

# When a Love of Animals Turns Into a Psychiatric Disorder

It officially became a psychiatric disorder in 2013, and likely happens much more than the estimated 2,000 cases each year. A sad, sad situation for the pets involved and the owner, here's how you can help if you suspect it's happening in your neighborhood.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The general category of hoarding was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 2013, and animal hoarding is included under that umbrella. This means that animal hoarding is now considered a psychiatric disorder
- An animal hoarder has a large number of animals at home that are not receiving the minimum standard of care, and the hoarder denies or minimizes the deplorable conditions both she/he and the animals are living in
- Animals in hoarding situations are typically sick, dirty, and have parasites. It's not uncommon for dead animals to be found in and around a hoarder's home
- Animal hoarders lack insight or awareness of the situation they've created, and often lack empathy for the animals in their hoard
- Effective animal hoarding interventions must provide care for the hoarder as well as the animals. Without appropriate mental health treatment, most animal hoarders will start a new hoard almost immediately

**Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 5, 2015.**

Hoarding was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 2013, which means that all forms of the condition, including animal hoarding, are officially considered a psychiatric disorder.

However, animal hoarding in the U.S. is probably much more common than the estimated 2,000 cases per year. There is a general lack of awareness that the behavior is an identified psychological condition, so only the most shocking cases get publicized. Very little research has been done on animal hoarding, but fortunately, interest in the subject is increasing in the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Australia.

## Profile of an Animal Hoarder

In order to be considered an animal hoarder, a person must have a large number of animals at home that are not receiving the minimum standard of care. Another prerequisite is that the hoarder denies or tries to minimize the appalling conditions the animals are living in.

Most animals kept by hoarders are sick, dirty, and infested with parasites. Often there are also several dead animals found around the hoarder's home or yard. Another problem is the effect on the local environment, which can include flea and tick infestations, and dangerous levels of ammonia from animal urine in the air.

Sadly, the hoarders themselves typically live in the same unsanitary environment as their animals, sometimes without a functioning kitchen or bathroom.

Most animal hoarders are socially isolated, middle-aged or older women who take in cats, dogs, or both. However, it's not unheard of for a man or even an entire family to hoard or live in a hoarding situation.

## **Animal Hoarders Lack Insight and Empathy**

Animal hoarding is believed to be associated with attachment problems to other people. Instead, hoarders develop an excessive attachment to animals, commonly in response to childhood neglect or abuse.

They lack the emotional knowledge to appreciate the reality of others, with the result that they fail to understand how others think and feel. They tend to decide FOR their animals how they feel, for example, "My animals love me" ... even though they are clearly suffering from lack of care. Hoarders also lack awareness of their animals' distress, or make up their own rules for what constitutes distress.

Animal hoarders often have other mental disorders, such as object hoarding or dementia. They also typically lack insight or awareness of their situation, and many demonstrate a lack of empathy for other creatures, including the animals in their hoard.

## **Helping Hoarders and Their Animals**

Experts agree that increasing public awareness of animal hoarding as a psychiatric condition will result in earlier detection of hoarding cases.

Also, standard policies for effective interventions must be implemented, and should provide assistance for both the animals and the hoarder. In most animal hoarding interventions, the animals are removed, but the person receives no further attention. Since hoarders don't comprehend that the animals removed from their care were severely neglected, they typically turn right around and start a new hoard. They need mental health treatment immediately to prevent a recurrence.

If you're concerned that a neighbor, family member or friend may be an animal hoarder (or an object hoarder), you can make your own risk assessment using the HOMES Scale. If you feel your suspicions are warranted, contact your local humane society, police department, or animal control department. This will probably be a difficult call to make, but consider the following, from The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium:

*"Failure to provide proper care for animals is a crime in every state. Although animal hoarders may suffer from a variety of mental health problems and behavioral predispositions, including how they respond to stress, that preclude them from providing proper care for companion animals, it is rare that they are found incompetent to stand trial.*

*Furthermore, even though 'intent' to harm may be lacking, most hoarding cases are characterized by a series of very deliberate acts and choices made by the hoarder, which placed their interest above the interests of animals (e.g., continuing to acquire, refusal of help, unwillingness to adopt, failure to seek medical care, failure to spay-neuter, etc.) that could all foreseeably lead to animal suffering and neglect."*

## Sources and References

[Washington Post August 8, 2014](#)

[Findings from the Henderson House Workgroup, 2011](#)

---