

Chapter 1/16

Welcome to the Class

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1. Welcome to the Declutter Class

Welcome to the Declutter Class! We are glad to have you on board.

The Declutter Class is designed to be a 16-week class with each class lasting for 90 minutes. This workbook will provide you with the information you need to learn and practice the skills from the Declutter Class. We encourage you to complete all of your treatment assignments directly in this workbook. You will see that there are

spaces to write in throughout the workbook. This document contains much of the same information that your class leaders will talk to you about during the class.

Here are a few important things about the class and this manual:

1. **Class tasks:** During the class we will be teaching you lots of new information and skills. We will also do lots of tasks together while we practice discarding and resisting acquiring. When you see this picture of a group discussion it means that we will do a task together as a class. These tasks will vary, but they are an important part of the class. 
2. **Rita's story:** When you see the image of the woman on the right it means that this part of the manual is "Rita's Story." Rita will explain how she used the skills in order to overcome her problem with clutter. You will see her story whenever you see her picture. You can follow her story across the 16 weeks of the class. 
3. **Sorting and discarding:** The goal of this class is to help you to reduce your clutter. We'll do this by having you practice sorting your possessions by putting them into different boxes. Our experience shows us that people in the class do best when they practice sorting and discarding using three boxes:
 - a. Keep
 - b. Donate/Recycle
 - c. Trash

We will be using this system throughout the class and we will practice sorting and discarding in most of the classes. This is an essential part of the class. You might find this practice difficult, but we will work on ways to help you manage feelings of distress that come up.

4. **Bringing clutter from home to class:** In order for you to complete various class assignments we will ask you to bring in a small bag or box of your belongings from home **to every class** starting in the third session. We will use these belongings to demonstrate the skills that you are learning in class. It might be tempting to pre-sort your belongings before class, leaving the "good stuff" at home and only bringing in things that would be easy to discard. For the sake of this practice, we don't want you to pre-sort what you bring in. Just take a handful of belongings from one area of your home, regardless of your thoughts about keeping or discarding them.
5. **Staying on schedule:** You will notice that your class leaders have a large clock sign. They will use this to help keep class members on track. We have found from our past classes that many class members have important stories to tell, but there often just isn't enough time to get through all of them. 

We want to make sure that we stay on track and get through all of the materials that we need to for the class. We will use the clock sign as a reminder for you to finish up with what you are saying quickly (within 30 seconds) and as a signal that we will be moving on.

- 6. Progress photos:** An important part of the class is to bring photos from home to demonstrate your homework (discarding). This aspect of the class might also be difficult for you. You might feel embarrassed showing pictures of your home, or you might worry that your pictures won't show enough progress over time. We understand that it can be hard, but in our opinion, taking and showing pictures is very important. It helps to break the wall of secrecy and shame that so often surrounds hoarding, and helps you and us get a good understanding of how well the program is working for you.

CLASS TASK: Introduce Yourself!

Let's start with introductions. Please tell us briefly:

- *Your first name.*
- *Why it is important for you to reduce your clutter right now.*



You can list the class leaders' names and contact information here:

1. _____

Phone:

Email (optional):

2. _____

Phone:

Email (optional):

2. Class Rules and Guidelines

We find that the Declutter Class works best when we have strict rules and guidelines that everyone in the class follows. On the next few pages you will find a treatment contract and a confidentiality contract. Please read through these contracts and sign the bottom of the form *if you agree to the conditions listed*.

We take the treatment contract and class confidentiality seriously. Unfortunately, if you do not agree to the treatment contract, we are unable to have you in our class. We will take a copy of the signed contract so that we know that you agree to the rules.

The class leaders also have some rules that they will follow:

- *Will not touch any of your possessions without your permission.*
- *Will not throw away any of your possessions without your permission.*
- *Will allow you to make all the decisions about your discarding.*
- *Will be creative and flexible in the treatment process.*
- *Will allow everyone the chance to speak and learn in the class.*
- *Will convey nonjudgmental empathy and compassion, and will strive to understand your situation as accurately as possible.*

Treatment Contract

I _____ (name) agree to the following conditions of the Declutter Class:

