

Hoarding: A psychological or spiritual problem?

Heidi Schlumpf | Jun. 22, 2011



(Newscom/ZUMA Press)

The suburban mansion of a former Chicago Bulls star was being emptied before going on the market. Photos for the upcoming estate sale promised not only NBA collectibles and ultramodern furniture but also rooms full of linens, clothing and shoes -- many unused and still sporting tags from the high-end department stores and boutiques where they had been purchased.

Seems like someone had a bit of a shopping addiction.

It's the epidemic of our time. Although retailers hit by the recession would like Americans to shop more, too many of us are buying things we don't need, can't afford and -- despite the increasing square footage of the average U.S. home -- have trouble finding the room to store.

I speak from experience. My own pack rat tendencies have worsened since we moved from a small condo to a more spacious (though still small by current standards) single-family home.

Peanut butter on sale? I'll buy five jars and store them near the basement freezer, which is also filled with food purchased at a discount. Cute kids' clothes at a rummage sale? They'll go in the Rubbermaid bins of hand-me-downs waiting for my children to grow into them. And my craft room? I'm embarrassed to admit how much yarn and fabric is in my stash.

My tastes may be more pedestrian than the NBA spouse, but the problem is the same. Too much stuff!

But if you keep that stuff organized and don't spend beyond your means, it's OK, right? That's what I used to think. Then I started watching "Hoarders," the TV series on A&E that chronicles the lives of people whose stuff has taken over their lives.

An episode starts out innocently enough, with a normal-looking suburban mom wheeling a shopping cart around Target, checking out clearance items. (Hey, I do that!) Then she brings her purchases home, where she can hardly open the door because her house is literally full. Piles of clothes, toys and other items make sitting in the living room, eating in the dining room, even cooking in the kitchen impossible. And the children's rooms are so

cluttered there's no room for them -- which is why child protective services removed the two toddlers from the home.

The show's producers provide a therapist and a cleaning crew to help the hoarder get her home and her children back. They sort, sweep, toss and trash. The therapist tries to get at the root of what is clearly a psychological issue. The woman, embarrassed when mice are found living beneath piles of purchases, cries on camera but still fights the cleaners every step of the way.

Finally, a decluttered and sparkling clean home is revealed to squeals of delight from the woman and her patient, but obviously frustrated, husband. But this happy ending is deceptive. The episode concludes with video from inside a warehouse with dozens of dumpster-sized storage bins full of stuff the hoarder would not part with. The final scrolling text reveals that the authorities still refuse to let the children return.

Watching 'Hoarders' is hardly entertaining. I often cringe in horror and occasionally have had to stop snacking because of the graphic depiction of the mess. The show's creators insist they are doing a service in educating the public about a mental disorder that affects more than 3 million people.

Apparently there's enough hoarding in the United States to warrant three television shows on the subject. In addition to A&E's 'Hoarders,' there are 'Hoarding: Buried Alive' on TLC and 'Confessions: Animal Hoarding' on Animal Planet.

Although psychologists have yet to create an official 'hoarding' diagnosis, many think it may be a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. And in the cases where hoarders have risked their children, marriages, even the roofs over their heads, mental illness seems to be an issue.

But I think hoarding shows are popular, at least in part, because they allow more mainstream amassers to feel superior. 'Sure, I have eight bins of Halloween decorations, but I'm not as bad as those people on TV!'

I've had the opposite reaction, instead seeing glimpses of myself in hoarders who buy just for the sake of collecting, who use 'retail therapy' to cheer themselves up and whose attachment to things sometimes rivals personal relationships. Watching an episode usually prompts me to fill a few bags for St. Vincent de Paul.

Our Catholic faith has consistently taught against excessive consumerism, though the church hardly gives it the prominence and attention of sexier issues like abortion or gay marriage. And, thankfully, most Catholics have not jumped on the 'prosperity gospel' bandwagon, so popular among some evangelical Christians, that teaches that God rewards good Christians with riches.

But our church could do more to help Catholics, especially those of us in wealthy, developed countries, to get at the spiritual roots of having too much stuff -- and at the effects it has on our planet and on the millions of the world's poor for whom hoarding is impossible.

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