

Resource A. Animal Hoarding: Devotion or Disorder?

While hosting my weekly radio program, *Take Back Your Life When Your Things Are Taking Over*, on the VoiceAmerica Variety Channel, one of the topics listeners wanted to know more about was animal hoarding. Even though several North American municipalities have set limits on the number of animals residents can have, that doesn't determine reliably what happens in real life. A surprising number of people contacted me with questions and concerns about their own or someone else's pet population.

Many of them were uneasy that the situation concerning them might actually be considered animal hoarding. Most would not give their names. They only felt safe asking the following anonymously.

Question 1: How many animals are too many?

Question 2: How do you know if what you are living with is animal hoarding?

Animal hoarding is defined as

- the failure to provide minimal nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care;
- the failure to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals or the environment; and
- the failure to act on, or recognize, the negative impact of the collection on the person's own health and well-being.

Minimal Nutrition

Minimal nutrition, in real terms, means the following:

- An animal should be within normal body weight.
- An animal should have access to clean water regularly throughout the day and night.
- An animal should be able to eat in peace without having to compete with other animals and should not be pushed aside or intimidated when accessing food and water by more aggressive animals.
- Food should be wholesome, fresh, and nutritious.

This standard is not very different from what we would want for our own nutritional requirements and, by extension, what we would want to provide for our own pets.

Minimal Sanitation

Although there is a range for acceptable levels of individual cleanliness in personal living environments, animal hoarding situations can easily deteriorate and reach extreme levels of squalor and contamination quickly. If we periodically assess the environment using the criteria in the definition above, long before it reaches its worst, we can recognize the downward trend before it becomes so deteriorated and overwhelming that a well-intentioned person can't turn it around.

Commonly, at some point, people hoarding animals lose insight about the actual condition of the animals and the environment, and they continue to acquire more animals while keeping all the animals they already have. They often resist any help to downsize or place animals for adoption, despite the deterioration. Generally, people hoarding animals do not see their environment in the same way others see it.

By the time law enforcement has to be called in, often the environment is unlivable because of the buildup of urine and fecal matter throughout. In extreme cases, houses have to be condemned because floorboards and walls are saturated.

Life happens, and standards slip from time to time, but most people would agree that there should not be urine and fecal matter remaining on surfaces. This would universally be considered below a minimal standard.

A good test for where on the continuum of deterioration the environment may be is whether

- you are still socializing and openly having people inside your home;
- you would be okay with someone you hadn't met before coming to your door and entering the house (providing you knew they were safe and there for a reason);
- you are part of a network and are not isolated, overwhelmed, and disconnected from your own life and state of well-being;
- the animals have become the main focus of your life to the exclusion of other things; and
- you are caring for all the animals you have and they are healthy, well-fed, well cared for, they are socialized, and getting lots of attention.

If any of these situations do *not* exist, matters may be beginning to lose a healthy balance.

Note that animal hoarding is a continuum and can range from dire conditions to something that approaches responsible pet ownership. If anyone is concerned that the threshold to animal hoarding is being reached, it probably is time to ask the tough questions. While there is no specific number of animals that constitutes too many, your capacity to care for each of them to the standards listed above is a safe guideline. Perhaps if you are feeling concerned, this may be a warning sign that you need to take some time to evaluate the situation.

Minimal Veterinary Care

What constitutes the minimum of care is complicated. Large numbers of animals have different needs than limited numbers of household pets. With household pets, seeing your vet once or twice a year for routine examinations and vaccinations may be sufficient.

With larger numbers of animals in a confined setting, there is a much greater risk of cross-contamination of infectious disease, particularly if new animals are entering the group from outside and you do not know much about the newcomers.

It is likely that you will need:

- to have a more careful and methodical vaccination strategy;
- to make use of appropriate quarantine and isolation areas;
- to have appropriate methods and knowledge to recognize infectious disease symptoms when they begin to set in;
- to be able to not only isolate those animals, but also to come up with a treatment plan moving forward;
- to consult your vet to help you to set up a home health care plan effective for larger numbers of animals; and
- to spay and neuter to prevent interbreeding.

Many communities and shelters in North America offer referrals and resources to help people unable to afford the cost associated. Some even have mobile vans that travel through neighborhoods to offer accessible services.

Question 3: What are the first steps people can take if they feel that their ability to care for their animals might be getting out of their control?

