



# THE MEANING OF THINGS

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## A NOTE

By Manu Valcarce

What most people would consider rubbish are often things that have real meaning for hoarders. Many of those things are of little or no monetary value but are attached to a strong emotional connection to the person and come with feelings of grief, sadness and fear when they are lost or taken away.

The reasons why someone begins to hoard aren't yet fully understood. They may be struggling to cope with a traumatic life event, such as the death of a loved one, but why it manifests itself in this way is unknown. Some of the people I met have twenty years of established behaviour. Many realise that they have a problem, but are reluctant to seek help because they feel extremely ashamed, humiliated or guilty. It is this guilt that keeps these behaviours secret from the people around them, this shame pushing them further inside and leading to more accumulation.

Although it is estimated to occur in between 2% and 5% of the population, there are no clear pathways to access support within existing health and well-being services. In the absence of medical recognition of hoarding as a specific disorder in the UK, statutory organizations look to regulatory powers made within environmental health legislation. This legislation addresses the problems created by hoarders but does not recognise or address the needs of the person hoarding. The answer from above is to force solutions that in fact reinforce the problem instead of taking the time to understand why and to start from there.

## CLUTTER IMAGE RATING

The Clutter Image Rating (CIR) is a pictorial tool used to determine the extent to which the three main rooms in the home are cluttered. We number each room before making a plan on how best to tackle the situation. We also show the hoarder the CIR and let them number their kitchen, living room and bedroom in terms of the guide, which helps their awareness of the situation and encourages them to face the problem. It is also used as a quick reference when talking to other health professionals who have not physically been to the space.



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## THE WORK

For the last 6 months I have been working with Making Room, a charity specifically working with hoarders. I arrive to their homes and together we work on clearing the clutter room by room. I don't throw anything away and am there to encourage the sufferer, to assist them in developing decision-making strategies and to help them identify and challenge the underlying beliefs that contribute to the hoarding problem. It can often take months to achieve small goals and I admire their commitment, motivation and patience.

Hoarding is dangerous, both physically and mentally as well as for the wider community. Fire, infestation and collapsed buildings are all very real threats. The only tangible answer in the eyes of the council is to Blitz-clean people's homes. They arrive and clear the house in a matter of hours until everything is gone. This is done against the sufferers will and is a traumatic and non-preventative process that arises from a general lack of awareness.

There is no official diagnosis for hoarding and it is not yet classified in the U.K. There are no paths to support, health officials are untrained in this area, research is minimal and social acceptance is non-existent. Blitz-cleans ignore the sufferer and the trauma experienced reinforces the problem. The person receives no treatment and a house that has been cluttered for twenty years can take as little as two years to become re-cluttered.

Although this new approach to hoarding is more time consuming, it is definitive and is centred on the person's needs. Once they start, the process of de-cluttering alone is therapeutic and coupled with support from mental health experts can really start to make a meaningful change in their lives. I believe hoarders have to decide they want to change and to throw away their clutter, piece by piece. For this to happen they need support, patience and space.



# JR

White male, 60 years old. Hackney Homes tenant. Level 9. He was referred to Making Room by support workers who gained access to his flat after a gas company was unable to do a gas safety check. He grew up around London Fields, youngest of 3 boys, with a mother and stepfather who drank and gambled. He attended a special needs school. He seems to have been co-dependent on his mother as an adult, who had bad arthritis and heart trouble. Regards himself as a loner who walks the streets out of boredom and not knowing what else to do. Never leaves Hackney. Collects as he walks around. He was never able to hold down a job.





**30/09/2015**

**2 hour session**

11 refuse bags mostly pillows and plastic bags.

2 recycling bag.

1 traid bag + about 10 foot balls.

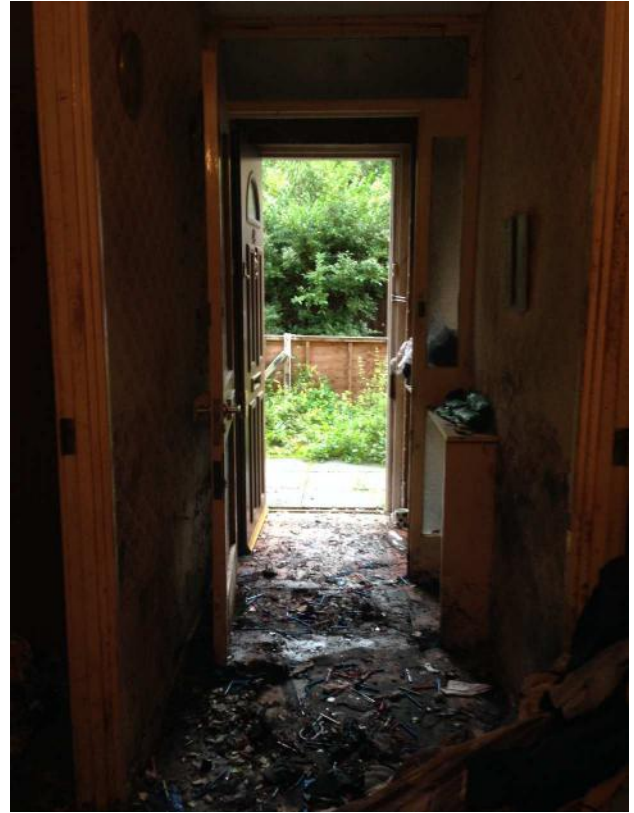
**JR** was again in a state of heightened anxiety over some items that he had agreed to let go last session – by way of not saying anything rather than expressly saying he wanted to keep them. He was very upset and angry with himself for allowing it to happen again, even though the previous items had been found. I talked with him for the 1st hour of the session before he was calm enough to start work. He had obviously been worrying about it all week. I spent a long time going over the very simple fact that all decisions should be made by him and if he's not been clear I should ask him to clarify or leave it for another day. I explained to him that it was not my concern to get loads of bags out each week, but rather that we go at a pace that suits him, avoiding the anxiety of feeling rushed that he said he felt last week.

