

ANIMAL HOARDERS

A NYSHA Fact Sheet

What is an animal hoarder?

A person who amasses more animals than he/she can properly care for. Such individuals generally fail to recognize — or refuse to acknowledge — when the animals in their custody become victims of gross neglect.

What characteristics do animal hoarders generally share?

- an apparent need to have many animals — and, usually, many inanimate objects as well; an addiction to clutter
- intelligence and communication skills, combined with a shrewd ability to attract sympathy for themselves, no matter how abused their animals may be
- a stubborn refusal to part with any of their animals, be it through adoption of relatively healthy ones or euthanasia of sick ones (Sometimes, they even keep the dead ones!)
- a clandestine lifestyle — There is often a stark contrast between the hoarder's public persona and his/her private life.
- a tendency to deny reality — They insist that all animals are healthy; that those confined for long periods in small cages or kennels are comfortable; that overcrowding does not subject animals to severe stress and related diseases; etc.
- recidivism — Unless expert psychiatric help is obtained, hoarders almost invariably return to old ways, even if convicted to cruelty to animals.

What motivates anyone to accumulate and “warehouse” large numbers of animals?

No comprehensive psychological study has been made of the hoarder syndrome, and most people tend to think of hoarders as motivated by “love of animals that got out of control.” This is one — but not the sole — possible factor. There are undoubtedly several types of influences (or combinations thereof), such as the following, and they are not the same for every hoarder.

- a “love of animals” combined with a failure to care for them responsibly — Example: the elderly woman who feeds all the neighborhood strays, but has none of them spayed/neutered or given other necessary veterinary care. This type of person is usually genuinely fond of animals, but quickly becomes overwhelmed when they multiply.
- a perception that reverence for life is synonymous with preservation of life, regardless of its quality — Some people find the thought of death so abhorrent that they deem an inhumane life far preferable to a humane death. They often go to great lengths to “rescue” dogs or cats from traditional shelters, sometimes boasting of having thus removed them from “death row,” the brink of euthanasia.
- a “hero/martyr complex” — Hoarders often receive very favorable publicity about the personal sacrifices they make on behalf of animals. They become enamored of their own public image, and won't risk tarnishing it by openly disposing of animals that have become burdensome.

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- a need to control — Many hoarders create situations which assure them absolute power over every aspect of the existence of animals in their custody. They keep their victims crowded together behind locked doors and gates, denying them human companionship, veterinary care, exercise, bedding, fresh air, and adequate food and water.

What can you do to help prevent hoarder tragedies?

- Promote legislation which provides for licensing, inspection, and strict regulation of both private and public animal shelters.
- Support — morally and financially — organizations, legislation, and programs that focus on spaying/neutering of companion animals.
- To the extent you can afford to do so, become involved in directly assisting individuals who are financially unable to have their companion animals sterilized, even if you must “do it yourself,” i.e., pay the veterinary fee for the surgery and transport the animals to and from the veterinarian’s office.
- Support the humane organization in your community which is responsible for enforcing anti-cruelty-to-animals statutes.
- Work to educate others about the suffering caused by hoarders, individuals who may be aptly characterized as “addicted to animals.” The public, many journalists, and even some representatives of humane organizations tend to sympathize with hoarders because they perceive them to be providing a service: keeping animals alive that would otherwise be euthanized or abandoned. Most people do not understand that keeping animals alive in the environment hoarders provide, invariably lead to intolerable suffering . Compassion for hoarders is not misplaced if one recognizes that most of them are in desperate need of psychological help. What hoarders do not need is the type of sympathy and support which result in enabling them to continue harboring and acquiring ever more animals. It is important for those who are familiar with the “hoarder syndrome” to inform others about the consequences of this problem.
- Do not deceive yourself into believing that animals for whom responsible homes cannot be found are better off warehoused than euthanized. Paradoxically, the animals “saved” by hoarders are usually condemned to infernal living conditions and lingering, painful deaths.

For further information, go to the website of the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC), which has published a number of articles by and for professionals in a variety of fields. Go to the Resources link to download the articles. <http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/index.html>

Additional articles can be found at The HSUS website:
http://www.hsus2.org/sheltering/library/animal_hoarders.html

Note: Animal hoarders are also referred to as animal collectors.