Start with these first steps:

- Recognize the emotional attachment you have with your animals.
- Acknowledge that you are starting to feel overwhelmed by the number of animals and your responsibility for them.
- Find a local veterinarian with a track record for approachability and start a conversation. Express your concerns. They may offer to do a home visit to determine whether a problem exists. Things may not turn out to be as bad as you feel they are.
- Keep an open mind that the veterinarian can help in various ways, including referring you to great people wanting another pet after losing one.
- Seek out rescue groups (if they are available in your area), which can also help find your animals good homes.
- Acknowledge if you have become isolated and do not have a good working relationship with a veterinarian. There may be someone else you can reach out to--a friend, a neighbor, or a relative who has these contacts.

Although the stated prevalence rate for animal hoarding has been estimated differently in various research studies, there really is insufficient reliable data.

Question 4: Is there any pattern to who is likely to hoard animals?

Whether self-referrals, referrals by others, or referrals by the courts, in all situations I have been asked to help with, irrespective of race, creed, age, socioeconomic status, or educational level,

the occurrence of animal hoarding very much depends on and is driven by the vulnerabilities of the person.

As a social worker I specialize in treating all forms of hoarding behavior. When dealing with animal hoarding, I have found work done by Dr. Jeanne Lewis, outlining five psychiatric models for animal hoarding, is helpful in pointing me in the direction of expert resources about the other accompanying mental health issues the person may be dealing with. While the person is not defined in rigid clinical terms, it helps me to find expert resources on these other disorders which allows me to offer a more holistic support network for those collecting animals. Each of us is more than the issues we are given in life.¹ It is critical not to use this work to pathologize individuals. Its helpfulness is in giving clinicians navigation tools to already existing expert bodies of knowledge and treatment protocols and strategies when behavioral symptoms are demonstrated. Animal hoarding can be overwhelming, not just for the people engaged in it but also for professionals trying to support them.

I would also add a sixth form of animal hoarding, although no research connects it to any medical or mental health model. These six models are outlined after Question 6 below.

The reported relapse rate for individuals who hoard animals is very high. This rate might be influenced by how these cases have been approached through the criminal justice system, which may not understand or take into consideration the complexities of this disorder. A person might be prosecuted with no provision for badly needed mental health support, counseling, and monitoring. Punishment versus treatment rarely works. Punishment takes away the problem (the animals) temporarily, but it doesn't provide long-term sustainable solutions.

¹ Jeanne Lewis, "'Crazy Cat Ladies' and Other Breeds of Animal Hoarders" (Presentation: Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, East Tennessee State University, 2008).

If we can start looking at this disorder as a mental health issue, we will go a long way to almost certainly significantly reducing the high recidivism (relapse) rate.

Question 5: So what is the best standard or model for intervention?

Across North America, community hoarding coalitions and task forces are being organized in response to hoarding being considered a mental health disorder in the *DSM-5* and therefore, when sufficiently severe, a disability in its own right. Because hoarding can in some situations constitute a disability, people living with hoarding disorder can be eligible under human rights codes for reasonable accommodation and the right to expect access to service provision.

Stakeholders for hoarding response come from a broad base of community groups: enforcement (police, fire, bylaw/code, children's protective services, animal control); all levels of government (federal, state/provincial, municipal); hospital and community-based physical, developmental, and mental health service providers; seniors' services; and nonprofit organizations (home care, meals on wheels, housing, day programs, outreach, homelessness prevention, etc.).

A universal way to find the help available near you is to check the internet for the equivalent legitimate organizations in your area.

Question 6: Is there a reason other than overpopulation to have shelters and impound facilities?

If you define overpopulation as an excessive number of puppies and kittens in an environment that cannot support them, then dealing with this problem is one function of a shelter. Shelters can provide many other functions in a community.

Often people find themselves in positions where, for completely understandable reasons, they are no longer able to keep their animals, and they need assistance to find new forever homes for them. Shelters in many communities provide a place where surrendered and other animals, such as strays, can be safely kept until they can be reunited with their owners or adopted. Shelters often play an important role in providing safe housing for animals that are abused.

Regardless of the reason people find themselves in need of help with their animals, it is important to adopt a compassionate and unprejudiced approach. An old but effective adage is to start where they are at, realistically, and without judgment. Having a solution-focused attitude to the barriers that prevent better outcomes will promote progress for all.

Models of Animal Hoarding

The following descriptions of models are clinical, so they may not seem sympathetic to the individuals who are caught in a far more complex dilemma than any theory or model of animal hoarding can encompass.² Please note that in five of the following six models (all but milling of animals), no one person or circumstances can be fairly described by the criteria listed for each mental health disorder. Using these descriptions can be useful only to the extent that an already existing, well-established body of knowledge and proven treatment protocols may aid practitioners to accelerate the progress those in need are searching for when they come to us for effective intervention plans and support.

1. *Focal delusional model* may exist when individuals' beliefs are inconsistent with reality.