**JR** brought up a firm that does 'blitz cleans' and it was very clear that he was very happy that we had not subjected him to that. Unfortunately **KS** did not feel up to working in the bathroom. The pan is full to the lid again. I have asked **JR** to make that a priority as I cannot work in there as it is. I reminded him how to deal with the solids in there. He has promised to try to deal with this by the next session.

After initial chatting, **JR** engaged really well and made some excellent choices on his own. Because of **JR's** anxiety I took the lead slightly more than usual, with me showing and then passing him nearly every item, rather than him showing me. Not much collecting but again the space that was cleared last week was no longer clear, probably due to reshuffling and avalanche. We worked towards each other from the front door and it was a pleasant session.

I noticed a large number of plastic bags today so **JR's** homework was to try to avoid bringing bags home. **JR** said this might be difficult so I suggested choosing a colour bag not to collect... No blue bags and to try to deal with the toilet.





**07/10/2015**

**2 hour session**

15 refuse bags.  
1 recycling bag.  
2 bags of electronics.

The session started with **JR** inquiring about a Christmas jumper that should have been kept from the previous session but that he couldn't find. **JR** said he was not too bothered about it but I went through the 'keep' pile and found it, as I thought it would reinforce his trust. He seemed very pleased and even tried it on.

**JR** said he has been getting less sleep. We talked about whether this was due to the change in his circumstance and if he was worrying about things - 'not really' was the main reply. He also mentioned mice a few times in the last few weeks but I've seen no evidence of them in the past.

Unfortunately **JR** didn't sort out the bathroom so reminded him of the importance of it and how to deal with it. We started working on the entrance and **JR** engaged very well.

After a while I left him working there and I spent some time in the living room organizing all the "keep" bags depending on the clothes (shirts/trousers etc) that will make our lives much easier in the future. I explained to **JR** where to find each thing but when I double-checked with him it was clear that he hadn't been listening. After that we kept working on the entrance until it was cleared. He kept engaging well and chatting and seemed to speed up by the end, as if he wanted to leave things clear before we finished. He was quite good at throwing things away and he kept only a few items, possibly because the majority of the items were in a very bad state. By the end of the session **JR** was quite happy to be able to open the door. Overall I think it was a great session.



**14/10/2015**

**2 hour session**

20 refuse bags.  
2 recycling bags.  
1 traid bag.

**JR** raised the issue of the kitchen tap constantly running which apparently has been broken since around the same time as the toilet. I have noticed that when I leave the room to take bags out, **JR** checks if all the "keep" items are still there. Also, when I left the house he came outside looking for me because he could not find a bag with some kitchen items he wanted to keep. I showed him where everything was and that satisfied him.

I felt that **JR** wasn't in a great mood when I arrived. He hasn't dealt with the toilet and he was not looking forward to doing it. After some talking we decided to give it a go. **JR** started emptying the content of the toilet in buckets and I kept bringing him buckets of water from the kitchen. It was not a pleasant experience for either of us.

We took a break from the toilet and we moved the mattresses that were blocking the way to the bedroom. Then **JR** took the lead and started de-cluttering the bathroom with a lot of energy that seemed to come from nowhere so I followed and we managed to take 20 bags out of the bathroom. He had an incident with one of the buckets that spilt over some stuff and we dealt with it the best way we could. After bagging up what turned out to be a heavily soiled (faeces) duvet, I decided that we couldn't work into the bathroom any more. It was not an easy session.

For the next session **JR** is going to see if the water is going down in the toilet and keep doing what we did.



**21/10/2015**

**2 hour session**

10 refuse bags.  
3 recycling bags.  
4 traid bags.

The session started with **JR** being really anxious over a red towel that has been thrown away in the previous session. He was upset with himself for letting it happen and I think the fact that the rubbish had not been taken away was not helping as he was pointing outside and saying that it was out there somewhere. I asked him to explain to me why this happens and he said that he gets blocked sometimes and cannot think. I told him that the next time he feels like that we could stop, take a break and that he can go through the items for as long as he needs. He seemed to relax and we started talking about what we were going to do. The plan of starting to de-clutter the kitchen from the entrance was NOT good for him. He said that it was going to take ages, that most of the stuff there is stuff that he wants to keep and that the real problem was not the tap, it was the toilet. Despite the evidence of the other rooms, I think **JR** lacks the foresight to see beyond what appears to be an insurmountable task. In truth I think the real reason he doesn't want to start in there is that he's wanting to protect his 'refuge'. He's still not using any of the other rooms in ways that he wasn't before the de-cluttering started, he still only sits in the same chair in front of the TV. **JR** has said he doesn't want to sleep in the now clear front bedroom.

**JR** had not dealt with the bathroom, so we had further discussion about this. I had a relatively firm word with him and asked him to try to bag up at least one big bag from there every day. He said he would try and I stressed how important it was. Unfortunately the rubbish has not been collected again and it is accumulating outside which is a bit disturbing for him. I don't think he has brought any bags back inside this time.

After all of that, we agreed to work in the front bedroom - with the goal to clear in mind, he had excellent focus and good progress, his engagement was as good as usual. He took the lead and I stayed behind picking up plastic bags and newspapers. He made all of the decisions himself and almost didn't ask me for my opinion.



**28/10/2015**

**2 hour session**

9 refuse bags.