1. **Willingness to discard.** The purpose of this class is to help me to reduce my clutter and improve my quality of life. For this reason, I am willing to discard items in my home. I will be able to control what I keep and discard, but I am open to discarding at least some of the items in my home.
2. **Being on time.** I understand that if I am 15 minutes or more late to the class (according to the clock in the classroom) I will not be able to attend class that week. If I am less than 15 minutes late the class will not stop to review what I have missed but I may join the class for that week.
3. **Bringing in clutter from home.** I agree to bring in some of the clutter from my home *to every class* (starting in week 3). This will help me apply and practice the skills from class. This is an extremely important part of the class. I understand that if I do not bring items each week I may be withdrawn from the class.
4. **Maintaining regular attendance.** I understand that if I miss 3 sessions or am late by 15 minutes or more for 3 sessions I may be asked to leave the class. This is because it is distracting for other class members. If I do miss a class, I understand that I am responsible for contacting the class leaders to find out the homework assignment. Homework must still be completed for missed classes.
5. **Completing assigned home exercises each week.** I agree to turn in all assigned homework worksheets at each class. If I miss this goal, I understand that I will be asked to meet privately with the class leaders to problem solve any difficulties. If I miss this goal more than 3 times I may be withdrawn from the class.
6. **Focusing on making changes to my current life and not dwelling on past events.** During the class, I will only bring up past events if it is for the purpose of making changes to my current situation.
7. **Letting others have their turn to speak.** I will not interrupt others or divert a topic of discussion. I understand that the class leaders will use the clock sign to signal me to finish up what I am saying quickly before moving on to the next topic.
8. **Ceasing all social conversation with other class members by the start of the class.**
9. **Refraining from giving belongings to other class members or acquiring materials from other class members unless instructed by the class leaders as part of demonstration of skills.**

I understand that these rules are for the purpose of helping me with problems associated with hoarding disorder. They are designed to reduce problems that can interfere with my treatment progress. I agree to the above conditions.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Class Confidentiality Contract

This is a contract for confidentiality among the members of this class.

1. Each member of the class agrees to keep personal information discussed in the class private.
2. Any information shared by a class member about himself or herself should be considered private information. This information should not be shared with anyone outside of the class.
3. Due to potential conflicts, we do not recommend contact between class members outside of the class.
 - I agree to respect the right of others to follow this recommendation.
 - I agree to not share contact information while at the class.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

3. What is Hoarding Disorder?

People can be diagnosed with hoarding disorder when they:

1. ***Have difficulty discarding possessions.***
2. ***Experience distress when trying to discard possessions.***
3. ***Have so much clutter that they have trouble using rooms and objects in their home.***

Many people with hoarding disorder also often have a problem of *excessive acquiring*. That is, they buy or pick up more items than they need, and bring them into the home, adding to the clutter. Excessive acquiring isn't one of the diagnostic criteria for hoarding disorder, but we have found it to be present in most cases.

Many people with hoarding disorder report that the saving, acquiring, and clutter in their home can lead to many problems, including:

- Unsanitary and unsafe living conditions
- Difficulties getting contractors or emergency workers into the home
- Arguments with family members
- Reduced social contact
- Financial problems
- Eviction
- Problems with the health department, housing department, fire department, or other agencies
- Dissatisfaction with the functioning of the home
- Losing/being unable to find important items

Frequently Asked Questions About Hoarding Disorder

How common is hoarding disorder? Hoarding is a common problem around the world. Recent studies suggest that between 2 and 5% of the population experience clinical levels of clutter and could be diagnosed with hoarding disorder.

What is the difference between hoarding disorder and just being messy? A lot of people have problems with clutter, but not all of these people have hoarding disorder. Hoarding disorder is primarily characterized by difficulty discarding because of a perceived need to save things, or severe emotional distress when discarding. A person could be messy, but if the person doesn't experience difficulty discarding things, we wouldn't describe it as hoarding disorder.

Hoarding disorder is also different from "messiness" in terms of the severity of the clutter. A lot of people have clutter in their homes, and they might find their clutter to be annoying or embarrassing, but hoarding disorder takes it a step further. When someone has hoarding disorder, the clutter is so severe that it gets in the way of them being able to live their life the way they want to.

What do we know about the biological reasons for hoarding? Research shows that hoarding may partially have a genetic basis. People who have hoarding disorder are

more likely to have parents, siblings, or children who also have too much clutter. Brain scans of people with hoarding disorder show that when they have to make decisions about whether to keep or discard possessions, their brains function differently than do the brains of people who do not have hoarding problems. In particular, when people with hoarding disorder have to make decisions about whether to keep or discard their possessions (as you will be doing in this class), their brain reacts as if very serious situation, with great potential for negative consequences. Their brain signals that *everything* is very important, and that makes it harder to let go of things. In this class, we'll help you work through those signals from your brain that tell you to keep things.

