



DAVID F. TOLIN | RANDY O. FROST | GAIL STEKETEE

# BURIED IN TREASURES

Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding

SECOND EDITION

*Buried in Treasures*

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David F. Tolin • Randy O. Frost • Gail Steketee

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All of us extend our thanks to the many people whose lives are afflicted by hoarding and who have helped us learn about this challenging problem in our clinics and research centers. This book is dedicated to all of you.

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# Introduction



## About This Book

This book is for and about people who have trouble managing their possessions. When we published the first edition of *Buried in Treasures* in 2007, not many people had heard of hoarding. Even doctors and health-care professionals had little or no understanding of this phenomenon, even though it was (and remains) very common. Things have certainly changed since then! Hoarding has been featured on such popular television programs as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The Dr. Oz Show*. Entire TV series, such as *Hoarders* (A&E), *Hoarders: Buried Alive* (TLC), and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* (Animal Planet), have been dedicated to the topic. These media portrayals have their strengths and weaknesses, but there's no denying the fact that they have brought hoarding into the national spotlight. Hoarding has gone from being virtually unheard of to a household word.

Changes have also occurred outside the popular media. The most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013, now includes for the first time a diagnosis of "Hoarding Disorder." That's what this book is about—Hoarding Disorder. We've written it mainly for people who are suffering from hoarding, although we also hope it is useful for people whose loved ones hoard, and professionals who work with people who hoard. Our aim in writing this book is to provide you with clear, up-to-date information about hoarding, and to provide you with a plan to gain control over your hoarding problems, whether they are mild or severe.

Now, let's start by saying that not everyone likes the word "hoarding." For many, terms like "excessive saving, acquiring, and clutter" sound a bit less offensive (and they are certainly more descriptive). And there's no doubt that a lot of people don't like the word "hoarder." Some prefer terms like "pack rat" or "clutterbug," but in the end, people are more than a label, even if the label seems less offensive. We therefore avoid the term "hoarder" in this book and instead refer to "people with hoarding problems" or similar terms. We have retained the term "hoarding," mostly because "excessive saving, acquiring, and clutter" is just too cumbersome. We hope you will understand that this is shorthand, and not meant as name-calling.

We'll start by describing the problem in Chapter 2 and introducing you to a couple of people who hoard. Their problems may seem familiar to you, or maybe your situation is a bit different. In any case, we hope you will take away some of the basic principles and have a better understanding of the hoarding problem. In Chapters 2 and 6, we discuss how hoarding develops and why people have such a hard time overcoming this problem. The rest of the book is dedicated to providing you with a step-by-step plan for getting control over hoarding thinking, emotions, and behavior. After an overview of all the strategies in Chapter 5, we'll work on keeping your motivation high in Chapter 7, help you reduce acquiring things that add to the clutter in Chapter 8, show you how to sort and let go of possessions in Chapters 9 and 10, describe how to tackle problems that come up in Chapters 11 and 12, and discuss ways to maintain your gains in the long run in Chapter 13.

Sounds pretty good, right? At this point, we should probably caution you: *Just reading this book will not solve your hoarding problems.* If that's all you do, nothing will change. We realize that saying this in the first pages of our book might be disappointing, but it's important that we be honest and that you understand what this book can and cannot do for you. This book is a guide that will provide you with the necessary information to understand the problem of hoarding and will give you tools to help beat the problem. The rest is up to you. You are the one who will have to do the work to regain control over your possessions. *This book is a roadmap. You are the driver.*

*Getting control of your hoarding will be hard work.* We have never met anyone who found this process easy. For most people, it took a long time for the problem to build up to its present level, and it's not going to get better overnight. In addition, it might not always be a pleasant process. We think you will find the overall program to be very rewarding, and we hope that

you get a lot of satisfaction from the results. However, there may be times that this program brings up some uncomfortable feelings and thoughts that perhaps you'd rather not experience. There may even be times that you want to throw this book out the window! But that's a very normal part of the process, and it's OK to have mixed feelings as you go through this. If you are willing to work hard, to keep your eyes on your goals, and to follow the program in this book, you can do it.

Another thing to keep in mind is that your goal is to change the way you think about the things you own and the decisions you make about them. Decluttering your home will be part of the program, but changing the way you relate to possessions is what will make this approach successful. This means making some changes in your lifestyle that will continue long after you finish with this book. This book is designed to get you started on that journey.

Finally, it's important to remember that *one size doesn't fit all*. People acquire and save for many reasons, so they will need to try different methods in order to get better. In addition, some people reading this book will have only mild hoarding problems, while others' problems might be quite severe and debilitating. There's no way we could write a book that will be a perfect fit for everyone. If only the solution were as simple as handing you a couple of exercises and guaranteeing they will work! But of course, it is not that simple.

