WORKING THROUGH THE CLUTTER: A HANDS-ON HOARDING WORKSHOP

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Objectives

- Describe cognitive-behavioral treatment strategies specific to in vivo interventions for hoarding behaviors
- Apply the understanding of underlying issues to the conceptualization of hoarding from a cognitive-behavioral perspective
- Implement treatment interventions that utilize cognitive-behavioral principles when working with hoardings in their homes
What is Hoarding?

- Acquisition
- Failure to discard
- Clutter makes living spaces unusable
- Distress or impairment resulting from behavior

(Frost & Hartl, 1996)
The Cognitive-Behavioral Model

Thoughts

Feelings  Behaviors
Hoarding and Thoughts

- **Thought Processes**
  - Perfectionism
  - All-or-Nothing
  - Fear of making mistakes
  - Missed opportunities
  - Distorted perception of others’ spaces

- **Information Processing**
  - Categorizing
  - Determining importance
  - Assumptions about items
Hoarding and Feelings

- Emotional Attachment
  - Possessions as extension of self
  - Attaching greater sentiment to items
  - Comforted by possessions
  - Exaggerated loss

- Reactions toward others in relation to clutter

- In context of co-morbid anxiety and depression
Hoarding and Behaviors

- Churning
- Distracting self from decluttering
- Avoiding decisions and discarding
- Needing to remember/record
- Keeping items in-sight
- Creating visual cues
- Avoiding emotional discomfort
Therapeutic Exercises

The Application of CBT Principles
Monitoring Emotional States

- Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS)
- Monitor the anxiety associated with a given task
  - Anticipation
  - In the moment
  - Reflecting back
- Identify the appropriateness of a given task
- Track progress during the course of treatment
If you were to write a handbook for living your life, what would be the predominant messages that reflect your values?

Once you’ve identified these priorities, what questions can you ask yourself that encourage choices that support these themes?
Challenging Automatic Thoughts

- **Downward Arrow**
  - What thoughts occur when faced with getting rid of a particular item?
  - What would happen without this item?
  - What would it mean to you? Why would this be upsetting or distressing?
  - If these thoughts are true, what’s so bad about them?
  - What’s the worst part about these thoughts?
  - What does it mean to you?

(Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring Workbook, 2007)
Challenging and Encouraging Insight

- How many do you already have? Is that enough?
- Do you have enough time to use, review, or read it?
- Have you used this during the past year?
- Do you have a specific plan for this item? By when?
- Does this fit with your values and needs?
- Is it important because you’re looking at it now?
- Is it current, of good quality, accurate, reliable?
- Would you buy it again if you didn’t already own it?
- Do you really need it?
- Could you get it again if you really needed it?
- Do you have enough space for this?
Decluttering Role-Play

- Trading places
  - Client practices coaching techniques in helping someone else (clinician) sort through clutter
  - Clinician demonstrates empathy and understanding of client’s circumstances
  - Client feels empowered to challenge and question self

- Using generic clutter
  - Have a box on-hand in office

- Using client’s possessions
In-Session Decluttering

- Working through acquired items
  - Practicing skills addressed during session
- Address thoughts and feelings as they arise
- Coaching through process
- Helps initiate homework process
  - Setting the stage for success
- Client controls which items are addressed
- Less threatening than allowing clinician into home
Application with Clients in the Home
Before Entering the Home

- Discussion of what to expect
- Identification of any “off-limits” spaces or items
- Plan what to do with items that are being let go of
  - Donation sites
  - How to deliver items to these destinations
- Definition of decluttering team
  - Family members or friends who may assist
  - Involvement of professional organizers, etc.
Rules of Engagement

- Therapist will not touch possessions without **EXPLICIT** permission
- Decisions are made by owner of the items
  - Can be *guided* by therapist, not decided by therapist
- Establish categories in advance
- Proceed systematically
  - Agree on a “Plan of Attack”
  - OHIO rule (**O**nly **H**andle **I**t **O**nce)
- Be flexible and creative
- **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**
  - Sorting, Decluttering, Non-Acquisition
Guidelines Around Engaging Clutter

DO:
- Imagine yourself in the client’s position
- Model positive, adaptive behaviors
- Provide encouragement and emotional support
- Share your opinions when asked
- Believe in the client’s ability
- Highlight strengths
- Stay calm
- Take care of yourself

DON’T:
- Use judgmental language
- Touch belongings without explicit permission
- Declutter behind the client’s back
- Minimize the challenges faced
- Make decisions
- Equate the clutter with the person
- Argue or try to persuade
Therapy Bag & Temporary Discarding

- Items set aside during self-directed decluttering between sessions
- Out-of-sight, out-of-mind
- Reviewing challenges faced while working independently
- Questioning how experience is different when in company of coach or clinician
- When considering letting go of an item but struggling with finality of commitment
- Allowing clinician to hold onto item
- Evaluate SUDS
  - Anticipated vs. actual
- Question experience of temporary separation
Role-Playing Exercise

1 Clinician – Empathetic, Supportive, Challenging
1 Client – Attached, Struggling, Overwhelmed
1 Bag of Clutter – Emotions, Memories, Uses

Trade roles half-way through
Questions and Discussion

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References and Resources

- Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring: Therapist’s Guide and Workbook
  - Gail Steketee and Randy O. Frost

- Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things
  - Gail Steketee and Randy O. Frost

- Buried in Treasures: Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding
  - David F. Tolin, Randy O. Frost, and Gail Steketee