

Animal Hoarding: Recommendations for Intervention by Family and Friends

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Since 1997, the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) has continued its research to improve the knowledge and understanding of animal hoarding behavior, so that methods of treatment can be determined. Although we are still in the process of studying this condition, and definitive conclusions have yet to be formulated, HARC periodically receives inquiries from family members and friends of animal hoarders. The living conditions of the humans and animals involved have caused concerned individuals to be perplexed, distraught, and in need of guidance to intervene in these situations. There are some aspects of animal hoarding behavior for which relevant interventions and methods of communication have been utilized with some promising results. We have therefore developed the following guidelines based on outreach practices associated with crisis management for at-risk persons resistant to assistance and care which we believe to be applicable to many hoarding situations. ¹

General Information About Animal Hoarding Behavior

Although the exact nature of this problem is still not understood, we define an animal hoarder as someone who:

- accumulates a large number of animals;
- fails to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care;
- fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals (including disease, starvation, and even death), or the environment (severely overcrowded and unsanitary conditions)
- fails to act on or recognize the negative impact of the collection on their own health and well-being.

Prior to commencing intervention efforts, it is advisable to keep in mind that you will be encountering a way of life, a sense of values, and a belief system that may be extremely difficult to understand and accept. While you may find the conditions to be unbearable for humans and animals alike, the animal hoarder may adamantly disagree. The animal hoarder may neither notice nor be

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bothered by his/her surroundings. Furthermore, since the conditions have likely developed over a long period of time, individuals may have become well accustomed to them to the point of being quite comfortable with the status quo. Even if public and/or animal health authorities have cited code violations, imposed fines or other penalties, the animal hoarder may still not consider such consequences to be incentives for change.

In order to begin to make a personal connection with a family member or friend who is an animal hoarder, it is important to suspend your own expressed ideas of proper living conditions and prioritize your efforts to strive for developing a trusting relationship and some common ground for positive communication. This approach is based upon an acceptance of the fact that there is probably little you can do in the short term to change the living situation of the animal hoarder. However, maintaining or developing favorable social interaction may be a key, initial step toward an improved way of life for the animal hoarder, who has likely become isolated, unchallenged by social norms or contrasting values, and extremely fearful or resistant to change. Perhaps an animal hoarder's inclination to avoid human interaction and social activity in general has been exacerbated by his/her sense of embarrassment about the home conditions and/or a fear that if other authorities, repair or service providers are given access, only negative consequences will follow. Consequently, over time, as you engage in a steadfast, consistent, and positive manner of sensitive communication and demonstration of genuine concern, the animal hoarder may develop greater tolerances for social interaction in general. In this way, there can be greater potential for your role to provide the animal hoarder with the motivation and support that facilitates the process of change.

Preparation

Prior to communicating concerns and trying to assist an animal hoarder to improve personal and home conditions, it is essential to critically examine one's own attitudes, manner of approach, and style of communication, as well as the specific objectives.

Attitudes and Communication Style

Identify both positive and negative feelings that you have about the individual and the status of your relationship. Consider whether there are particular preexisting, problematic issues between you and this person and how these matters may interfere or undermine your efforts to provide constructive assistance. If there have been prior conflicts or hostilities, become determined to exclude such history or hot topics which would contribute to contentiousness. Assume a mindset that is genuinely positive, respectful, polite, sensitive, and patient. The priority of intervention is the development of trust and rapport. To facilitate this objective, refrain from verbal or non-verbal communications which may be viewed as challenging, moralistic, or condemning of the living conditions or the person's apparent sense of values.

Education about The Human-Animal Bond

Enhance your understanding of the human-animal bond in general, so as to facilitate engaging in empathic communications with the animal hoarder. Keep in mind that the individual's affinity and devotion to animal companions are often founded on a number of attributes generally ascribed to pets. We may be most familiar with the concept of "unconditional love" as being profoundly motivating for

those who seek the companionship of animals. Yet, there are additional, significant and fundamental characteristics that may contribute to a person's appreciation of animals. The animal caregiver's pets may be the exclusive resource from which she or he derives a sense of trust, control, and self-esteem. The animal hoarder may regard the animals as being devoted family members, with whom there are no conflicts, only constant pleasurable interactions, providing continuous gratification.