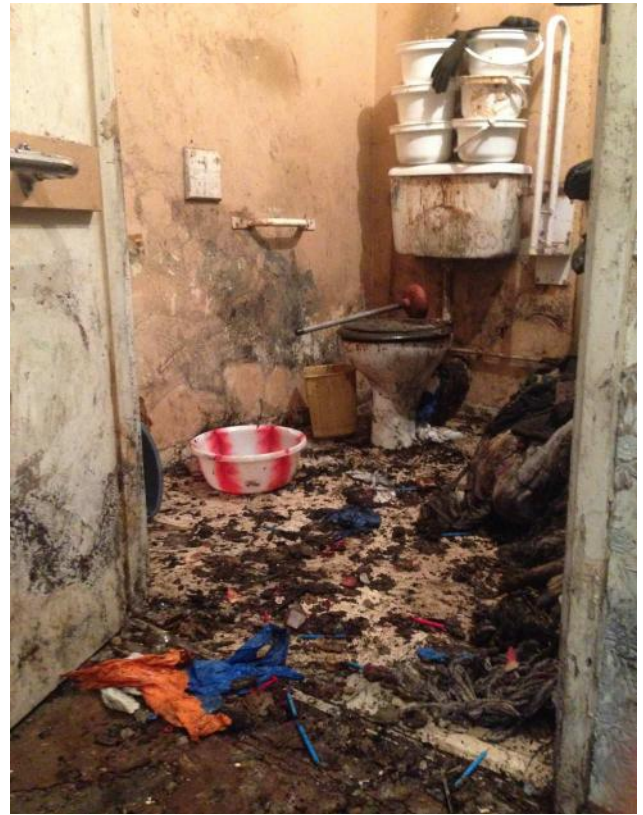
8 recycling bags.

1 traid bag.

**JR** talked about his mother in some detail today, mainly surrounding her death - it would've been her 100th birthday today.

**JR** has not worked on the toilet and I think it is quite clear that he is not going to do it. I gave him two new printouts to monitor/encourage him to 'flush' and take bags out of the bathroom. He didn't seem very keen at all and I'll be surprised if he manages to do it. Lots of excuses from him saying that it would take up all of his time, he wouldn't be able to watch TV and he was paying for that license. I explained that in the short term that yes, it might reduce some of his viewing time, but to think about what was really important. He doesn't want to work in the kitchen. I think he's scared that with all the change he will be 'expected' to live in a certain way that he feels incapable of. For example, despite me showing him how to use the stove, which he enjoyed, he has no real interest in doing it himself. Yet he still complains of only having cold food. I mentioned to him that some of the items, particularly in the bottom of the bathroom, might be soiled as we have found in other rooms. I reminded him that if we sorted through the items he would be able to find things easily, as he often talks about misplacing things.

From all of the sessions I had with **JR** so far this one was definitely the best. I felt he was much more relaxed, quite chatty and he even asked me some personal questions. We talked about his collecting and he said he is not collecting as much as before. We then worked, again with **JR** taking the full lead in to the front bedroom. Some slight resistance to this but we actually had a good chat and **JR** got quite into the decision making. I felt he had really found a good rhythm and was a bit disappointed when it was time to go. I am not being as 'firm' with keeping the guidelines at the moment as I'm sensing that **JR** is quite stressed. Instead I'm encouraging him to have faith in his decisions. We worked on the bedroom until it was completely clear. There are four mattresses in the front bedroom and he is planning to keep only one. I was quite please to see that they have collected the other 3 we had left outside so I suggested we take the new ones outside but eventually we decided to leave them in the bedroom for now until we decide the best way to dispose of them. He doesn't want to sleep in that bedroom so I think we could use it as storage. Overall it was a really good session.



**04/11/2015**

**2 hour session**

23 refuse bags.  
2 recycling bags.  
no triad.

The session started as any other: talking about the toilet. His attitude, however, has changed and he was quite apologetic about it and said he didn't want to get in trouble. I think he is just incapable of doing it on his own. Eventually he agreed to my request to fill 2 black bags from the bathroom to prove that it wouldn't take all day for him to do it. After 5 Min **JR** had filled a bag and we chatted about that and how much easier it would become with every bag. I mentioned that the flushing would become easier too as he wouldn't have to climb over items to do so. Surprisingly he almost didn't complain so I gave him two more bags when he finished the first two. I saw the opportunity to leave the whole toilet issue behind all of us so I told him to get on with it. "Think of how relieved you are going to be when this is over" was all I needed to convince him and he cracked on and managed to take 23 big bags out, leaving the whole floor clear while I offered him support from the distance. He threw literally everything away, saying "not even I would like to keep anything from here". It was quite a funny session, I made a few jokes about it and we laughed. He took the last bag outside and sat down in the sofa completely exhausted but smiling.

Then he asked me to explain to him how to fill out the 'flushing' sheet and he said he would do it for next session. We briefly talked about what he wants to do during the next session and the possibility of getting into the kitchen. He didn't see it as such an enormous task all of the sudden so maybe I should try to tackle the kitchen again next time.

Although I have offered, **JR** does not want therapy. He feels its for 'crazy people'. I wonder what will happen to him when the whole house is de-cluttered and I hate to think of him being left alone in the de-cluttered space with no support. This process has made him face his problem and I get the feeling sometimes his stalling because once it is all clear he won't know what to do. I think he wants our support for as long as possible. His self-esteem is low, he doesn't trust his feelings as he feels they have taken him nowhere.





TH

White male, 60 years old, born and raised in Hackney. Level 9. He has been a Hackney homes tenant for 30 years. Studied Latin and had been a substitute teacher (Latin, Greek and Math) for many years. He has never been able or wanted to hold down the same job. He would eventually like to return to teaching but his situation is holding him back. He was referred to Making Room when he started collecting in the corridor of the council building outside his home. He has had two blitz cleans in the past, all his belongings having been cleared out. He spoke of feeling lost in his own home and started recollecting immediately.



