Your Relationships

Understanding Hoarding

Do you know someone you think is a “pack rat”? He or she never seems to throw anything away. With some seniors, in particular, this collecting of seemingly worthless stuff can become the focus of their lives. When collecting things, or refusing to get rid of them, becomes a compulsion, these people exhibit the characteristics of “hoarding.”

Most of us seem to have an inborn interest in acquiring – for some people it is money, for others it is a hobby such as collecting teddy bears. Hoarding goes far beyond mere collecting.

Mrs. T., age 86, is an example of a hoarder. She lives alone and has almost no contact with family or friends. After her husband died, the outside of her home fell into disrepair and the yard was totally neglected. The letter carrier grew concerned and contacted a local senior services agency.

When a home visitor from the agency called on Mrs. T., she was shocked at the conditions inside the home. Every room was packed floor to ceiling with boxes of trash, old newspapers, animal waste, clothes and other debris. Spoiled food was everywhere. The hot water heater was broken and bare light bulbs provided the only light. The junk was so overwhelming that Mrs. T. could walk only a very narrow path between all the debris in every room.

Hoarding is generally not the result of poverty, but more often an emotional disorder with complex causes. Many senior hoarders severely neglect themselves and their homes, and often suffer from some level of Alzheimer’s or related dementia. The dementia causes them to lose their sense of judgment and sense of self-care. Some hoarders hide items important to them.
and then lose them as the mess continues to grow.

How can you help a neighbor or relative who hoards? There is no quick solution. Caring friends must balance the hoarder’s right to privacy against the need to protect them, as well as the respect for freedom versus safety. Most hoarders are lucid enough to understand consent documents that would permit caregivers to step in, and the hoarders often refuse to sign away these rights.

The best approach seems to be slowly establishing a trusting relationship with the hoarder. Make regular home visits that do not immediately address the hoarding problem, but instead enable you to get to know the person and his or her interests. As the relationship grows, the hoarder may be more willing to accept simple offers of assistance. Be sensitive to the fact that the hoarder finds some security in the mess that surrounds him. If you begin clearing without his support, it will only accumulate again.

Some hoarders will not respond even to careful efforts to gain their confidence. They have grown suspicious of others, sometimes justifiably. Dementia often robs a person of her ability to relate to or trust anyone. In these cases, senior service or health care agencies may have to step in to protect the senior. As a friend, your role may become one of helping the senior consider various new care options and selecting the one best suited to his situation.

Your Resources

Home Modification And Repair For Seniors

Daily tasks such as bathing, cooking and climbing stairs can be made simpler and safer for seniors with a few home modifications and repairs. Research shows that one-third to one-half home accidents like falls can be prevented by home modification.

More than 60% of older people live in homes that are at least 20 years old - homes that most often need repair. Making modifications allows older adults to stay in their homes longer and more comfortably.

Many problems like getting in and out of the shower, slipping in the tub, difficulty turning doorknobs, poor ventilation or difficulty climbing stairs can be solved with modifications to
the home. Grab bars and non-slip strips can be installed in the shower or bathtub. Doorknobs can be changed out with lever handles. Add an air conditioner or insulation to help ventilation and install handrails where stairs are located.

Some financial assistance is available for eligible older people. Get information from the following:

- Georgia Rural Development (706-546-2171) Grants and loans available.
- Georgia Division of Aging Services (404-657-5258): Often has funds for modification and repair of homes.
- Physician or health care provider: Funds from Medicaid and Medicare are often available for medical equipment (with a prescription).
- Local banks

It is illegal for landlords to refuse to allow a tenant to make reasonable modifications to their home if the tenant is paying for it (Fair Housing Act of 1988 Section 6(a)). All new apartments with at least four units must follow handicap accessibility requirements.

There are many different ways you can modify or repair your home:

- you can do it yourself (or with friends and relatives)
- Hire a contractor or handyman
- Locate a home modification and repair program

If you use a contractor, get recommendations from friends and reference from the contractor’s previous clients. Make sure the contractor is licensed and bonded. Contractors take advantage of the
elderly far too often, so be specific with what you want and get several bids for the job.