It is important to acknowledge that while the observer may find the living conditions of the person/pets to be unsafe and unsanitary for human and/or animal quality of life, the animal hoarder may find this home to be a safe haven for the humans and animals alike. The animal hoarder may consider this domain to be a refuge from the stresses and challenges encountered in alternative settings. The individual may derive pride in his/her role as a "savior" and caregiver of these animals and strongly assert ethical and moral objections to the potential for animal homelessness or euthanasia. There may be physical, emotional, and/or cognitive impairments which affect the animal hoarder's capacity to insightfully acknowledge that the conditions for the humans and/or animals are problematic. If the animal hoarder does acknowledge the poor conditions, he/she may still object to any need for remediation. He/she may defensively and adamantly assert, "Any life is better than no life." From the perspective of the animal hoarder, this conviction may override quality of life considerations. Since the person and animals are typically sharing the same conditions, any critical or challenging remarks of the living situation of the animals may be readily perceived by the animal hoarder as being personally threatening or offensive. It is important to keep in mind how strongly identified the individual may be with the animals.

Listening Skills

Be ready, willing, and able to LISTEN ATTENTIVELY to the individual. Be receptive to learning what may be specific and critical to motivating or inhibiting the person's behavioral response to alter the status quo. The animal hoarder may only indirectly convey that s/he is experiencing inconveniences, difficulties, or conflicts regarding personal or home conditions. While initially averse to receiving any assistance with such issues, the animal hoarder may gradually become more accepting of guidance and support as further trust, rapport, and communication develop over time. Focus on the values, wants, and needs that the animal hoarder may express or imply. Reserve your own agenda until you have derived these essential clues to guide your method, manner, and content for subsequent communication.

Recruiting Help of Others

Recruit other family members or friends who might be willing to help, if not directly with the animal hoarder him/herself, then perhaps as a resource or advisor for you. It can be particularly helpful to enlist those who have an affinity towards animals; who understand the challenges associated with proper care; have strong interpersonal skills; or special knowledge or experience as related to particular aspects of the situation. If the hoarder has a relationship with a local veterinarian whom s/he trusts, that individual or a member of her/his staff may be able to offer some help. The local humane society or animal rescue group is another possible avenue for help. Initially, you may want to proceed cautiously when you contact others, in order to be sure you are comfortable with their understanding of the situation and approach. However, with any individual whose assistance you seek, proceed very slowly and selectively, if and when you consider directly introducing her/him to the animal hoarder.

Keeping a Record

Since the problems are complex, it can be helpful to keep a diary of telephone calls and other actions involved in the intervention efforts. This practice can be helpful for you to maintain reference notes on the different contact persons you will be calling upon, as well as specific recommendations or suggested resources that you derive from them. It can also be helpful for you (together with the animal hoarder) to keep notes about what tasks have been agreed upon for individual or mutual follow-up review, so that the steps being taken are clarified and confirmed in writing. This practice can alleviate subsequent disagreement or chance of forgetting. Documenting the plan and its progress or set-backs, as well as keeping track of the specific assistance provided are helpful tools for periodic assessment and modification of the measures and approaches that are being utilized.

Optimizing The Animal Hoarder's Response

Expressing Your Concerns

In order to facilitate access, convey simply that you are concerned about the well-being and safety of both the animal hoarder and the pets. You might emphasize:

- a) The person's physical health (avoid references to mental health);
- b) Without indicating your own standards or subjective appraisal, present the possibility that the Department of Public Health, humane organizations, and child or adult protective services may receive reports from neighbors, utility workers, or even passersby, and investigations would follow;
- c) Department of Public Health may cite health and safety violations that could result in property condemnation, with subsequent homelessness resulting for the individual and the animals alike;
- d) Department of Public Health, Department of Social Services, Adult Protective Services, or Law Enforcement investigation may cite specific conditions which these authorities deem to be neglectful/abusive (animal, dependent child or elder;) and the animal hoarder would risk having the animals (and/or human dependents) forcibly removed; fines and/or imprisonment may also result. Focus on your desire to provide supportive efforts to prevent these consequences if possible.

Creating a Comfortable Setting for Discussion

Given the likelihood that the animal hoarder may be anxious or ill at ease about your request to meet and talk, (if such activity is not a customary occurrence,) it is suggested that you give priority to addressing her/his needs for comfort - i.e. time and place for meeting, duration of visit, if/which others will be participating, and other factors that may be conducive to an amicable and productive encounter. Be flexible, changing the focus or style of communication depending on how the person is reacting. Defuse contentious interactions that may develop with shared humor and laughter, along with safe subjects. Animal hoarders may welcome opportunities to provide stories about individual animals. Express compliments or praise for the person, or notice a special feature about a specific pet. If and

when even minor steps have been taken to improve conditions, express positive reinforcement – i.e.: “Your hard work shows;” “What a good job you’ve done.” In the course of conversation, freely express corroborating comments whenever possible – i.e. “That’s true;” “I agree.” Continually demonstrate warmth, caring, and respect: i.e. “I’m so glad you called;” “I’ve been concerned about how you are;” “Might I stop by with an extra casserole dish I made?”

