

ARE YOU A JUNKAHOLIC?

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A Humorous Approach to
Junk Collecting (Hoarding)

Schar Ward

with Debra Varin



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We love our social workers!

We dedicate this book to all the great social workers we have worked with.

There were too many to be able to mention the names of all of them, but there are two who stand out above the rest.

Kay Wittgenstein and Lauren Ross.

Both work with House Calls, a charity organization we partner with in Ramsey County.

The compassion and love you show to all who reach out to you are amazing. Your work is challenging and sometimes unrewarding, yet you keep going from case to case, doing your best, and making the world a better place.

Thank You

Schar Ward & Debra Varin

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INTRODUCTION

What is a Junkaholic? Is it connected to junk yards or drinking? I can't find that word in the dictionary.

The word has nothing to do with alcohol or drinking; you won't find it in the dictionary. It's a word we created for anyone who collects too much junk.

For over forty years, our cleaning company has partnered with House Calls, a local charity that helps people in danger of losing their homes due to failed housing inspections. Working together, we save hundreds of homes every year.

We learned a lot about junk and the people that are addicted to junk. We have been yelled at, spit on, had dishes thrown at us, and propositioned.

But we have also been hugged, kissed, praised, and called angels. We help people change their lives, and the work is gratifying.

Some people use the word "Hoarder" to describe the people we help, but we don't like that term. It conjures up a picture of someone lazy, unkempt, and angry. Our clients are none of these. They had careers before they became Junkaholics. They were nurses, teachers, writers, business owners, and even politicians. But, at some point, something happened, and they lost control of their lives.

There are several treatment programs for alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, but few for Junkaholics. Junk addiction interferes with their life, their relationships, and their well-being. They must deal with the problem alone, and most are alone because they will not let anyone into their home due to their junk. Like any addict, they become estranged from their family members, increasing their loneliness and ability to get help.

When a Junkaholic's home becomes a safety concern, the city or county will intervene. The Junkaholic will be notified to clean it up by a specific date. The fire department issues orders to downsize their things by a certain percentage, usually fifty to seventy-five percent.

While working with the Junkaholics, we learned they needed help understanding the orders; they required amounts, not percentages. The orders were clearer to them if we suggested the number of pants or shirts to keep.

That is why we created the Essential Needs section of this book. The Essential Needs guide is helpful to anyone trying to downsize or move to a smaller residence.

Not everyone reading this book is a Junkaholic, but most people have junk piling up somewhere in their homes. It might be in the garage, shed, or basement. Whether you have a little or a lot, this book can help you eliminate it.

Moving from a home to an assisted living facility requires downsizing and getting rid of excess stuff. This is a big step, and there is a lot to consider. With our experience working in thousands of senior homes, we can tell you what to look for when choosing a community, how to prepare for the move, and how to make the move successful; you want to do it right.

The chapter How to Prepare to Depart offers planning for that last big move, where you can only take one box: the one you are being buried in. There is a lot more to consider than just a will.

We know the job of dejunking is difficult, so why not make it a little more fun? We add a little humor to keep you smiling as you work, along with our many made-up words. We are happy to be able to share our experiences with you.

We hope you will find this book inspiring and enjoyable: and that it sheds some light on junk addiction and its effect on people. Some information and advice might bite a little, but please don't be offended. Our only intention is to help you get more quality, love, and enjoyment in your life.

CHAPTER ONE

ADDICTED TO JUNK

Why are people addicted to junk? That is a question we have been asked frequently. Psychologists tell us that a significant loss in one's life, such as a divorce or losing a loved one, can trigger depression. The despair then causes a lack of energy to deal with life. Many of our clients are on antidepressants, so depression does play an essential role in the problem.



Some think people who live in messy houses are lazy. From our experience, we saw that clients are embarrassed and sad that they cannot remedy their situation.