What do we know about the psychological reasons for hoarding? Throughout this class, we'll be talking a lot about the psychological reasons for hoarding. You'll find that understanding and overcoming them is the key to getting the problem under control. In brief, we think that hoarding stems from a combination of problems with:

1. **Decision-making and problem solving:** It's very common for people with hoarding disorder to have difficulty sustaining attention and making decisions. These issues can make it hard for them to solve problems, make a good plan, and stick to it. You'll see that much of this class is dedicated to helping you make decisions in a more effective and efficient way.
2. **Intense emotions:** Many people with hoarding disorder find that they struggle with feelings of sadness, anxiety, grief, or anger. These feelings can make it harder for them to make decisions or to let go of their possessions. In this class, we'll show you ways to manage unhappy emotions so they don't control you.
3. **Unhelpful thinking:** People with hoarding disorder often have strong beliefs about their possessions, some of which might be inaccurate, exaggerated, or just plain unhelpful. Many also feel a strong sense of attachment to objects. In this class, we'll examine your beliefs about possessions and discarding, and will help you think things through more accurately.
4. **Motivation:** Many people with hoarding problems are ambivalent about cleaning up the clutter. They may think that the problem is not so bad, or that the costs of cleaning up outweigh the potential benefits. Even if your motivation is very high right now, it's quite likely that at some point you'll find your motivation slipping. Throughout the class, we'll use various strategies to help keep your motivation high and encourage you to keep working.

4. What Will I Learn in This Class?

In this class we will help you to:

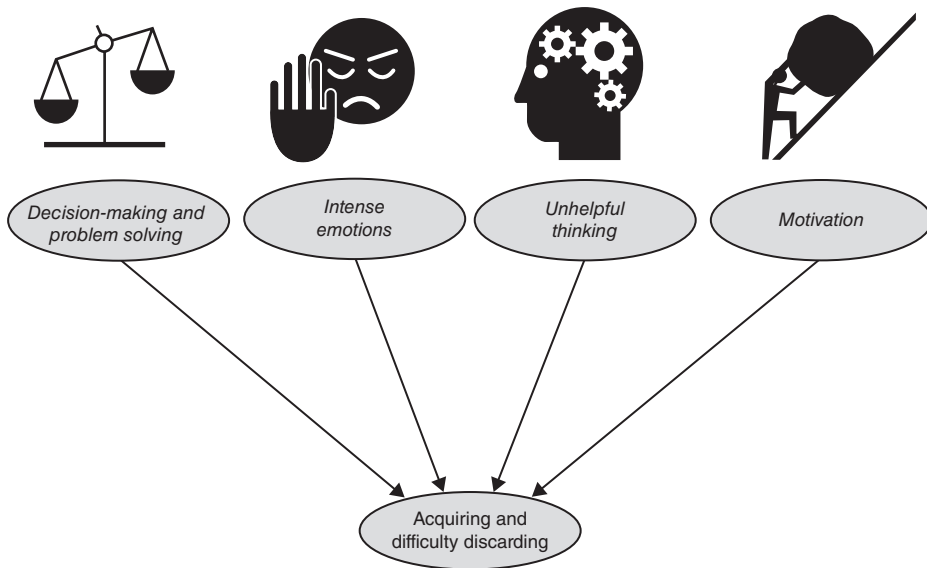
1. *Learn more about what contributes to you having clutter.*
2. *Learn evidence-based skills to reduce the clutter in your home.*
3. *Learn how to apply the skills on a consistent basis.*

Learn More About What Contributes to You Having Clutter

As we talked about above, we know that people with hoarding disorder tend to have problems in one or more of the following areas:

1. Decision-making and problem solving
2. Intense emotions
3. Unhelpful thinking
4. Motivation

Difficulties in these four areas lead to acquiring and reluctance to discard. Because everyone is different, we will help you to understand the areas that are problematic for you and to understand the reasons for your own hoarding behavior. We will start to learn more about this in the next class.



Learn Evidence-Based Skills to Reduce the Clutter in Your Home

The Declutter Class teaches you evidence-based skills to reduce the clutter in your home. We call the skills that we will teach you “evidence-based” because we know from a lot of research that they work! The skills are not easy to do, though, and require lots of repetition and practice. Just like learning any new skill, it also takes time!

We will give you time to practice the skills in class, but it is also important that you practice the skills at home. We recommend spending at least 1 hour a day working on the skills. The more time you spend practicing the skills, the better off you will be at the end of the class.

Sometimes people find some skills work more for them than others. This is normal, but we ask you to at least try all the skills before you decide that they will not work for you. We are confident, however, that if you work on these skills a little bit each day, you will make improvements in your symptoms.

Learn How to Apply the Skills on a Consistent Basis

This is the most important part of the class. From week 11 onwards we will be putting all the skills together and making them part of your everyday life. This takes lots of practice and repetition. After lots of practice with these skills we expect that you will make much improvement in reducing the clutter in your home. You will most likely notice that it is much easier to make decisions about discarding and it will not be as distressing for you to throw items away.