Developing a Positive Alliance

To maintain access and to sustain involvement, the priority objective of your interactions must be to achieve a sense of alliance, without which progress cannot develop in your relationship as a supportive helper. Put aside any sense of urgency to fix the conditions of human(s) or animals. It is advisable to avoid any precipitous manner of taking charge and taking action. No matter how well intended and completely benign you believe yourself to be, your proposed assistance may be viewed as an imposition of your negative judgment of the situation. Likely unaccustomed and leery of social interactions, the animal hoarder may consider you to be an unwelcome intruder on her/his turf. It becomes crucial to slowly, deliberately, and persistently strive to ease the animal hoarder’s anxieties regarding change and associated loss. Continuous efforts to create a positive mood and a cooperative working relationship are essential factors conducive to further steps toward remediation.

Waiting for Acknowledgement of Problems Before Offering Help

Await the individual’s readiness and/or expression of being emotionally conflicted or overwhelmed by the numbers of animals or related conditions before conveying your willingness to facilitate “downsizing” (i.e. via placing any of the animals in other homes or shelters.) This objective, if assumed prematurely in an unsolicited manner, can readily be considered by the animal hoarder to be antagonistic, as it reflects a failure to acknowledge the profound attachment that the person may feel for each and every one of her/his flock. In order to maximize the potential for continued access and constructive intervention, it is advisable to focus only on mutually defined problems and needs, one step at a time.

Offering Specific Assistance

A direct question such as “how can I help you?” may not evoke any specific response from the animal hoarder, no matter how glaring and numerous the needs may be to address health, financial or legal problems, home repairs, cleaning, etc. The animal hoarder may simply express a terse and dismissing “There’s nothing I want you to do” or “I don’t know.” It may become more productive for you to provide specific suggestions with a focus on particular tasks that appear to be least challenging to one’s sense of privacy or control, such as:

“Perhaps I can help you by getting some new containers to store the pet food or some large metal cans to hold garbage or newspaper items for disposal or recycling... if difficult to lift or move to the street, I could help with that.”

“Would you like me to put some shelving up over there? We could organize the pet food and supplies, and set up the feeding and watering bowls below.”

“I have a very pretty sofa cover that I’m not using anymore, and it might look nice here.”

“If you or the animals are bothered by the fleas (or flies, cockroaches, rats, etc.), we could see what we could do about that.”

“We could plan on re-screening some of your windows – it’s quite easy and we could do it together as a project... Maybe we could get some colorful curtains at a tag sale next weekend.”

“I know someone who is redecorating and planning on getting a newer stove (dishwasher, clothes washer, refrigerator). She’s asked me if I know of anyone who might like to have the one(s) being replaced.”

“For you and the animals to be safe, it would be a good idea if we got smoke detectors, and I could put them up for you.”

“You might be eligible for this new program I just heard about in your community for elders to receive grants for home repairs. I could get more information about this for you...Did you know that there are telephone (or other utility, and service) discounts for elders’ and persons with disabilities? Would you like me to find out more about this for you?”

“I see that you have some sores on your legs that might become infected if not treated” or “I hear you have a bad cough.” “I could arrange an appointment for you with a doctor I know who I think you would like. I’d be happy to give you a ride, or go along with you, if transportation is any problem.”...”You know how dependent the animals are on your being physically well.”

Providing Help and Setting Limits

The issue of assisting the hoarder with the costs or care associated with the animals is one which poses questions or concerns. Family and friends who are able and willing to help with the finances or physical assistance related to veterinary services, food, supplies, grooming, and cleaning will need to assess whether such assistance would actually encourage the animal hoarder to acquire additional animals. In this regard, it is advisable to discuss with the animal hoarder specifically what it is that you are willing to do and under what conditions (i.e. that no additional animals will be acquired during this time of your efforts to help out.) If the animal hoarder is able to acknowledge the importance of having pets sterilized, you might suggest your assistance with locating low-cost resources and helping with transportation. If you are amenable to providing help with food, grooming, or cleaning, it may be necessary to have a clearly expressed agreement that no additional animals be acquired in the course of either your doing so or your deriving and coordinating help from others.