**19/10/2015**

**2 hours session**

16 refuse bags  
1 recycling bag  
1 TV and 1 table

We started the session talking about **TH**'s meeting with the new therapist he was referred to and how he finds it hard to answer all the questions but he understands that it is good for him. I think maybe that's why he asks me about other people I work with. I told him about achievements we had made working together with other clients and he asked me many questions. The conversation went very well, **TH** found it fascinating and it seemed to put him in a very good mood. **TH** also told me about a friend he made who was a hoarder too. He went to her house and it was even "worse" than his. He loves her company because they have that in common but he thinks it's not doing him well as they both think "that they are fine and it's the rest of the world that is crazy"

**TH** talked about his last meeting with Alan, the support worker, and how Alan was concerned that we were not de-cluttering fast enough. From his point of view the problems are:

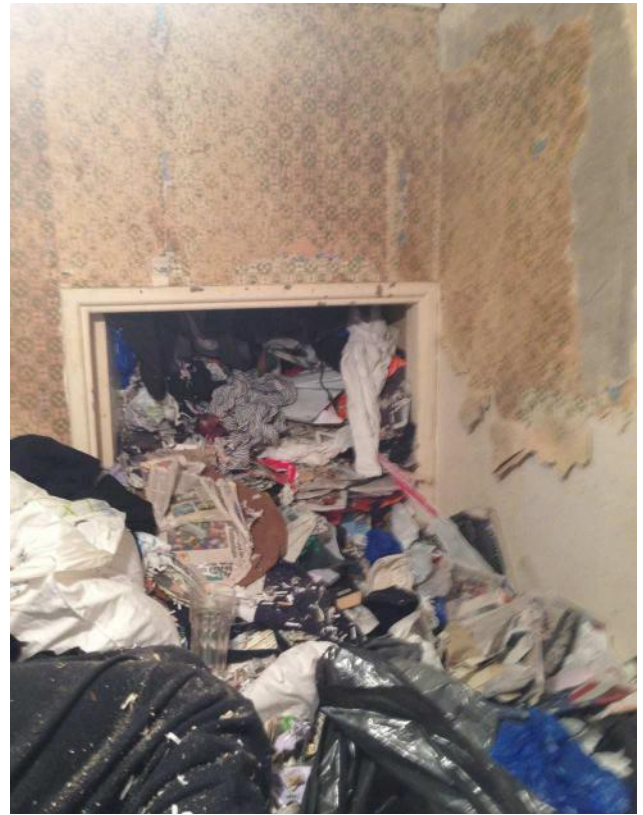
- 1- Alan thinks we should start from the door inwards but that is the area where he sleeps and it needs to be even. It's harder to see the difference when we de-clutter evenly.
- 2- Alan complains about the newspapers as they are a fire risk but **TH** thinks going through the newspapers is time consuming and that "we don't fill many bags". I told him that this is not about the number of bags we fill but he wants to show that he is making an effort.

In the middle of the session the light went off. He found a new light bulb but it was not working either. He thought it was a problem with the fuse and he got very stressed as the fuse box was in another room that looked completely inaccessible. We worked in the darkness, which made things a bit difficult, for about 20 mins until the light came back.

**TH** talked about the blitz clean and how he was concerned they would throw away things from his bedroom that were personal to him. He also mentioned that after the last blitz clean he had seen the benefits of having all that space and that he was a bit upset with himself when he had started cluttering it again until "things were out of control". I really think we should continue with the support after the blitz clean is done.

For the next session he is going to continue de-cluttering the kitchen door. This is easier for him as most of it is rotten food in plastic bags. He is not going to collect more plastic bags.





**02/11/2015**

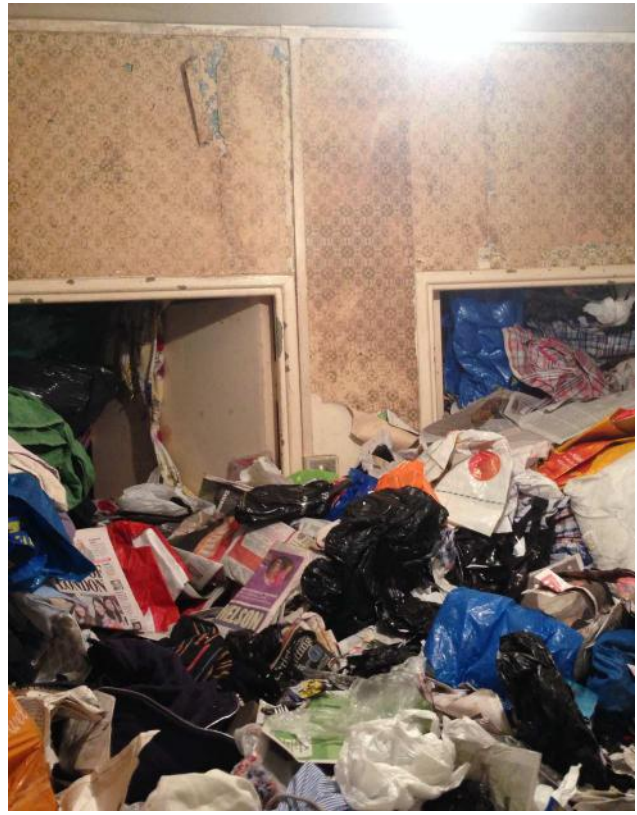
**2 hour session**

10 refuse bags  
2 recycling bags  
2 charity bags

I think it wasn't an easy week for **TH**. The light went off a few days ago and unfortunately the electricity box is in one of the rooms that is completely inaccessible. He bought a head light and managed with it but he realized that for today's session we would need more light so he had put loads of stuff from the room with the fuse box into the main area and sorted it out. The main area, however, was much worse than we had left it last week.

**TH** confessed that he had done some collecting this week as well. From a few comments he made I believe he collects more when he has been out having a drink so most of the new stuff has probably been collected during Halloween and the mid term holidays. We talked about it however, and we got rid of most of the stuff. **TH** said that he has always collected but that the situation got worse when he stopped working and had much more free time. He said that he doesn't allow himself to pick up any bulky stuff, like two chairs that he found in the street last week. **TH** talked about them a few times throughout the session, amazed at the things people throw away. Clearly it has been in his mind all week. He said that he used to be much worse though, that he used to have a trolley hidden in the park and that at one point he had bags full of stuff hidden in various places, but that he doesn't do any of that any more.