The average person would not form the same beliefs about the severity of the situation the animals and sometimes the individuals themselves are in. Under this model, people

² The five models are from Jeanne Lewis, "Crazy Cat Ladies' and Other Breeds of Animal Hoarders" (Presentation: Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, East Tennessee State University, 2008).

who hoard animals insist that the animals are in good condition, despite concrete evidence to the contrary. They develop suspicion leading to paranoia regarding any offers of help. These individuals are isolated and alone, with an overwhelming situation that is deteriorating and increasingly out of control. They feel that they have special abilities to relate with animals, despite there being no evidence that this is factual. Other than the above characteristics, the person may appear to be normal. I prefer to phrase this as “the person may demonstrate behavior considered generally as typical.”

2. *Addiction model* may exist when individuals are preoccupied and obsessed with animals that have become their “drug” of choice. Their addiction has deteriorated to the point where they also neglect themselves. The more self-neglected, unaware, and lacking insight individuals are, the less they can be available to meet the needs of the collection of animals. They are unaware of the animals’ medical, mental health, and breed needs. These individuals are unable to control their impulses to acquire more animals; rescuing animals has become an obsession for them.
3. *Attachment model* may exist when individuals have experienced early deprivation or abuse as children. These people lack close adult human relationships. Animals are often their only stable relationship as an adult. They prefer animals to people, even when they do appear to have closely related people in their lives. Life is hallmarked by chaos, which prevents them from being available to attend to the animals’ needs, even as the condition of the animals deteriorates. The desire for animals is to meet personal unmet needs for unconditional love and acceptance.

As humans, we all have a need for unconditional love and acceptance. Getting this need met in a balanced way keeps us mentally and emotionally healthy. With

attachment model animal hoarding, the need is profound and is very different from the need the average person experiences.

4. *Obsessive-compulsive model* may exist when people have an overwhelming belief that they must be responsible for preventing all harm and providing all care to as many animals as they possibly can. Because there are irresponsible pet owners willing to relinquish or abandon their animals, the supply of animals needing new homes is plentiful. Individuals who meet the criteria for an obsessive-compulsive model feel a need to take responsibility for the abandoned animals of irresponsible pet owners, which may legitimize their choice to harbor unmanageable numbers of animals by claiming to be a shelter. In many jurisdictions, there is no accreditation required. Neither is there a definition of what constitutes a shelter, haven, or impound. In these situations, any individuals can call themselves a shelter, without having to be licensed, accredited, or meet any criteria for actual requirements reflecting what is necessary to shelter large numbers of animals. They often hoard inanimate items as well.
5. *Zoophilia model* occurs when individuals keep animals as objects of sexual attraction and sexual gratification. This model is believed to have a very low prevalence rate.
6. *Milling of animals* may exist when animal breeding, care, and adoption attitudes and practices result in what has commonly come to be known as puppy or kitten mills. These individuals breed animals to get the maximum number of “units” to sell. This model may also include individuals who casually breed their own animals for sale with no thought for minimally sound breeding practices to protect against genetic afflictions and deformities. Unfortunately, this practice may also promote inadequate veterinary health checks of both the male and the female in the breeding pair. Milling of animals is often

associated with inhumane treatment of the breeding animals and the offspring because the primary goal is yield and maximizing profit. This sixth situation has not been associated with mental health criteria or known disorders. In my opinion, it exists frequently enough to be included as a form of commercialization and hoarding of animals.

I know of this last form of animal abuse from personal experience in adopting Belle. She is a golden retriever, bred in a puppy mill to be no larger than a spaniel, in no way reflecting her breed's conformation standards. Her breeding was catered to buyer appeal. That appeal was that she has the temperament of a golden retriever without the inconvenience of being a large dog. After birth she was kept as a breeding bitch, and after having numerous litters by the age of two, she was rescued by a legitimate rescue group. Belle is a sweet, gentle, trusting dog whose teeth we later discovered were all broken off. When I asked my vet how this would happen, she told me that she has seen this before among breeding stock rescued from puppy mills. These dogs are kept in small cages with insufficient space to give them enough exercise. Due to their living conditions and mistreatment, they experience intense anxiety and frustration. To release these stressors, they bite and shake the bars of their cages, thereby systematically damaging their teeth. Because of that same anxiety, Belle needed many months after we brought her home to feel safe and confident enough to come out of her crate. Belle has been a cherished member of our family for the past nine years and is especially devoted to my husband. Despite our care and patience, she still can't walk through narrow openings and prefers lounging in spots that give her a heightened sense of safety.

What loyalty would you offer your best friend, one that appreciates you on your best and worst days?

Why would we offer our pets less?