Community Resources

Area human and humane organizations may be available to provide you with information, support and/or referral services that address aspects of the individual, animal, home and health care needs. In order to familiarize yourself with the parameters which define safe and sanitary conditions for humans and

animals, you can contact the town's Department of Public Health and the humane society or SPCA. While maintaining the anonymity of the animal hoarder her/himself, you may find it helpful to become informed of the definitions or guidelines utilized by these groups, so that you can better advise the animal hoarder of the specific standards for property and human or animal conditions which are not being met. Generally speaking, all states have anti-cruelty statutes that specify that companion animals must have sufficient food, clean water, sanitary housing, and veterinary care when illness or other suffering is present. Failure to provide these conditions can be justification for removal of the animals and prosecution. However, it may be possible to arrange a negotiated agreement whereby the hoarder gives up some or most of the animals and agrees to periodic monitoring in lieu of prosecution. This can also be a vehicle to provide care to both the hoarder and pets.

Depending upon the individual's age, physical or mental condition, income, dependents, etc., there may be particular outreach or support services available at the regional or community level which may be contacted to either provide information, referral, and recommendations to you or provide direct services to the animal hoarder. Such resources would include:

- Council on Aging or Department of Elder Affairs
- Elder at Risk Program or Adult Protective Services
- Child Protective Services
- Department of Mental Health
- State Rehabilitation Agency
- Department of Public Health
- Local humane society, animal welfare or animal control programs

You may also find particular service providers or outreach programs that focus on difficult to reach, oppositional or involuntary clients. Specific organizations or agencies can apprise you about the general scope of potential services and the procedures that an authority or agency would follow or recommend with regard to introducing prospective services to the individual in need. If there are financial resources available, it may be advisable to consider the option of private human service providers or case managers for family and/or individual needs for counseling or care management. Referrals to social workers or case managers with specific specialties can be derived from professional organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers (listed by state) or the National Association of Private Geriatric Care Managers. Consult the HARC website (www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding.html) for information regarding the availability of private individual and family consultation services with members of HARC.

Local humane societies or other animal protection groups may be able to offer suggestions with regard to staff, affiliated social workers or counselors, or other professionals who specialize in human-animal bond issues. However, given the relatively recent development of research and services devoted to animal hoarding, a lack of available resources with this expertise can be expected at this time. Nonetheless, there may be health and human service professionals who possess particular knowledge and experience in addressing certain behavioral aspects or contributing factors as may be associated with animal hoarding – i.e. the potential needs for medical or neuropsychological evaluation and treatment (including specialized geriatric services, treatment for depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, etc;) housing, financial, and legal aid; counseling related to crisis management, major loss and grief, trauma and abuse history; or, the potential need for humane education as related to the need to learn responsible, animal caregiving practices.

In the event that 1) one suspects that the animal hoarder is in fact violating laws related to the neglect and abuse of dependent humans or animals, and 2) that such report(s) has not been made, it is one's responsibility to see to it that the appropriate authorities are apprised in a timely manner. In order to preserve one's role as an intervening ally, it may be best to designate another individual in the intervention team to make the report.

The Role of Authorities

Family members and friends of animal hoarders often become frustrated when they believe that there has been no response on the part of an authority or agency when a report to investigate or a referral to provide service intervention has been made in order to effect the animal hoarder's cooperation to improve conditions. In this regard, keep in mind that when human service and/or law enforcement agencies have made efforts to intervene, the person need not accept further contacts or services, unless violations of the law have indeed been found and corrections mandated. Also, the involvement of human service agencies will be confidential, prohibiting communication with you about any intervention with the animal hoarder unless they have the individual's written consent. In addition, it is important to realize that in the absence of violations of health and welfare regulations and without the clinical criteria and a determination by the court that would deem an individual to be incompetent, the individual is assumed to be competent with the right of self-determination, despite conditions and risk factors which others may consider to be unacceptable.

Closing Commentary

It can become exceedingly challenging and distressing when we do not feel we are achieving a favorable response, no matter how patient and extensive attempts have been. As noted above, it is important to be continually aware of the contributing physical, mental, and emotional factors that may adversely affect the animal hoarder's response. Maintain realistic expectations regarding your own objectives, as well as the animal hoarder's capabilities to change attitudes and behaviors of long standing. You may not readily achieve discernable progress, and it is natural to become discouraged when conditions are not improving in spite of the steadfast efforts that have been made. Nevertheless, the communication and positive interaction that you are able to sustain can reduce the animal hoarder's level of isolation, help build trust, and affect greater self-esteem. These factors are essential to keep the door open for potential change.