Modification programs can be found in Georgia through the Division of Aging Services (404-657-5258) or the Georgia Residential Finance Authority (706-369-5636).

Source: HUD, 2000

Your Health

Dietary Changes to Reduce Your Risk of Heart Disease

Do you know how to reduce your risk of heart disease? Recently the American Heart Association gave us some advice on how to change the way we eat and other lifestyle habits to help reduce our risk of heart attack and stroke.

We’ve all heard we should “eat our vegetables,” but now there’s evidence that micronutrients in vegetables, especially the dark green, deep orange, or yellow, help lower your risk of heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure. To get your quota of at least 5 servings a day, try to eat a couple servings at each meal, and even add one or two for snacks. More grain products, especially whole grains, are good for your heart because they contain fiber, vitamins, and minerals. The American Heart Association is now suggesting that we all eat at least two servings of fish each week, especially the fatty type like salmon, mackerel, trout and tuna. Fish contains a type of fat, known as omega 3 fatty acids, that protects against heart disease.

If you’re like a lot of Georgians who weigh a little more than they’d like, try to eat smaller portions at meals and snacks. Limit foods and beverages that are either high in fat like potato chips, french fries, biscuits and gravy, desserts; or high in sugar like candy and sodas. The American Heart Association is also suggesting that we all get at least 30-60 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. Mall walking, water aerobics, or an exercise bike are good ideas, but any type of physical activity is helpful. Eating less and getting more activity is likely to help you lose a few pounds, which can help reduce your risk of heart disease.

Limit foods with high saturated fat and cholesterol like meats, cheese, and whole milk dairy products to lower your blood cholesterol. Choose more grains and unsaturated fats like olive oil, canola oil, and soft margarines. Also limit foods that contain trans fats (liquid oil that has been processed to become hard at room temperature) like packaged cookies, desserts, fried foods,
and some stick margarines.

If you have high blood pressure, you may think that medications are the only option. But, there are several things you can do to lower your blood pressure just by changing some of your lifestyle habits. Studies show that if you eat less salt, lose weight if you’re overweight, reduce your intake of alcohol, get more physical activity, and eat more vegetables, fruits and low-fat dairy products, you can reduce your blood pressure.

These are a few things you can do to lower your risk of heart disease. Make just one or two changes at a time until they become lifestyle habits. You’ll feel better and you’ll be on your way to becoming a healthier you.

**Baked Pear Dessert**

1/3 cup unsweetened apple cider
2 tablespoons dried cranberries or raisins
1 tablespoon toasted sliced almonds
1/8 teaspoon cinnamon
1 medium unpeeled pear, cut in half lengthwise and cored
½ cup vanilla low-fat sugar-free frozen yogurt or ice-cream

1. Preheat oven to 350° F. Combine 1 teaspoon cider, cranberries, almonds and cinnamon in small bowl.
2. Place pear halves, cut sides up, in small baking dish. Mound almond mixture on top of pear halves. Pour remaining cider into dish. Cover with foil.
3. Bake pear halves 35 to 40 minutes or until pears are soft, spooning cider in dish over pears once or twice during baking. Serve warm and top with frozen yogurt.

Makes 2 servings.
Exchanges: 1 fruit, ½ fat

**Nutrients per serving:**
Calories 87
Fat 2 grams
Carbohydrate 16 grams
Cholesterol 3 milligrams
Sodium 13 milligrams
Fiber 1 gram

Dear Friend:

SENIOR SENSE is a quarterly publication provided by your local county Extension Service office. It is prepared by Extension Family & Consumer Sciences specialists at The University of Georgia specifically for the educational needs of older Georgians.

Please contact your local Extension Service office for more information on these and related topics.

Contributors to this issue:
Don Bower, DPA, CFCS, Extension Human Development Specialist
Jorge Horacio Atiles, Ph.D., Extension Housing Specialist
Janine Freeman, RD, LD, CDE, Extension Education Program Specialist