I asked him about his meeting with Susan, the therapist from MIND, which I don't think he enjoys very much. They meet for half an hour in the park for a bit of privacy but she asks about his feelings about the clutter but "his feelings are not always good" and he doesn't want to get stuck in negative feelings. She also asks about his family and he doesn't like to talk about these things because he "is not that kind of guy". He prefers our sessions because they are more dynamic and **TH** feels we are doing something about it and finds it easier to get stuck in when there is somebody there to encourage him. He thanked me for letting him make the decisions as opposed to the rest of the people who had been in his house so far (brother/ blitz clean etc.) I started picking up rubbish (mainly take-away boxes from the weekend) and plastic bags, while he was sorting out newspapers and clothes. I thought we could have gone a bit faster but I sensed that he was quite stressed so I didn't push it too much. I mentioned my meeting with Making Room who had said they could sort out funding for a second session a week and I think **TH** was quite pleased to see that his progress have been rewarded. I gave him the chance to think about it a bit longer but he said he would like to start this week so we arranged to meet on Wednesdays at 14:00. For the next session he agreed to stop collecting, at least any duvets and pillows and to keep sorting out the room for Alan's visit on Wednesday



**09/11/2015**

**2 hour session**

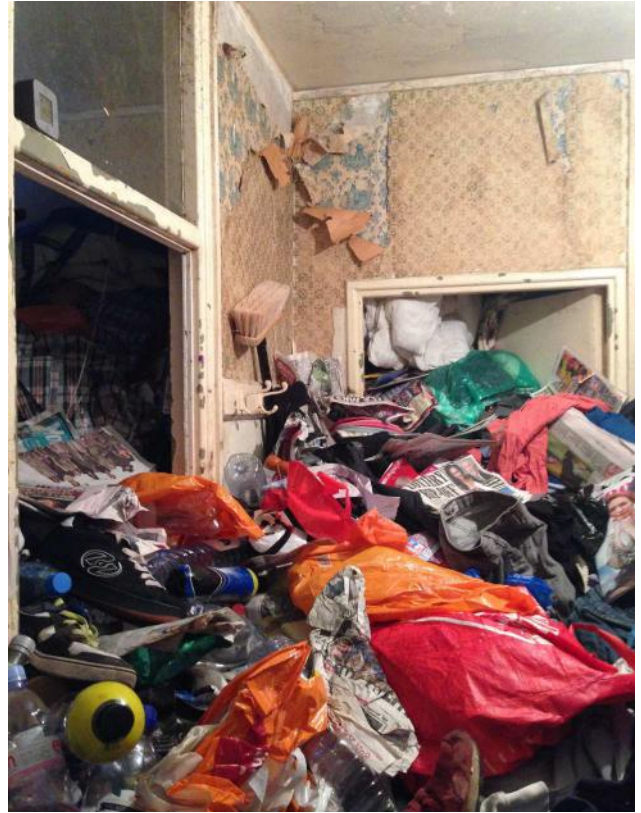
4 refuse bags.  
6 recycling bags.  
2 charity.

December is getting closer and it is in **TH's** mind all the time. There are two important events: his birthday that he really likes and the meeting with his family that he clearly doesn't. I asked him why and he said that mainly the preparation for it was what he disliked: buying presents for everybody and sorting out himself to look 'normal', **TH** said that he was glad when it was over and confessed that he had to have a few drinks beforehand.

Every Monday **TH** comes with a lot of questions about other clients and finds it very interesting. It probably comes from his session with Susan in the morning who, as he said, is trying to find out why he collects and to stop him from doing it. I asked him if she has found out why and he said it is probably from not being able to hold down a job and from 'family stuff' as she asked many questions about his family. Apparently there no conclusions about that yet. She checks his house before the session and she is pleased with the results but she thinks we should be going faster and she is concerned that he is only getting rid of stuff he doesn't want and he should also give up some stuff he likes like the t-shirt he was wearing. Apparently she finds it very easy to get rid of stuff to what he said 'I guess we are all different'.

**TH** talked about the last two blitz cleans and how he felt lost in the house afterwards. He said that he missed his stuff and that he lost many important things, even his keys. He is aware, however, that he has had many chances. **TH** understands why they want to do it and he is thankful that he hasn't been evicted like a friend of his with similar behaviour.

**TH** confessed he was a bit hungover when I arrived and he didn't look well. He doesn't drink on Sundays any more because of both Susan and my sessions, but he went to see the football and got carried away. I have to say that I agree with Susan and I also think we should be going a bit faster so I changed my approach and asked **TH** to let me get rid of bags and newspapers without asking. He agreed, so I started working on the entrance and that completely woke him up. We worked in different areas most of the time but sometimes he came to my area to save some of the newspapers. He used techniques like sitting on top of them or slowly sliding into my work area until he was covering most of them in an attempt to slow the process down. I asked him a few times if he was suffering and he said he was but that 'it was good for him'. We laughed a lot, it was a really funny session.



**11/11/2015**

**2 hour session**

8 refuse bags.  
4 recycling bags.  
2 charity bags.

**TH** was concerned again about filling up the bins on a Wednesday as they get collected on Mondays and the neighbours might complain. We talked for a while about it once realized that it was on his mind a lot. It turns out that the real problem is that **TH** finds it difficult to be seen with the bags. He fears that if the neighbours see the bags outside his gate they might think that he is bringing more things in and talked about two neighbours that complained before to both him and to the council. **TH** spoke about the time he started collecting outside the house because 'I could not fit the stuff and myself inside'. He didn't even know what was inside the bags as he didn't want to make a mess outside. The estate manager came to talk to him and gave him the opportunity to clear it out but he didn't, so the council came and throw most of it away. **TH** still feels ashamed about it. I think it was quite a difficult time for him and he was collecting much more than he is now. He saved some of the stuff from the council and he hid it in a nearby park and in some other places. It was a bit torturous for him as he constantly had to go and check if it was still there. Eventually, it was all cleared out and he said it was a weird feeling of relief and 'even him' realized that the situation was out of control. Apparently **TH** mentioned something to the estate manager once and she said that they have spent a lot of money on his blitz clean so he decided not to mentioned it again. We also talked about the future and **TH** said that he would like to be a teacher again but that the situation at home was holding him back as he cannot bath everyday etc..

