Supporting a Loved One Who Hoards

A guide for family, friends and carers from Fruitful Purpose Counselling

Understand what is happening

Watching someone you care about struggle with clutter can be worrying, frustrating and exhausting. This guide offers ways to help that protect your relationship and respect their choices. Hoarding is a recognised mental health difficulty, not laziness or stubbornness. Belongings often carry deep meaning, memories or a sense of safety, and letting go can trigger real anxiety, grief or panic.

What tends to help

Lead with care, not criticism. Focus on your concern for their wellbeing.
Ask, don't tell. "How do you feel about your home at the moment?"
Focus on safety first. Clear exits, working smoke alarms and safe walkways matter more than how tidy a space looks.
Respect their decisions. Ask before touching or moving items.
Notice small wins. One cleared chair is real progress.
Encourage professional support gently, without ultimatums.

What tends to backfire

Backfire	Help
Throwing things away without permission	This often damages trust and increases acquiring
Large forced clean-outs	It can shut down honest conversation
Labels such as "disgusting" or "hoarder"	It makes people feel judged, not helped
Arguing about whether an item is worth keeping	It pushes them further from support

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Helpful things to say

"I care about you and I want you to feel safe at home."
"What would you like to be able to do in your home that's hard right now?"
"Is there one small area you'd like to start with?"
"Would you be open to talking with someone who understands this?"

Look after yourself too

Supporting someone can be draining. Set boundaries, share the load where you can, and seek support for yourself if you need it.

When to act quickly

If there is an immediate risk such as fire, blocked exits, a fall, or a person unable to care for themselves, call 000 in an emergency or contact their GP or local council for advice.

Getting support: Fruitful Purpose Counselling works one-on-one with adults experiencing clutter, hoarding or squalor, via home visits or telehealth. If you're worried about a family member, you're welcome to get in touch to talk through options.

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In an emergency call 000. For 24-hour crisis support call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

General information only; not a substitute for individual professional advice.

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