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The welfare of animals is very important in American society, and American families own more pets today than ever before. According to the 2011-2012 American Pets Products Association National Pet Owners Survey, 62 percent of American households own a pet, which equates to 72.9 million homes. Unfortunately, of those pets there are hundreds of new animal hoarding cases each year.

Animal hoarding is a prevalent topic in mainstream television today due to the popular cable network shows. Even though the public is more aware of this issue, it is still a very cryptic and confusing topic for many to comprehend. The lack of studies and information about this disease make it a hard one to diagnose and treat.

"There have been a variety of definitions for animal hoarding produced over the years, but there are common themes in how it is typically conceptualized," says Dr. Derek Bergeron, psychologist for Texas A&M University Counseling Services and satellite clinician at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences (CVM). "Generally, animal hoarding is indicated by the accumulation of a large number of animals, overwhelming a person's ability to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care. Typically, failure to acknowledge the deteriorating condition of the animals (including disease, starvation, and even death) and the household environment (severe overcrowding, very unsanitary conditions) is demonstrated. Similarly, there is typically a failure to recognize the negative effect of the collection on the hoarder's own health and well-being and on the well-being of any other household members."



According to Bergeron, animal hoarders can cut across many demographics. However, some studies suggest that animal hoarders are more likely to be female, elderly, isolated, and on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Also, most hoarders have been identified with a comorbid mental health condition, such as depression or a panic disorder.

As the group of people likely to be animal hoarders is so diverse, it is also hard to decipher their motives and to put them into distinct groups. The best attempt made by researchers is to place the hoarders into three groups: overwhelmed caregiver, rescue hoarder, and exploiter hoarder.

The overwhelmed caregiver generally arises out of a dramatic event, such as the loss of a loved one, economic hardship, or a health scare. The individual may already have many animals and cannot take care of them over time, or will choose to take on more animals to mask the pain and to avoid dealing with the situation.

"The overwhelmed caregiver type is likely to be more situational, and these individuals typically have more insight into the situation," notes Bergeron. "They understand that there is a problem, which is why they feel overwhelmed. These individuals generally feel a strong attachment to their animal, which makes addressing the situation more difficult for them."

Rescue hoarders feel that they have a mission in life to save and protect animals. These individuals are often actively engaged in rescue work, and they may even own a shelter.



"Rescue hoarders often believe that they are the only people who can adequately care for their animals, and feel that animals would die without them," says Bergeron. "These hoarders have a strong need for control, and do feel in control of the situation despite the problems that exist."



The exploiter hoarders generally lack empathy for people and animals and are indifferent to the harm they cause. Their main concern is to be in control.

“Exploiter hoarders do not feel a strong attachment to their animals, unlike the other two hoarder categories,” explains Bergeron. “Rather, their hoarding behaviors are motivated by a need for control. They have a strong need to feel dominant and to be the expert. Hoarding animals is the outlet they have found to meet all of their needs.”

Animal hoarding does not happen overnight. It is a behavior that develops over time, and people continue this behavior because it serves a role for them. The function hoarding serves is typically related to regulating emotional needs, and very likely involves other mental health problems.

Most hoarders do not recognize their behavior as irregular. However, the hoarders who do recognize their behaviors as atypical, the overwhelmed caregivers, will hide their behavior out of shame and fear of possible consequences. Other hoarders may choose to hide their behavior, even though they don’t recognize their hoarding is dangerous or different.

“The individuals who are not aware of their disease may not necessarily believe that they are doing something ‘wrong’, but they may appreciate that there are consequences if other people discover their behavior,” notes Bergeron. “Thus, some individuals hide their behavior, because they desire to continue hoarding animals.”

It is important to identify the dangerous consequences for pets that animal hoarding can lead to.

“The nature of hoarding leads to deficits in basic areas of care such as providing food, medical care, and attending to sanitation,” says Bergeron. “Thus, hoarding can lead to starvation, lack of medical treatment, and increased risk of disease transmission. Hoarding can be very dangerous for the animal. Increased animal suffering and death are potential consequences if hoarding behaviors persist and are chronic.”

To this date, there have been no controlled studies done on treating animal hoarding. Therefore, there are no recognized treatments with strong empirical support for addressing animal hoarding.

“Overall, anecdotal evidence suggests that hoarding is a difficult problem to treat,” explains Bergeron. “Hoarding will likely require longer term therapy. Part of the complexity of working with hoarders relates to the likelihood of dual diagnosis with other mental health problems. This means that multiple problems will need to be addressed to increase the likelihood that the individual will be able to make a change in the long-term. However, given that there are treatments with strong empirical support for other common mental health problems, it may be easier to seek treatment for these other problems first.”

If you suspect a friend or a neighbor is an animal hoarder, ask your veterinarian for assistance. Veterinarians will know a responsible agency in the area to contact to get help for the individual and their pets.

ABOUT PET TALK

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