His engagement was excellent. I was surprised to see that he had done the homework and de-cluttered some of the kitchen door. He didn't get to the laundry bags I had asked for but he he did green bags to put the stuff he wanted to keep inside. I saw a big difference from the last time, **TH** was faster, didn't try to waste time and he made a few comments about me reporting to Making room, Alan etc. He clearly wants to show that he is putting in an effort. Since he has no access to water he needs to keep plastic bottles that he fills up in the street somewhere. We agreed to keep 3 big bottles and 2 small ones and now I am allowed to throw the others away without asking. Same with the plastic bags, we put together some blue ones that he is going to reuse and we got rid of the rest. We worked on the newspapers for a while and then we got our hands on the clothes. He agreed on keeping only men clothes and size XL and I tried to negotiate to keep only 2 duvets and 2 pillows but that proved to be more difficult. We managed to get rid of one duvet though. The session went really well. **TH** was happy with the progress and he said that he enjoyed working with me as opposed to his brother who "doesn't understand him".



**16/11/2015**

**2 hour session**

7 refuse bags.

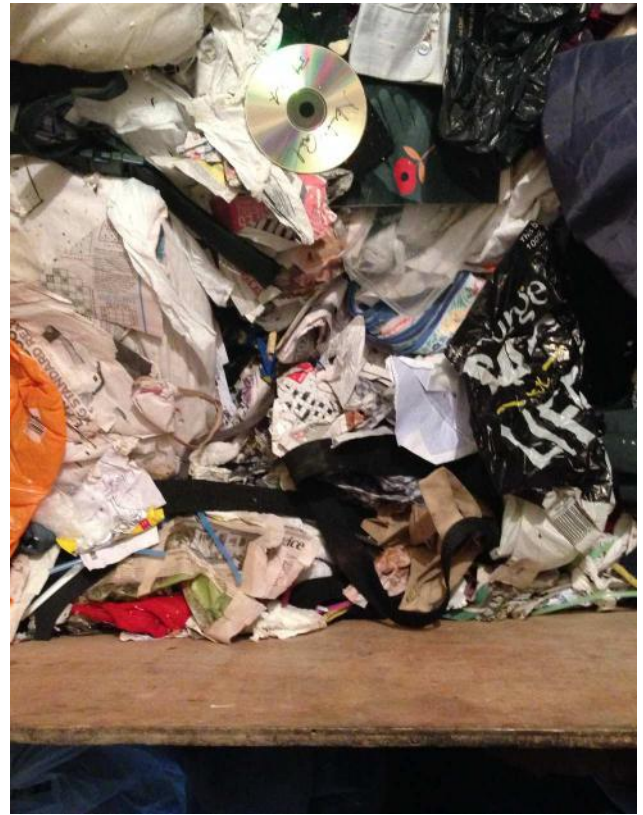
6 recycling bags.

1 charity bags

Today's session was a little frustrating. Some of the areas where we have been working are cluttered again so we had a serious conversation and I told **TH** there was not point of me going there if we had to work on the same areas every week. I showed him pictures taken the previous week and he agreed and told me that he was going to try to leave them as they were for our next session on Wednesday. **TH** understood that, considering his situation, it's only in his best interest to show some progress and that even if I am there to also sort out the items he wants to 'save' from the blitz clean he will have to also give up some things he likes such as wearable clothes simply because there is literally not space to keep them. **TH** keeps saying that the further we go underneath the easier it will be to discard things because the things on the surface are the stuff he normally uses, but after some talking I think he understood that he needs to be ready to make some tough decisions because otherwise somebody else is going to make them for him.

The rest of the session wasn't easy. We started working on the entrance and I had the feeling **TH** was blocking me more than usual. I decided to address the problem of the plastic bottles as it seems particularly difficult for him to throw them away. Since **TH** has no access to water as the kitchen is blocked we agreed in a previous session to keep some bottles to use and refill in a plastic bag and throw away the rest. Since then, the plastic bag is as we left it and there is an insane amount of bottles everywhere. Most of them are not completely empty and **TH** uses this as an excuse to keep them. I was not really sure how to deal with this, so I started to pick them up, put them all together in the same place and asked him to deal with them. I was hoping that when I put all of them together the amount would highlight the problem but he still didn't throw away much. I tried to talk to him about it but it was all getting a bit uncomfortable so I let him put them in an Ikea bag and gave him a break. Working around the Ikea bag that was falling all over the place and finding even more bottles highlighted the issue and he agreed that something needed to be done.

For next session he agreed to start drinking from the bottles in the Ikea bag and not bringing in any new one until those are done. He will also keep a plastic bag for rubbish so I don't have to spend the beginning of the sessions picking up take away boxes from the weekend.



**18/11/2015**

**2 hour session**

8 refuse bags.

7 recycling.

2 Charity.

This last session was a success, at least compared to the previous one. **TH** has cleared the area that had been cluttered again and he was actually taking bags to the bins outside when I arrived. At the end of the session **TH** said that starting to work an hour or two before I arrive was probably a good idea because he takes a while to get started. I think the conversation that I had with him during the last session worked and he seemed to be in the mood to get things done. **TH** has also dealt with the issue of the bottles, probably after a couple of days of having to move around with the Ikea bag full of plastic bottles falling everywhere. The way to deal with it, however, was putting them in a black bin bag and half hiding them from me or himself in the little space available behind the kitchen door. 'Out of sight, out of mind' he said.

We both started working on the entrance as I think working in different areas is quite stressful for him. **TH** said that he trusted me but it is impossible for him not to keep an eye on what I am doing. He seemed to be in a really good mood and if he was suffering from throwing away the newspapers he didn't show it. **TH** made two bags of clothes for charity but, again, only clothes that he could not wear so we talked further about this and I reiterated that he needs to make some choices and tough decisions. He agreed and confessed that every time he goes to the clothes container to leave the charity bags inside he ends up going through some bags left outside and bringing home new clothes. We agreed that from now on I'm going to go and drop the clothes to the container myself at the end of each session to avoid temptation.

