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## Elderly hoarders: Does it become harder to throw things out as people age?

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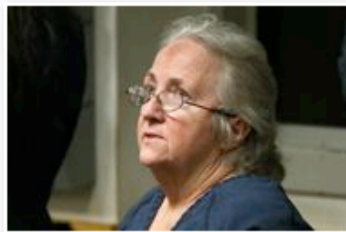
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Janna Howard's home in Greenacres was called the worst case of hoarding in Palm Beach County history.

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Lannis Waters

Janna Howard appears in court Tuesday. Howard was arrested on more than three dozen animal cruelty charges on Monday. Howard, 60, came under scrutiny on March 6 when fire rescue crews discovered some 50 cats living among trash heaps inside her home when they were called for a medical emergency.

By [Staci Sturrock](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Irene Atlas knows better than most what goes on behind closet doors.

As someone who specializes in senior relocation and estate sales, she helps the elderly and their families pack up the flotsam and jetsam of a long life. And sometimes, the sheer amount of stuff that she and her staff must wade through impresses even Atlas.

There was the man who owned 69 long-sleeved shirts and 66 short-sleeved shirts. "How can anybody wear that much stuff?" asks Atlas, owner of Delray Beach's Caring Transitions. "He took up more room in his closet than his wife did, and we never see that."

And there was the woman who'd amassed 52 umbrellas, hundreds of pairs of shoes and enough handbags to cover her queen-sized bed, three feet high. "I'm bringing purses out of her closet, and she's yelling at me, 'Where are you finding these purses?'"

And there was the deceased man whose family hired Atlas to empty a home filled with 30 china cabinets, dozens of chairs and countless lamps. "Most of his stuff was beautiful, but there was just too much," Atlas says. "It looked like a museum."

These folks fit more under the, um, umbrella of packrats and collectors, says Atlas, who views the hoarding spectrum as a bell curve. On the extreme end: the recent case of 60-year-old Janna

Howard of Greenacres. Earlier this month, Howard was charged with 45 counts of animal cruelty in what authorities called the worst case of hoarding in Palm Beach County history.

While Howard had decamped to her patio, 43 cats fought for space inside a two-bedroom townhome filled with bags of trash and feline waste. Animal Care and Control employees donned heavy-duty respirators to remove the cats, plus the bodies of two dead cats. Most of the rescued cats had to be euthanized.

Viewers of reality series like TLC's *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, A&E's *Hoarders* and Animal Planet's *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* will recognize Howard's sad plight. Those shows have shone a harsh light on hoarding over the past few years, although the International OCD Foundation points out that the earliest literary reference to hoarding appeared in Dante's *Inferno*.

Tempers on the hoarding shows inevitably flare on clean-up day, when a professional organizer or psychologist walks a hoarder through an intense decluttering process, with a junk-removal company standing by.

"A hoarder's worst nightmare," says New York-based Ron Alford, the self-dubbed "Disaster Master." And it's not an accurate portrayal, he believes.

"People are labeled 'hoarders' far more than they should be," says Alford, who prefers his own term, "disposaphobic." "In my experience, it's the elderly who are weak and infirm and can't deal with things they used to be able to."

They aren't hoarding possessions, he says, so much as "they're just not taking care of themselves or the people around them. There's no way I would refer to them as hoarders."

There are all kinds of people who acquire too many things, Alford points out. "There are the book people, the women who are clotheshorses. Remember Imelda Marcos? How many pairs of shoes did she have — and how many feet? She was not a hoarder. She just had an obsessive-compulsive desire to (spend) money that she didn't have to earn."

Patricia Maisano, CEO and founder of IKOR, which addresses short- and long-term care needs of seniors, also thinks the issue of hoarding is overblown.

"I think we hear more about it on the news and on TV, but to present it as a pandemic... It really isn't," she says. "We see it quite a bit in the senior population because people have started to experience memory loss and they're afraid to throw anything away because they might need it later."

If it seems like more Americans are living with too much stuff, it's because the population is aging, and a greater number of people are being forced to deal with a house grown too full, Alford says. "The older they get, the more apt people are to get lazy, tired, worn out or not give a damn."

And the desire to cling to too many things is, in many cases, generational, Atlas says. Many older people, particularly those who survived the Great Depression, live by the mantras "If it isn't broken, don't throw it out" or "If it's on sale, you need to buy more," she says.

The latter manifests itself most often in the paper product aisle. Says Atlas, "I have moved people with enough paper products to last three lifetimes."

For others, writing instruments hold a magnetic appeal. In one family, "we were talking pencils — five grocery bags of pens, pencils and who knows what other little stuff they shoved in there," Atlas says. "But they wouldn't throw them out 'because they were good'. It wasn't an emotional attachment. It was a financial attachment."

When attachments are strong, it takes a delicate, diplomatic hand to help separate owner from item, says Maisano. "Dealing with it carefully and systematically is part of what we do, and leaving the person with their dignity is extremely important to us. Their dignity is held within all this stuff. That we know."

What isn't known is a one-size-fits-all treatment for hoarding. People who are forced to throw away large numbers of objects, either by code enforcers or well-meaning relatives, typically relapse and refuse further help.

Antidepressants have shown mixed results because researchers don't fully understand the neurochemical causes of hoarding. Cognitive behavioral therapy — working with a clinician or coach to learn new behaviors — has shown the most promise.

Even then, children of elderly people who hoard need to remember that the living room didn't fill up with paper towels and cans of two-for-one overnight. And it won't get clean overnight, either.

"We're talking about a situation that's a longtime process," Maisano says. "The children need to know that, and they need to be involved on a consistent, longtime basis."

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### **The Who's, How's and Why's of Hoarding**

Scientists still don't fully understand what causes extreme hoarding, but here are a few things they do know:

#### **Who hoards?**

Up to 5 percent of the worldwide population. Common personality traits include depression, anxiety, neuroticism, indecisiveness, impulsiveness, perfectionism and vulnerability.

The average age of those seeking treatment for hoarding is 50, although children begin collecting items at 25 months of age. (Some researchers believe that hoarding was an evolutionary advantage that's been preserved in some family lines.)

#### **How does hoarding differ from collecting?**

A compulsive hoarder seldom cares about displaying his or her possessions, which often hold little value to the average person. The disarray of the amassed items interferes with normal household activities such as moving freely throughout the home, cooking or bathing.

A collector, on the other hand, typically keeps his or her collection well-organized and may display it in the home for others to see.

#### **How do you know if someone you love is a hoarder — or a packrat?**

In addition to creating and maintaining a large amount of clutter in the home, workplace, cars or storage units, a hoarder has extreme difficulty parting with items; finds himself drawn to free items and bargains, even if he doesn't need them; may lose documents or money in the clutter; keeps family, friends and even repairmen out of his home because of shame and embarrassment.

#### **Why is it so difficult for hoarders to declutter?**

They tend to deny that they have a problem, and they have difficulty organizing their possessions. And, when acquiring new items, they tend to experience unusually strong positive feelings. But, when faced with getting rid of items, they have very strong negative feelings, and may believe that their inanimate objects have feelings, too.

#### **How can you help a hoarding family member declutter?**

You can't force someone to be motivated to clean up, and until they are motivated from within, they may not accept offers to help. Remember that people who hoard may not see a problem with the way they live, and all adults have the right to make choices about the objects they surround themselves with.

Source: International OCD Foundation