In this book we've tried to provide a framework to help you understand and work on hoarding the way we do—flexibly, trying different things and modifying the program as you go. So as you use this book, there might be some parts that just don't apply to you. That's fine; just skim those parts for reference if you like. But pay special attention to those parts of the book that seem to fit what you're noticing in your own life, and work especially hard on those exercises.



## **Who Should Use This Book and How?**

We have designed the information in this book to be applicable to a wide range of people who are concerned about hoarding. We recognize that if you're like most of the people with hoarding problems we've met, you didn't choose to have this problem and are very unhappy with how things are going. You want things to get better but just don't know where or how to start.

To begin with, congratulations are in order. Your purchase of this book is the first step toward beating this problem, Your purchase of this book is the first step toward beating this problem, and that's no small feat. A lot of people never make it as far as you have now. Perhaps, however, this is not the first book you've bought on the subject. We've met a lot of people whose purchase of books about how to declutter and get organized just added to their clutter! We would like nothing more than for this to be the last book you ever buy on this topic. What's different about this book? Unlike many of the other books you may have seen, the information in this book is based on the best available science. Although we still have a long way to go before we have a complete understanding of hoarding, the strategies in this book have been "road tested" in our research programs sponsored by the National Institutes of Health. As we write this book, research on understanding and fixing hoarding is ongoing. The great news is that the majority of people who have participated in our clinical research in Boston, Hartford, and Northampton have shown significant improvement. The tips and strategies in this book reflect what we've found successful for the people who come to see us.

While you can certainly use this book on your own, in the last few years, a number of people have begun to use the chapters of *Buried in Treasures* together in small groups. These Buried in Treasures (BIT) Workshops are going on across the country now, and they have proven nearly as successful as individual therapy for hoarding using very similar methods. If you know of or would like to find other people who need help with this problem, we encourage you to consider forming a BIT Workshop. The BIT Workshop method is highly structured, with each session focusing on a chapter from this book and everyone working through the exercises in it. There is no professional therapist, just someone who takes on the role of facilitator. Everything you need to know to run one of these workshops can be found in a facilitator's guide that is available for free at the International OCD Foundation Web site ([www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding](http://www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding)). The guide is called *Leading the Buried in Treasures Workshop: A Facilitator's Manual* and is written for people with hoarding problems.

If you are a family member or friend of someone who has a hoarding problem, this book is for you too. We hear from a lot of people like you, and we know how difficult it is to watch a family member or friend go through this and how frustrating it is not to be able to do anything about it. We've

lost track of how many people—hundreds, maybe thousands—have contacted us with questions like, “My mother (father, daughter, brother, etc.) has mountains of clutter but doesn’t acknowledge that anything’s wrong. The whole family has talked to him/her about it, but the conversation always turns into an argument. How can I convince him/her to do something about it?” It’s great that you want to help, and we will try to help you. In various places, you’ll notice breakout boxes with the title “Fact File for Family and Friends.” These boxes contain information specially designed for you.

Still other people reading this book will be mental health professionals, social service workers, or professional organizers who work with people with hoarding problems. For many of you, hoarding has represented a special challenge in your practice. We get questions like, “I’ve been treating someone for depression for a long time, and I never knew he/she had a hoarding problem until his/her relative contacted me. Why didn’t my client tell me about it?” Or, “Our agency has been getting complaints about clutter outside someone’s home—but the person seems reluctant to do much about it, no matter how much we talk to him/her.” We hope this book will give you some insight into what we know about hoarding and how we go about treating it in our clinics. If you’re a mental health professional, you will probably find the therapist guide (see breakout box) useful, as it provides strategies for cognitive-behavioral therapy that are not included here.

The specific things to look for and the way to use this book will vary somewhat depending on who you are. If you are a person with a hoarding problem (and in the coming chapters we’ll help you find out whether you are), you have a couple of options. The first option is to use this book as a standalone program for beating hoarding. This is perfectly fine and makes sense as a first shot. But, if that does not work well enough, consider forming or joining a Buried in Treasures Workshop. One of the participants in a recent BIT Workshop made the following comment about it: “I first read the book and revved up my uncluttering. But when I re-read the book with my support group and did all the exercises, I understood myself better. I didn’t just clear out some space. I changed.” This is the kind of outcome you can achieve if you keep at it.