We worked on the entrance until we got to the floor and we both decided that we needed a change of strategy. We found two big cushions that he is going to sleep on one side of the entrance while we are going to continue working on the other side towards the kitchen so he can access the tap and create some space to sort out the things he wants to keep before the blitz clean.



# PS

White female. 62, private home owner. Level 5. She was referred to Making Room by her psychotherapist, who had researched the condition online. She had been making complaints to her psychotherapist for a long period of time about the state of her home. She was born and raised in Hackney after her parents immigrated to UK from Poland during World War II. She was a literature teacher who suffers from depression for many years. She leaves the curtains closed constantly for fear of the clutter being seen from the outside. She has isolated herself from the world.



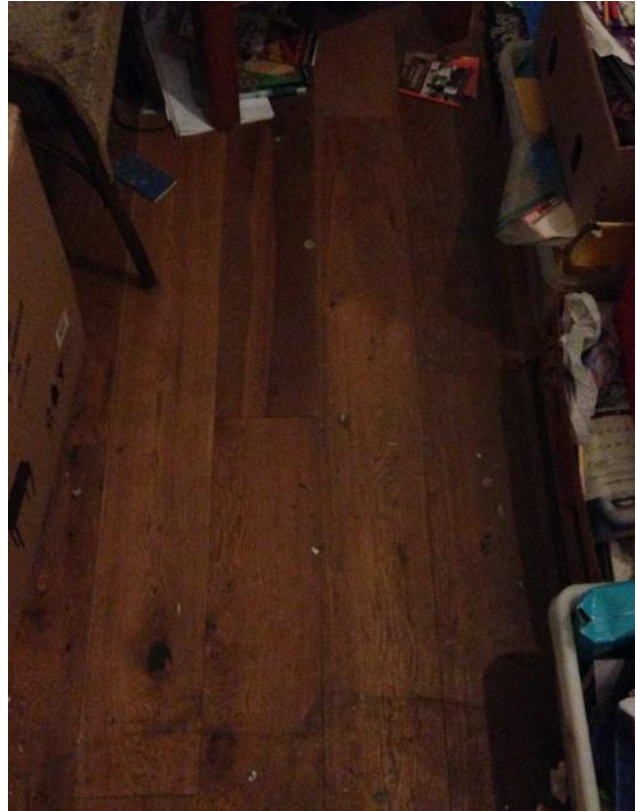
Small world

An Indian summer for your home page 22

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**07/10/2015**

**2 hours session**

9 recycling bags.  
Few books for charity

During the session **PS** talked about the severe depression she had for many years (partly caused by being a teacher, which she found incredibly hard at times) but she also mentioned that both her parents suffered from depression too. She told me that she was born in London but her family came to England as refugees from Poland during World War II. We talked about friendships and she said that she had friends that had tried to help her in the past, but that eventually everybody was too busy and the clutter got worse and that now she is quite isolated.

**PS** wants to organize the books into authors, themes and from bottom to top on the shelves in order of how often she uses them. Although it makes sense, I'm a bit concerned about time. She wants to do something similar with all her documents. She also has some furniture still in the boxes and would like help building them if there is spare time at the end. There was also a massive TV that she wants to get rid of.

At the beginning of the session we agreed on a work plan to make things easier. We would focus on the living room first and when we had space on the floor to work we could bring things in from the bedroom and go through them more easily. Her first reaction when she had to show me the rooms was of anxiety but she relaxed quickly and after that her engagement was excellent, even though sometimes she seemed overwhelmed with the amount of work that needed to be done. However, **PS** worked hard throughout the session and she didn't even want a break, she wanted to get as much done as she could while I was still there. At one point at the end of the session she wanted to use a ladder to reach the higher shelves. I didn't think that was safe so I stopped her and she mentioned that she wanted to show me that she was ready to engage. By the end of the session she was really tired and she had to have a rest on the sofa. She seemed really pleased that the work had started and that within only one session she could see a big difference. We created a pathway next to the shelves and we organized loads of books on them but I saw she had difficulty discarding any of them. Only 3 books went to charity. Because **PS** has this idea of storing the books in this particular way, we thought it was a good idea to just get them off the floor for now so we could go through them more easily (since they would be on the shelves), in the future. Something similar happened with some documents (mostly school material from when she was a teacher), so we stored them neatly next to a filing cabinet that she bought some time ago for that purpose.





**13/10/2015**

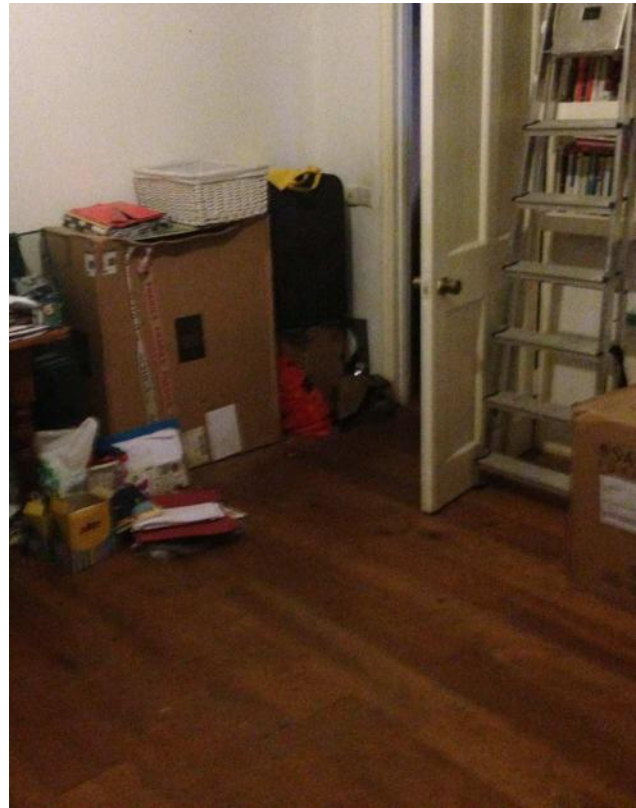
**2 hours session**

2 bags recycling  
1 bag refusal

**PS** would rather do the session earlier in the morning when she has more energy so I changed the session to Tuesdays at 10:30am. She apologized for not doing any of the homework, as she felt unwell most of the week. I asked her if that was related to the work we did last week and she said it wasn't (that it was "the usual") and that she was happy with the pace. Then **PS** talked a bit more about her depression and how the only thing that seemed to work was going for walks in nature. She casually said that she was unsure about me going into her bedroom as it was a bit personal but we didn't talk about it further. Rowan and I saw the bedroom on the first session and I didn't feel it was a big problem in there. Maybe in the next session I will suggest for her to go through it on her own time while there is still allowance hours left and she how it goes.

