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## CAN YOU LEAD A HOARDER TO GIVE UP HIS STUFF?



*Chris Dorst*

Rita McGhee gives tips on how to separate hoarders from their possessions at a workshop for social workers.

By [Rosalie Earle](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- After he appeared last year on the TLC television program "Hoarding: Buried Alive," Sky Kershner said he was amazed at how many people told him about similar experiences.

"Everyone has a hoarding story," he said.

Apparently they do. When he instructed a roomful of social workers last week to share their hoarding story with the person next to them, the noise level rose dramatically.

The director of the Kanawha Pastoral Counseling Center and Rita McGhee, a professional organizer, talked about their experiences on the show, about why people hoard and how they can be helped.

McGhee said she tries to act fast when she gets a call from a hoarder or from the hoarder's family. If she can't accept a client, she'll refer callers to other organizers.

"They need help now. I'm afraid they'll lose the ambition if they have to wait," said McGhee, the only certified organizer who works full time in the Charleston area.

Sometimes the client believes she needs help with a bedroom, but it's the blocked entryway and the unusable kitchen and bathroom that are the priority problems. She said she goes slowly through the house, asking permission to open a door or a drawer.

"I see tears being fought back. It's hurtful. I have invaded their space. I may be the only person in years invited in. It's scary," McGhee said.

A family member may not understand why a hoarder can't just get up and clean up the mess. But research has shown that nagging doesn't help.

If nagged, a hoarder will say they need the item or find another reason to keep it. "What they say out loud to themselves is more important to them than what is being said to them," Kershner said.



*Sky Kershner, Director of KPCC*

"Any addiction or obsession is protecting you from something more painful, which can be a good thing" if manageable, Kershner said.

"If it's all organized, is it hoarding?" one listener asked.

Generally, no, both McGhee and Kershner said. Hoarding is only a problem if it's creating a problem, Kershner said.

McGhee said she is more successful with clients if she can suggest ways that stuff can be recycled or reused -- old magazines to hospital waiting rooms, art supplies to a community center, clothes to a children's charity.

Kershner gave some tips he has read for eliminating objects. "Surround yourself with objects you love or you use -- or else get rid of it."

Often, objects act as memory cues of deceased loved ones or of special times in our life, he said. So he liked the idea of taking a digital photograph of the item and preserving the memory cue on a disc rather than in a closet.

If you have relegated items to a faraway place, such as an attic or storage shed, they can't be that important, so start there when you begin to organize, said one social worker.

"My husband and I try to take two trips a month to take things to the Salvation Army, even if it's just a shopping-bag full," said another listener.

"If I haven't touched it or worn it in two years, it goes," came another comment.

McGhee suggested making organizing a team sport. Ask a friend to help clean out a closet.

Kershner observed that America is a "thing-oriented culture. No one thinks about hoarding experiences -- like travel."

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