

# The potential benefits of colour in supporting people with compulsive hoarding disorder

Colin Jones and Satwant Singh present the findings of a preliminary study which indicate that colour can help motivate some people with this syndrome to declutter

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## Abstract

Public health officials are beginning to recognise the significance of compulsive hoarding disorder. As clutter accumulates and obliterates living space, the world of the compulsive hoarder can become drab, dull and achromatic.

Many people with the condition report having difficulties finding important items such as passports and other documents that become submerged under piles of hoarded material.

Using an exploratory cross-sectional survey design, a volunteer sample of 15 members of a national hoarding therapy group was recruited. Participants were asked to take home sheets of coloured fluorescent card (colour markers) and use them to assist in defining or influencing their home environment. The purpose of the study was to explore what potential benefit colour may have on the environment and also the psycho-emotional benefits of colour for the person with the disorder.

The study concluded that both the choice of colour and the way in which the colour marker was used appeared motivationally beneficial and served to inspire attempts at reducing or removing clutter.

## Keywords

Colour, compulsive behaviour, hoarding, home environment

COMPULSIVE HOARDING is characterised by the accumulation of and failure to discard seemingly useless possessions (Steketee *et al* 2000). Importantly, hoarding may carry serious health and safety issues for the person concerned and other individuals as the disorder escalates.

The motivation for this study came from the researchers' earlier work in which participants made specific reference to the way in which colour and vibrancy seemed absent from their living spaces (Jones and Singh 2013).

The following quotation from a participant in our study illustrates the potentially negative psychological sequelae that compulsive hoarding can bring, and the potential effects of introducing colour.

'I remember a long hot summer in the 1970s when I still thought my life would be good. Yellow and orange were '70s colours, wallpapers, clothes and furnishings. Yellow is a positive feeling of warmth, brightness and hope, feelings which I just normally have now. If I had more sheets of coloured card I would have made a flower out of them. Looking at the card reminds me of the therapy group and I feel less alone when surrounded by it all. I find the colour uplifting; my flat is shabby and drab' (Participant 6).

Cardboard boxes, refuse sacks and other storage receptacles make for a dull, drab and colourless environment. This achromatic world has the potential to exacerbate negative, depressogenic thinking, which in turn can reduce the motivation or inspiration to throw away or clear unwanted items.

## Literature review

Hoarding disorder is a syndrome characterised by excessive collecting and saving behaviours that result in cluttered living space and significant distress or impairment (Frost and Hartl 1996). The types of items collected are often perceived by others to be useless or of limited value, and preclude the individual's living space from being used for its intended purposes such as cooking, sleeping and