

# More than Just That Crazy Cat Lady: Animal Hoarding

by Joyce Squillante

Animal hoarding is not a minor issue. The television shows do not do it justice. It is a misunderstood psychological problem that goes beyond the brain of the person it encompasses – it goes on to affect other living creatures. No one is quite sure what causes it and there are few organizations trying to figure out why it happens. People of all economic levels are affected. Animal shelters have no way to take care of animals displaced by hoarders, and the shelters that think they can take care of the animals end up becoming hoarders themselves. Animal hoarding may not be important to many animal rights activists, but it is looming over their heads.

Almost a quarter of a million animals are taken hostage by hoarders per year in the United States (Humane Society) and that number is growing. Approximately 900 to 2000 cases are found per year (ASPCA). The number of animals that are hoarded by a single person can be in the hundreds. Many are found dead, some even mummified. Those that are found alive are found in places that are full of filth and grime and are not acceptable living conditions for animals (Pet-Abuse.com). In over half of the cases that animal hoarders are discovered, the floors are reeking with urine and feces, as were the human's quarters. Many hoarders' homes do not have working utilities, like plumbing or heat. The living conditions of the houses are unlivable not only for the animals, but also for the humans. The majority of household pet hoarders tend to be widowed, divorced, or otherwise lonely women sixty years old or older. Cats and dogs are the most hoarded animals (Frost). Almost 100% of animal hoarders are repeat offenders (Pet-Abuse.com). Even after the animals are removed, they begin hoarding again.

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These revolting statistics are the realities of animal hoarding in the most basic form. Hoarding is a psychological issue, and is often linked with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) (Humane Society). There is a correlation between animal hoarding and OCD, but the problem goes beyond a simple disorder. Animal hoarders believe they are doing the animals a favor by saving them from being euthanized (though ironically many of them die from the abominable living conditions). By saving them from the streets, the hoarder thinks they did them a great favor. They are oblivious to the fact that they cannot take care of their animals. They love animals, but do not care for them (Pet-Abuse.com). Hoarders do not live in reality – many insist that their animals are healthy and living in conditions that are satisfactory, despite blatant evidence to the contrary. Another psychological correlation is a dependent model where the hoarder is attached to the animals, perhaps because of a detachment to their parents in their childhood (Frost). Others feel a strong need to own animals to be able to control them, which also probably stems from chaotic childhoods. (Pet-Abuse.com). These psychological issues make animal hoarding so much more different from other cases of animal cruelty. The hoarders feel they are doing a good thing, as opposed to animal abusers (such as people involved in dog fighting or seal clubbing) who know what they are doing is wrong.

A prime example of a hoarder who fits many of the typical characteristics of hoarders is a story from the Journal Sentinel, posted on November 15, 2010. A cat hoarder surrendered thirty cats to the Wisconsin Humane Society (Loohauis-Bennet). The spokeswoman of the WHS said “Characteristic of animal hoarders, the person involved was well meaning and started out with a few cats and continued to acquire

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them beyond her capacity to provide care” (Loohaus-Bennet). The article also stated that the woman previously surrendered sixty cats, proving the statistic that many hoarders hoard repeatedly, even after the animals are removed.

Animal hoarders are becoming more and more common, and more and more cases are being publicized. It is becoming more apparent that the stereotypical “crazy cat lady” is not the only type of animal hoarder. On February 26, 2011, a 23-year-old man living in Long Island, New York, was charged with sixty-one counts of animal cruelty after seventy-five living animals and twenty dead animals were found in his home where he lived with an elderly woman with dementia (Cergol). Among the animals were cats and dogs, along with birds, mice, a calf, and ducks, among others. There were also goats and pigs roaming the yard. The living conditions in the house were considered “deplorable” and there was no food or water (Cergol).

Many who are knowledgeable about hoarders seem to be aware only of the usual household hoarders, who are only part of the problem. “Rescue groups” that are posed as non-profit groups take in animals that they have no means to keep (ASPCA). On February 28, 2011, 197 dogs and 31 cats were removed from a “rescue organization” named Dirty Sally’s Pet Pals in Gordon, Alabama (“More Than 200 Animals Rescued from Alleged Cruelty in Alabama”). The Houston County Sheriff’s Department received several accusations of animal cruelty and neglect at the organization’s facilities. The department then asked the Humane Society of the United States for assistance (“More Than 200 Animals...”).

The action that those outside sources took in calling the sheriff’s department is exactly the type of action society should be taking when suspicions about a particular

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organization are raised. The public needs to correctly be aware that an animal hoarder is not just that crazy cat lady down the street. An animal hoarder could be anyone of any description. It could even be an organization that feels it is helping animals, but is instead harming them. According to the ASPCA, these are the most common signs of a hoarder:

- They have numerous animals and may not know the total number of animals in their care.
- Their home is deteriorated (i.e., dirty windows, broken furniture, holes in wall and floor, extreme clutter).
- There is a strong smell of ammonia, and floors may be covered with dried feces, urine, vomit, etc.
- Animals are emaciated, lethargic and not well socialized.
- Fleas and vermin are present.
- Individual is isolated from community and appears to be in neglect himself.
- Individual insists all animals are happy and healthy—even when there are clear signs of distress and illness. (ASPCA)

When the public becomes aware that anyone could be a hoarder, it will be taking a huge step in the right direction. Once the telltale signs of an animal hoarder become more universally known, taking action when one sees the signs will become easier and more frequent.

When the hoarder is a close friend or family member, some find it difficult to tell

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him/her there is a problem. As a consequence, the problem may never be solved or it may keep building until the results become even more disastrous. As Gary Patronek, vice president for animal welfare at the Animal Rescue League of Boston, says, “Neighbors and family often see the situation is reeling out of control but are hesitant to ‘intrude.’ They dread starting a difficult conversation, much like families of alcoholics” (Ramsey). When this is the case, interested parties need to realize that if they truly care about their friend or relative, they must bring it up with them. “Gaining cooperation is not about avoiding confrontation. It’s critical to long-term resolution” (Ramsey).

While the public quickly becomes more aware of the ways to spot an animal hoarder, psychologists must conduct a more extensive research into this poorly understood problem. Since psychologists only have a basic understanding of what causes it, it is imperative they start taking a closer look into the mind of animal hoarders. Currently, the basic knowledge is that it has a correlation with OCD and a cold childhood (Frost). However, this knowledge is not very helpful in defining how to cure animal hoarders. As was posted in the Psychiatric Times, “To date, no research has addressed strategies for resolving cases of animal hoarding” (Frost) and it concludes that “Until models for this behavior are established and tested, our understanding of this problem will be limited” (Frost). The public can become aware of the signs of a hoarder, but psychologists are what are going to address it once and for all.

Animal hoarding is not like any other type of animal cruelty. Unlike most cases of animal cruelty, the “abusers” feel they are doing something kind for the animals. They are not cruel people doing cruel things they secretly know are wrong. These are people with good intentions that went horribly wrong. It has such a large psychological factor

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that needs so much more research. It cannot be cured by simply removing the animals from the homes or facilities. It is wired in the brain of the individual. It is a far-reaching disease. In order to cure this disease, which affects tens of thousands of animals per year and many other human beings, animal hoarders must be educated correctly and know the signs of how to stop it. Only research and society can cure this disease.

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