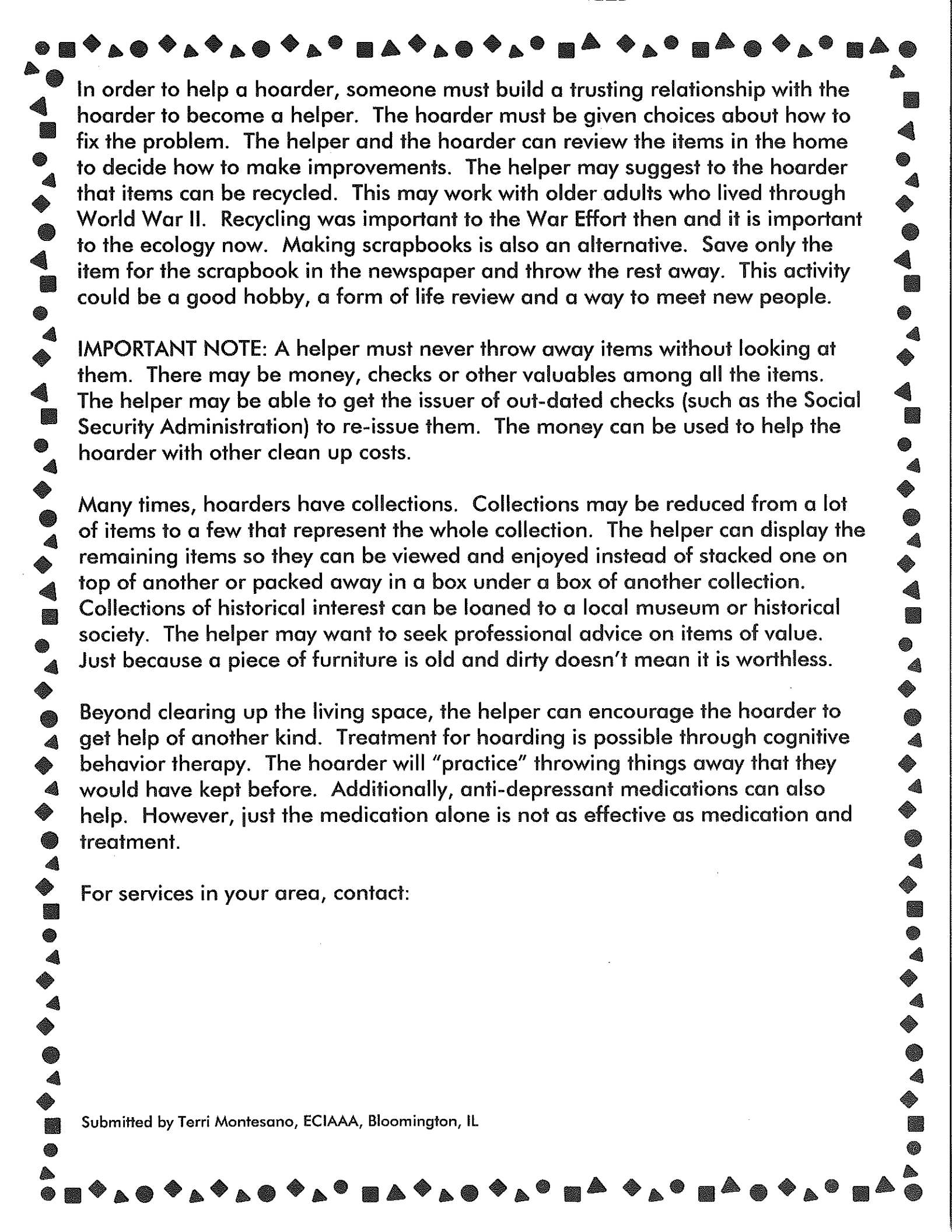
- ◆ Social isolation
- ◆ Lives alone
- ◆ Reclusive
- ◆ Housebound
- ◆ Unfriendly
- ◆ Impaired support system.
- ◆ Domineering
- ◆ Suspicious
- ◆ Quarrelsome
- ◆ Eccentric
- ◆ Stubborn

Most hoarders have highly developed defense mechanisms. Their living conditions did not happen overnight. They are quite comfortable with the way things are. Hoarders are good at putting up a front and resist any offer of help. They don't see that there is a problem. Other people are not welcomed into their life. Hoarding may begin after a physical illness, stressful event, loss in one of the senses or be the result of an existing disorder. Hoarding may also be a form of death-wish.

Some other reasons for hoarding are:

- ◆ Items have value to the hoarder.
- ◆ Items give a sense of security.
- ◆ Hoarders fear losing or forgetting the items.
- ◆ Hoarders have a need to collect and keep things.
- ◆ Hoarders feel love not found from people.
- ◆ Hoarders fear that others will find their personal information.
- ◆ Hoarders have a hard time organizing things.
- ◆ Hoarding is a sign of self-neglect.

Generally, it is when the community becomes concerned that the older adult's hoarding becomes a problem. Family or neighbors may file complaints with the local Health Department about the living conditions of the older adult. They want the problem solved right away. However, merely clearing out all of the items is not a solution. It may be a "quick fix"; but, the items will return.

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In order to help a hoarder, someone must build a trusting relationship with the hoarder to become a helper. The hoarder must be given choices about how to fix the problem. The helper and the hoarder can review the items in the home to decide how to make improvements. The helper may suggest to the hoarder that items can be recycled. This may work with older adults who lived through World War II. Recycling was important to the War Effort then and it is important to the ecology now. Making scrapbooks is also an alternative. Save only the item for the scrapbook in the newspaper and throw the rest away. This activity could be a good hobby, a form of life review and a way to meet new people.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** A helper must never throw away items without looking at them. There may be money, checks or other valuables among all the items. The helper may be able to get the issuer of out-dated checks (such as the Social Security Administration) to re-issue them. The money can be used to help the hoarder with other clean up costs.

Many times, hoarders have collections. Collections may be reduced from a lot of items to a few that represent the whole collection. The helper can display the remaining items so they can be viewed and enjoyed instead of stacked one on top of another or packed away in a box under a box of another collection. Collections of historical interest can be loaned to a local museum or historical society. The helper may want to seek professional advice on items of value. Just because a piece of furniture is old and dirty doesn't mean it is worthless.

Beyond clearing up the living space, the helper can encourage the hoarder to get help of another kind. Treatment for hoarding is possible through cognitive behavior therapy. The hoarder will "practice" throwing things away that they would have kept before. Additionally, anti-depressant medications can also help. However, just the medication alone is not as effective as medication and treatment.

For services in your area, contact:

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