5. How Well Does the Declutter Class Work?

Past research shows that people who complete a course like this will have:

- A significant reduction in their clutter
- A significant improvement in their quality of life
- Improved safety in their home
- Less buying and acquiring
- Improved ability to organize possessions and to let go of them when necessary

It's important to recognize that simply attending the class will not help the clutter problem. This class will only work if you invest the time and energy needed to do the work outside of class. Research shows us that:

- The amount of benefit you receive is directly related to how much homework you do.
- People who do the best are those who practice the skills regularly.
- Those who continue to practice the skills after the class is finished will continue to reduce the clutter in their homes.

6. Homework

Doing homework is not always pleasant. It's time consuming and can be difficult, both emotionally and physically. We understand that your life may already be quite busy, and that you may not want to do things that make you feel bad. But we cannot emphasize enough how critical this part of the class is.

We have found from our previous classes that people who do their homework every week get the best outcomes. For example, one recent research study found that 80% of those who did their homework regularly saw a significant benefit from this class. In contrast, only 20% of those who did not do their homework regularly saw a significant benefit. In other words: If you do your homework consistently, you will probably have a very good outcome of this class. If you do *not* do your homework consistently, you will probably *not* have a very good outcome of this class.

For this reason, you will have homework every session. We want you to get the most out of the class so we want you to do your homework every day. If you do not do all your homework consistently, you may be removed from the class (see the class contract). We recommend spending at least 1 hour a day working through your homework.

Your homework this week is:

1. Reread information from week 1 (including Rita's story).
2. Take "before" photos of ALL main areas of your home.
3. Complete the "What Has Hoarding Taken From Me?" worksheet.
4. Other: _____
5. Other: _____

Rita's Story

I want to welcome you all to the Declutter Class. I completed the class many months ago now and wanted to let you all know about my experience.

I had a real problem with clutter before I started the class. I would collect way too many things like craft items, knick-knacks, clothes, and books. Over the years things just got out of control. It got to the point where I was unable to use many rooms of my house because it was full of all my stuff.

My family got really annoyed by my stuff (they called it junk). But I had a lot of trouble sorting through things and throwing them away. They offered to help me get rid of things many times but it made me feel like a child and I just got angry at them. It got so bad that my family refused to come around my house any more because they thought it was not safe. That really hurt!

My daughter told me about the Declutter Class. I didn't think that any class could help me reduce my clutter. I felt like I was a lost cause. Initially I just enrolled in the Declutter Class to get her off my back. To my surprise, though, the skills taught in the Declutter Class really helped me to make changes in my life. I was able to gradually work on throwing things away and also bringing less stuff into my home. It's not a miracle cure, though. It was hard work and at times I thought I wouldn't make it through the class and felt like dropping out. But I kept at it and now I can really see the difference. My family can see the difference as well and they are no longer afraid to come to my home.

You will hear from me over the coming weeks. I hope you can learn from me, as well as your class leaders. You might also be able to learn from some of the mistakes I made along the way.



Good luck!

Rita.

What Has Hoarding Taken From Me?

In this class we want you to fight back against what hoarding and clutter has taken from you. An important first step in this process is to identify what the clutter has cost you. Find below some common costs of hoarding. Check the ones that are relevant for you.

Family

- ☐ Family can no longer come to your home
- ☐ Arguments with family members
- ☐ Less time with family
- ☐ Loss of custody of a child or elder
- ☐ Other _____

Social

- ☐ Friends can no longer come to your home
- ☐ You have let friendships go because of the state of your home
- ☐ Arguments with friends because of the state of your home
- ☐ Less time with friends
- ☐ Disagreements or strained relationships with neighbors
- ☐ Other _____

Health

- ☐ Problems breathing
- ☐ Bed bugs or other bugs
- ☐ Skin problems
- ☐ Rodents in the home
- ☐ Emergency services unable to come in and help in an emergency
- ☐ Unable to get out of the home quickly in a fire
- ☐ Other _____

Emotional

- ☐ Anger
- ☐ Sadness
- ☐ Anxiety
- ☐ Frustration
- ☐ Other _____

Economic/legal

- ☐ Spent more money than you can afford
- ☐ Borrowed money from others that you can't pay back
- ☐ Debt problems
- ☐ Trouble with state/government agencies due to clutter
- ☐ Evicted or threatened with eviction
- ☐ Other _____

Valuing your time and money

- ☐ Over the past year, how many hours do you think you have wasted acquiring items, looking for lost items, or being otherwise inconvenienced by clutter?

- ☐ How much do you think an hour of your time is worth? That is, if someone wanted to buy one hour of your life, what would you charge for it? \$_____
- ☐ How much has hoarding cost you in terms of personal time over the past year? \$_____
- ☐ How much money have you spent rebuying items that you already had, or buying things you did not use? \$_____

Other

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____