

## Good Intentions Gone Awry: The Sad Situation of Animal Hoarding

by Josie Benson

I can count the number of times I have been to my grandmother's house on one hand. Why? She's an animal hoarder. In her small ranch house live approximately 20 cats and 15 dogs, and the unfortunate effects of this hoarding have marred my few visits to her home.

The conditions in her home are astounding. While theoretically the dogs are housebroken, in practice they seem just as likely to use the kitchen floor as a bathroom than the outdoors. The cats are relegated to the basement because they antagonize the dogs; however, the basement boasts a suspended ceiling and the cats have nudged aside several panels, allowing them inside. In every room, a faint meowing echoes through the vents. The resulting atmosphere is that of a low grade horror movie; you know the cats are there, but never when they're going to pounce.

To prepare for going to my grandmother's home, you must apply a generous layer of insect repellent to deter the fleas, and even if you aren't allergic, antihistamines are necessary due to the thick dust and dander in the air. The levels of ammonia are so strong you to want to wear a mask; however, to do so would offend my grandmother, since shockingly, she sees nothing wrong with her home. She doesn't realize that for us, entering her home is more akin to entering a biohazard site than visiting an elderly relative.

Unfortunately, my experience is not unique. Animal hoarding affects up to 250,000 animals and 6000 people a year (Dove). And if conditions sound bad for humans, they are

even worse for animals. According to the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC), “Compromised welfare is at the core of all hoarding cases.” An animal hoarder has more than the typical number of animals and fails to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter, and veterinary care (HARC). This neglect may lead to illness, spreading disease, untreated conditions, injuries, starvation, and death. Many hoarders are unable to keep up with housetraining and cleaning, creating an environment that’s literally toxic. HARC director Gary Patronek describes hoarders’ homes as oftentimes being “putrid with rotting carcasses and urine-soaked floors,” while “ammonia levels rise from unchecked urination....It’s not unusual to find decaying animals under layers of feces.” These ammonia levels can cause respiratory distress for animals and humans, and feces carry diseases and parasites.

Even healthy appearing animals in a clean environment are negatively impacted. Animals kept in crates or cages are unable to stretch, exercise, or socialize with either animals or humans (HARC). Behavioral problems can develop: animals may become withdrawn, shy, semi-feral, and unable to bond with humans (Dove). Many suffer psychological issues due to living in a crowded, competitive environment with a “survival-focused existence” (Dove). For instance, if “a dog is confined in a small space and unable to avoid other threatening dogs, it would certainly add an element of peril to daily life” (Dove). If free but in a small area, animals may be unable to retreat from others that pose a threat. As a result, animals may develop extreme aggressiveness. Some rescued animals are semi-feral and must be rehabilitated before they can be adopted. Some are unable to be rehabilitated and must be euthanized (Dove).

The costs of tending to many animals also has negative consequences. Food may be scarce; animals may be malnourished, starve, or fight over limited supplies. Routine trips to the vet may be avoided and animals may be infested with parasites such as fleas or worms or suffer from communicable diseases like mange, all of which spread fast in crowded conditions. According to HARC, "Failure to provide proper care to one animal inevitably affects the rest." Hoarders may lack money to spay or neuter animals or to immunize. As a result, "Animals have litter after litter, and often the young die before maturity because of their living conditions" (Dove). In one episode of the television show "Confessions: Animal Hoarding," cleaners found nearly 30 dead cats throughout the house, most under mounds of rubbish, including many kittens. In fact, in 80% of reported cases, authorities found either dead or severely ill animals (Colin).

Despite the often appalling conditions, many hoarders live in denial. Cruelty is not intended; rather, hoarders believe no one else can take care of the pets as well as they can. "Hoarders often explain that they simply love animals, or that these particular critters would've died without their intervention....Warped though it might be, it's a noble impulse that guides" (Colin). Hoarders contend their animals are well cared for, that they love them like children, and that the animals are happy and love them back. As one hoarder explained about 38 dogs living in a single room, "They got a room of their own. We got two windows...they get air and sunshine. They won't come outside because they are scared" (Vaco-Gazman).

Like many hoarders, my grandmother views herself as a "rescuer." Hoarders do not necessarily seek out new animals; rather they take in any animal that crosses their path. My

grandmother lives in a rural area, and stray cats cross her doorstep frequently. The difference between her and her neighbors, though, is that cats cross her doorstep only once; after they enter, they aren't coming out.

Never have I seen my grandmother voluntarily give up an animal. The only way out is to die. My grandmother doesn't allow the cats outside for fear they'll be hit by a car or eaten by coyotes or by the mountain lion she swears she saw on her roof. Perhaps the saddest incident of a "rescued" animal is the feral cat that lives in a cage in the basement "for his own protection." My grandmother intends to keep the animals safe and away from harm; however, in practice she's putting them in greater harm. Neglect is worse than an accident; at least an accident only happens once.

Several steps can be taken to reduce animal hoarding, including raising awareness among the public and psychological professionals, and considering changes to the laws. Traditionally, hoarding is treated as a criminal matter (Weiss), and psychology has "a dearth of understanding" (Patronek). Shows such as "Confessions: Animal Hoarding" bring public awareness; however, increased awareness does not mean that it is easier for a hoarder to get treatment. No matter how well-intentioned they are, hoarders are still legally liable for their actions. We picture my grandmother, small and meek, up against a judge who would view her as an abuser, and we stall any major interventions under consideration. The family typically must address hoarding, which can be difficult and frustrating when a hoarder denies any wrongdoing.

The time of hoarding being a family matter needs to pass. Like us, many families feel reluctant to report a hoarder and secure help for fear of legal action. To combat this fear so families are more willing to seek aid, a few actions must occur. First, authorities need to be more aware of the pathology of animal hoarding, able to distinguish these cases from cases of intentional abuse or neglect. Once hoarders are recognized, they must seek psychological therapy. Currently, only a few states mandate treatment for hoarders rather than criminal charges (Weiss). Without treatment, animal hoarders have a nearly 100% recidivism rate (Patronek). Even if we staged an intervention with my grandmother and adopted out all her animals, the likelihood she would hoard again is almost certain without therapy.

Second, animal hoarding must be officially classified as a psychological disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which psychologists use to diagnose and treat disorders (Patronek). Currently, hoarding is not an official diagnosis, and “perpetrators are often viewed as cruel rather than sick,” and face criminal charges. (Weiss). But hoarding is “a vastly misunderstood problem, one that goes far deeper than a few animal cruelty charges” (Colin). As a result, even if hoarders are sent to treatment during an intervention, therapists may have little knowledge of hoarding and feel unprepared to treat it (Patronek). Increased awareness and guidance for therapists is desperately needed, and researchers like those associated with HARC attempt to fill this gap.

Perhaps the most important stipulation is that criminal charges for hoarders be forgiven contingent upon successful completion of treatment, a reduction in the number of animals in their care, and improved living conditions. This would allow the concerned

family to take steps to end the animal hoarding without feeling guilty for being the cause of legal action against their relative.

If people aren't scared to seek treatment and if there's no threat of prosecution, the likelihood of continued hoarding decreases. This system would make it possible to get help for those affected by hoarding, people or animal alike, and most importantly, will make sure these rehabilitated hoarders don't sink back into the behavior. With help, hoarders can stop denying, realize the implications of their behavior, and treat animals in a way that truly shows their love: by caring for them well.

## References

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