Another thing to consider is to use this book in addition to seeing a professional mental health worker such as a psychologist, social worker, psychiatrist, or psychiatric nurse. Two of the authors of this book (Gail Steketee and Randy



Frost) have written a manual for clinicians and an accompanying client workbook that follows the same program as this book (see breakout box). You can suggest that the professional follow along with his/her own manual. If you decide you would like help from a professional while you go through this program, good resources for finding a therapist are the International OCD Foundation ([www.ocfoundation.org/treatment\\_providers](http://www.ocfoundation.org/treatment_providers)) and the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapists ([www.abct.org](http://www.abct.org), click on “Find a Therapist”).

Treatments *ThatWork*™

*Treatment for Hoarding Disorder,  
Therapist Guide, Second Edition*

*Treatment for Hoarding Disorder,  
Workbook, Second Edition*

By Gail Steketee and Randy O. Frost  
Oxford University Press



### **“Ugh, how am I supposed to digest an entire book?”**

We realize that it can be quite daunting to start a self-help program. And if you're like a lot of people with hoarding problems, you might find that it's hard to sustain attention and focus for a long time (more on that later). Don't worry. We've done our best to make this as straightforward as possible. First, we have tried not to clutter up the book with scientific jargon, statistics, citations, and so on. Even though this book is based on scientific research, we've deliberately kept a lot of details out so the book will be easy to read for people without a background in science. Second, you might notice that we repeat ourselves from time to time. That's deliberate. We know from decades of research that people learn best when they read something more than once—and that's especially true for people who have problems of attention. So don't worry about trying to memorize everything in the book—we've made sure that you'll get the important points more than once, in a variety of contexts.



### **“Are you guys going to make me throw out all of my cherished possessions?”**

No. First of all, we're not going to make you do anything—we couldn't even if we wanted to. We believe firmly in respecting people's autonomy

and control. Your possessions belong to you, and only you can decide what to do with them. Second, although it's easy to focus on discarding (indeed, on the hoarding-related TV shows a lot of emphasis is placed on throwing stuff out), we think that this is only part of the picture. When your home is filled to the brim with stuff, it's hard to get any enjoyment out of your possessions. The good stuff might well be buried underneath a pile of other stuff, so it's hard to find. Even if you do find the good stuff, you might not have enough room to enjoy it. Or you might find that after being buried under a pile for a long time, the good stuff has deteriorated to the point where it's not so good anymore. The critical issue, then, is to *make room in your home for the things you value most*. A major goal of this book is to enable you to celebrate and enjoy the things you save. This program will help.



## **When Is It Time to Seek Professional Help?**

There's no hard-and-fast rule here. Seeking professional help is a very personal decision, and different people have different criteria for making that decision. Our criteria (which might differ from yours) are that you should consider consulting a professional (a) if the problem seems too overwhelming to manage on your own or with the help of friends or family; (b) if the strategies in this book don't seem to help; or (c) if other mental health concerns such as anxiety or depression seem to be getting in the way of beating the hoarding problem. Below, we'll describe some of the different kinds of treatment and the types of people who can provide them.

### Therapy

Traditional “talk therapy” doesn't seem to be particularly helpful for people with hoarding problems. We do have evidence, however, that a particular kind of psychological therapy—cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)—is helpful for people with hoarding. What's unique about CBT? Unlike other kinds of therapy or counseling, CBT is a very active solution-focused treatment in which you and the therapist work together to learn how to sort and let go of possessions, think more clearly about your possessions, and control the urges

How to find a therapist:

American Psychological  
Association

Web site: <http://www.apa.org/>  
Telephone: 800-374-2721;  
202-336-5500

Anxiety Disorders Association  
of America

Web site: <http://www.adaa.org/>  
Telephone: 240-485-1001

Association of Behavioral and  
Cognitive Therapies

Web site: <http://www.aabt.org/>  
Telephone: 212-647-1890

Council on Social Work Education

Web site: <http://www.cswe.org/>  
Telephone: 703-683-8080

National Association of Social  
Workers

Web site: <http://www.naswdc.org/>  
Telephone: 202-408-8600

International OCD Foundation

Web site: <http://www.ocfoundation.org/>  
Telephone: 203-401-2070

to acquire. In our clinics and research studies, the therapist even goes to the person's home to help him or her learn how it's done. We have been studying the effects of CBT for people with hoarding, and our evidence shows that the majority of people who go through this treatment show substantial improvement in the level of clutter and in how they feel. What we have also found is that in most cases, the person's condition improved and he or she was happy with the results but still had more clutter than the average person and had to continue to work at it. CBT is usually provided by a psychologist or social worker, although not all psychologists and social workers practice this kind of treatment.