**PS** spoke about her dyspraxia, which might be one of the reasons why, in her opinion, she doesn't seem to be able to organize her surroundings very well.

Like the last time, she engaged very well. We started at a good pace but eventually we had to deal with the documents and we slowed down. She said it was like facing your life and her energy levels became low. We stored personal and work documents in different drawers and we used one of the shelves for art books and workbooks. I think having the books classified in sections is more important for her than I thought originally. Overall it was a really good session. **PS** will try again to clear the desk on her own time for the next session.



**03/11/2015**

**2 hour session**

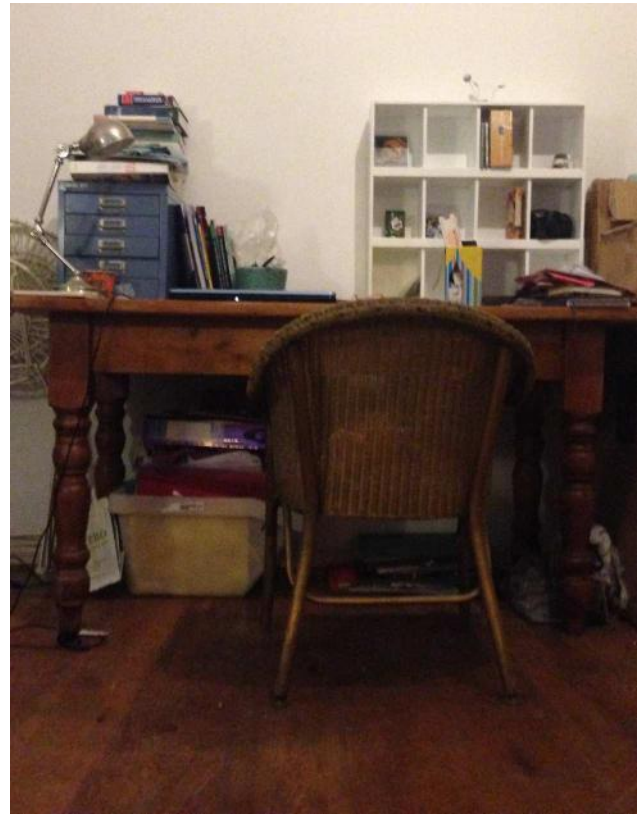
6 recycling bags.  
Few books for charity.

I asked her what she wants to get out of this and she said that her main goal was to be able to bring people home. Then she talked about London, how she finds it to be a difficult city to live in and that she feels lonely here. Something else that **PS** wants to get out of the de-cluttering is to start writing again. **PS** writes fiction and poetry and she is hoping that a clear desk and living room will help to clear her mind.

**PS** mentioned again that she was not comfortable with me going through her things in the bedroom, so we agreed that she was going to start working in there on her own time and we could have a look at it again in the next session.

After **PS** cancelled the last two sessions, I wasn't sure what I was going to find and I thought maybe the whole process had been more difficult for her than I thought originally. I was wrong and her engagement was great. We worked at an even faster pace. We finished organizing all the books in the shelves so after that we couldn't avoid the piles of documents any longer. She finds it very difficult to deal with the documents and I haven't worked out why yet. I suggested we briefly look at them and put them into 4 piles: work/personal/bank/her own writing. That seemed to work quite well and **PS** got rid of much more than I thought she would and even threw away wrapping paper that she kept from the last session. It was a really pleasant session and she gave me a lot of advice about how to manage my dyslexia (as she used to be a teacher). We also talked about her own work, she thinks that her dyspraxia is the reason why she was not successful in her life and finds herself in the situation that she is in at the moment.

We agreed to work on the desk area during the next session, which is going to be in two weeks. She said she would prefer to have more space between each session.



**17/11/2015**

**2 Hour session**

2 recycling bags.  
Few books for charity.

Today was the last session with **PS** and we were both in a really good mood. We started working in the living room while she told me that she have been feeling much better in the last two weeks and that having the living room almost clear had helped her to have a clearer mind. **PS** thinks that that's one of the reasons why she started writing again, one of the things that she wanted to achieve, and that she is having conversations with an artist who might illustrate her poetry. They had a meeting in her house. It's the first time that she had somebody over to her house in a long time. **PS** told me she was nervous when she came and that 'even though she probably thought it was a mess, she didn't know the magnitude of the achievement'. Achieving one of the goals she had set out was a great moment for her.

As we were reorganizing things around the room **PS** mentioned that maybe it was time to ask for some help from her brother to build some new pieces of furniture that have been in the boxes since she bought them years ago. 'Now he would have the space to work' she said. She was feeling more comfortable in the space and wanted to do something to improve it. **PS** said she was also going to call her psychotherapist who had referred her initially.

I noticed **PS** had cleaned the floor, which was really dusty and that she had put some ornaments on some of the shelves. I asked about it and she laughed and said 'yes, I think it is a good sign as well'. She said that she had learned a lesson, that sometimes you can do much more than you think.

At the end of the session **PS** opened the curtains and said that she didn't remember the last time she had done that, mainly because she was ashamed of the clutter being seen from the outside but also because of her depression, 'a way of hiding yourself from the world'. By the end of the session the whole space was clear, she sat down on the sofa, clearly exhausted and thanked me for all the sessions. **PS** said that it has really made a difference. She gave me her email and asked me to send her some pictures from our fist session. It was really rewarding.





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