

DIGGING DEEPER INTO HOARDERS

We're all prone to clutter, which can be dealt with by a good clean-out. But an alarm bell should ring if entire living spaces are filling up. Helen Grange looks at hoarders

IF YOU'VE watched DStv's Lifestyle Channel, you might have seen *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, about hoarders and their predilection for accumulating stuff. In dark fascination you will have scanned the scene together with the camera, observing clutter piled high on the floor, on desks, on cupboards, on chairs on kitchen worktops, even in the bath and on the bed the person sleeps in. The entrances to their home might even be obstructed by piles of things, so no one can get in easily.

Hoarding is rare in SA, says clinical psychologist Kevin Bolon. "It's present in only about 1 or 2 percent of the population. But because the problem isn't acknowledged – it's usually a relative or friend who forces the person to seek help, so it hardly ever presents in the psychologists' rooms – that percentage may well be higher," he says.

The SA Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag) follows the Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) definition of hoarding: the compulsive purchasing, acquiring, searching and saving of items that have little or no value. The behaviour usually has deleterious effects – emotional, physical, social, financial, and even legal – for a hoarder and family members.

The most commonly hoarded items include newspapers, magazines, paper, plastic bags, cardboard boxes, photographs, household supplies, food and clothing. Some hoarders even download software they do not need, cramming their computer's memory.

The reason most hoarders give for their behaviour is to not waste things that might have value. A typical plea might be: "But I can't throw things away. What if I need them one day? I don't want to throw something out that might be valuable."

Cape Town psychologist Emile du Toit identifies six types of hoarder:

- Scarcity mentality hoarder ("What if the Depression returns?")
- Frugality mentality hoarder ("nothing should be wasted").
- Frozen indecision hoarder ("no decision is easy").
- Ordinary hoarder (standard material things).
- Rubbish/refuse hoarder.
- Animal hoarding (people with too many animals to care for properly).

"In all cases, the acquisition of things or animals is out of control, and the hall-



CLUTTER CRISIS: Hoarding is when the accumulation of stuff affects the person's daily life, when spaces have filled up and there's no room to move, or to get in or out.

PICTURE: MICHAEL LUTZKY/WASHINGTON POST

marks of addiction are there: powerlessness, damage and denial," he says.

A number of studies have reported a correlation between hoarding and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but Bolon says that because many hoarders don't show any other symptoms of OCD or ADHD, categorising hoarding with these disorders is being reviewed.

"The causes of hoarding are complex. It certainly has a genetic aspect – there's often a family history of hoarding; emotional anxiety and depression sometimes play a role; and most hoarders have information-processing difficulties, either due to ADHD or memory problems.

"They tend to make multiple categories instead of simple categories and this is compounded by difficulty with deci-

sion-making," he says.

Bolon adds that intense emotional attachment to many different objects is a common symptom, but that attributing hoarding to personal loss is not accurate.

"It might act as the trigger, but the predisposition was there all along. Mild hoarding behaviour typically starts at about 13 years old, then gets worse over time."

With animal hoarding, the situation becomes "very unhygienic" and is actually cruel to the animals. "This is a particularly worrying form of hoarding, as pets are involved," he says.

The National Council of SPCAs (NSPCA) has requested that a situation that looks like animal hoarding should be reported to the local SPCA. It says studies indicate that hoarders are intelligent, communicate well and have a

shrewd ability to attract sympathy to themselves, no matter how neglected their animals might be.

"This is usually combined with a stubborn refusal to part with any of their animals, whether through adoption or euthanasia of sick ones.

"Most people do not understand that keeping animals alive in the environment that hoarders often provide inevitably leads to intolerable suffering," stresses the NSPCA's Christine Kuch.

"Compassion for hoarders is not misplaced if you recognise that most of them are in desperate need of psychological help. What hoarders do not need is the type of sympathy and support which would enable them to continue harbouring and acquiring even more animals."

The key to recognising hoarding is

when it affects the person's daily life, when spaces have filled up completely and there's no room to move, or to get in or out.

"Hoarders have an inability to get rid of anything, even as it takes over living space. Also, the hoarder is typically embarrassed about others coming into their space. This is the opposite to collectors, who are proud of their collections," says Bolon.

Du Toit agrees. "It's about the damaging impact it has on the person's life and the hoarder's inability to stop the behaviour. It is compulsive and out of control."

● For more information or to find a counsellor, contact the SA Depression and Anxiety Group at www.sadag.org or call 011 262 6396.

● If you suspect animal hoarding, call 011 907 3590.