When selecting a therapist, it is important to find out whether he or she is an expert in CBT and has experience treating hoarding. Unfortunately, most clinicians are not yet very experienced at treating hoarding problems, but if the person is skilled at CBT and reads this book and/or Steketee and Frost's treatment manual, this will go a long way toward enabling him or her to help. At this time, the best places to find a therapist who knows how to treat hoarding are the International OCD Foundation Web site ([www.ocfoundation.org](http://www.ocfoundation.org)) and

the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies Web site ([www.abct.org](http://www.abct.org)), both of which contain interactive pages for finding a therapist in your area.

## Medications

So far, very little research has examined the use of medication to treat hoarding. Medications used to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) have

American Psychiatric Association

Web site: <http://www.psych.org/>  
Telephone: 703-907-7300  
E-mail: [apa@psych.org](mailto:apa@psych.org)

also been used for hoarding. These medications include serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SRI) such as clomipramine, as well as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI) such as fluvoxamine, fluoxetine, sertraline, and paroxetine. Some new

evidence suggests that some of the SSRIs (especially paroxetine and venlafaxine) may be helpful for hoarding, but other evidence indicates that these medications are not as useful for treating hoarding as they are for OCD. Legally, any physician can prescribe medications. However, we generally recommend that you consult a psychiatrist or advanced practice nurse who has special expertise in prescribing psychiatric medications.

## Professional Organizers

It's important to remember that serious mental health problems require treatment from a trained mental health professional. However, we think that professional organizers can be a very useful addition to your team. Professional organizers have a term called “chronic disorganization,” which is similar in many ways to our concept of hoarding. The subgroup of professional organizers who specialize in dealing with this kind of problem is called the Institute for Challenging Disorganization. Professional organizers, particularly those with this specialty, are great at helping you figure out ways to organize and manage the possessions in your home. In fact, some of what we do in treatment is borrowed from the work of professional organizers.

## Stepped Care

Increasingly, doctors and researchers have been interested in a concept called *stepped care*. That means that you can start with one treatment—usually something relatively easy and inexpensive—and then move up to more intensive treatments only if they are needed. For many people, this is a very sensible way to work on a problem—try something simple first, see if that works, and if it doesn't, do something more complicated. This book can be a great first step in a stepped care program. We know from our experience

The concept of “chronic disorganization,” used by professional organizers, is similar in many ways to hoarding. The Institute for Challenging Disorganization (ICD) has outlined the following characteristics as signs of chronic disorganization:

- Accumulation of large quantities of objects, documents, papers, or possessions beyond apparent necessity or pleasure
- Difficulty parting with things and letting go
- A wide range of interests and many uncompleted projects
- Need for visual “clues” to remind one to take action
- Tendency to be easily distracted or lose concentration
- Poor time-management skills

For more information, visit the ICD Web site at [www.challengingdisorganization.org](http://www.challengingdisorganization.org).

that it will help some people, perhaps even most people, but it won't help everyone. So here's a way to think about your own stepped care program:

1. Try this program, on your own or with the help of a friend or family member. Pay careful attention to what works and what doesn't work for you.
2. If it seems like this program has adequately addressed the hoarding problem, great! Keep it up and congratulate yourself. If not, consider finding or forming a BIT Workshop. Our experience has shown that a BIT Workshop can be beneficial even after trying to use this book on your own.
3. If, after you've given this a good try (meaning you really did your best with it and kept up with it for a reasonable amount of time), the hoarding problem still hasn't gotten better, don't despair. It just means that you probably need to take the next step, which would be consulting with a professional. But even in that case, this book can lay the groundwork for future success with a therapist or organizer.



## **What's New in the Second Edition of *Buried in Treasures*?**

Our understanding of hoarding, and our ability to do something about it, is constantly evolving. As we mentioned previously, since we published the first edition of *Buried in Treasures*, there's been an astonishing explosion of public and scientific interest in the topic of hoarding. First, the new edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* includes, for the first time, the diagnosis of Hoarding Disorder; we have incorporated those diagnostic criteria here (see Chapter 2). We've interviewed readers who attended our Buried in Treasures Workshops and found out what they found more or less easy to digest; we have tried to be clearer about those areas they told us were confusing. We also have provided more information about the findings of our clinical trials that show what works with hoarding and where we still have room for improvement. We've improved our self-assessment tools (see Chapter 3) to help you prioritize safety and

to conduct your own experiments to help you understand why you save things. As we've learned more about what stops people from overcoming hoarding—we call these the “bad guys”—we've added more emphasis on psychological issues such as perfectionism, stress, and time-management problems (see Chapter 4). We've also added a new strategy to our “good guys” on setting manageable goals and gradually increasing your stamina. In Chapter 6, we update you on the latest research (ours and others') about how hoarding is related to brain function. These changes are designed to keep you up to date with the best available information about hoarding and to keep you on track with the best possible strategies for beating it. We hope you find these revisions helpful.