Many people have no family or friends to help. Our county referrals have little money and no means of transportation. They reside in small apartments or senior living facilities and must contend with bed bugs and cockroach problems. This type of atmosphere doesn't motivate anyone to keep a spotless home.

There are many other theories, including heredity and lack of self-esteem; the individual lived during the depression and was born under the wrong zodiac sign.

Our theory is that we are taught that things make us happy. We learn to measure our self-worth by how much stuff we own. Thus, we become Junkaholics.

We tell our children that we will bring them something if they stay home while we shop. We offer to bring them souvenirs from our vacations. As they get older, we bribe them to do household chores. We teach them that holidays and birthdays are for getting and giving stuff.

We save all their school what-nots in a box to give to them later. When they become teens, we provide them with the latest fashion shoes, clothes, and backpacks. So, as you can see, we are raising the Junkaholics of tomorrow.

We know from the number of dumpsters we fill each week that we are in a junk pandemic. Contractors can't build storage units fast enough to meet the demand, and landfills are becoming overwhelmed, affecting everyone.

Junk does not discriminate. Across the board, rich or poor, ten kids or one, mansion or apartment, junk is causing strained budgets, sprained backs, chaos, and failing relationships.

We need to treat junk addiction like any other addiction. You must admit that you have a junk problem, decide to correct the problem, and seek help for the condition. As your Junkologists, we are here to guide you whether you have a staggering amount of junk or need a push to get organized. You are not alone; whatever the reason, you can improve your life. We hope this book is the catalyst to cure your junk addiction.

“You can't reach for anything new if your hands are full of yesterday's junk.”

—SCHAR WARD

Junkaholic Prayer

*God, give me the strength
to get rid of my junk*

*And give me the courage not to
collect more*

Help me to dejunk one day at a time

On my way to a better life

“The mentality of Junkaholics is wholly irrational until you understand that they are completely powerless over their addiction and unless they have structured help, they have little hope.”

—SCHAR WARD

Junkaholic Steps

1. You admit you are powerless over junk and that your life has become unmanageable.
2. You have made a searching and fearless inventory of your junk.
3. You admit that junk interferes with your relationships, energy, and finances.
4. You have decided to remove all junk from your life.
5. You have sought help to improve your junk situation.
6. Having awakened due to these steps, you will take precautions to not rejunk yourself.

“You can avoid reality, but you can’t avoid the consequences of avoiding reality.”

—SCHAR WARD

CHAPTER TWO

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

One of the symptoms of JCD (Junk Collecting Disorder) is denial. It is a disease that most people will say doesn't exist. So, diagnosing the illness can be tricky since the determination depends on the person being willing to honestly answer a series of questions about their junking patterns and attitudes.

We know it's difficult to talk about your junk habits, but you are reading this in the privacy of your home, so no one will know or judge you. Examine your body and see if you notice any of these symptoms.



- **Bloodshot eyes:** because you cannot find your bed under all the debris.
- **Bruising on your legs:** due to bumping into the stuff surrounding you.
- **Poor physical appearance:** you can't find your clean clothes under the dirty clothes.
- **Sudden weight change:** since your counters are covered with stuff, eating a candy bar is easier.
- **Strange discharge:** items are hanging out of crammed drawers.
- **Poor circulation:** due to you keeping the windows and doors covered to prevent people from seeing your mess.
- **Body odor:** because the bathtub is filled with your craft supplies.

6 Are You a Junkaholic?

You will require further evaluation if you check more than three symptoms. Please proceed to the Junkaholic Test on the next page. Remember, honesty is the key to understanding your problem.

“A Junkaholic plan for organization is to
move the stuff to a less obvious place.”

—SCHAR WARD

Junkaholic Test

1. Can you drive by a garage sale without stopping?
2. Have you ever been caught digging in an overflowing dumpster?
3. Do you steal condiments from fast food places?
4. Do you save everything made from Tinfoil?
5. Is your basement full of broken appliances?
6. Do you accumulate plastic containers?
7. Do you have drawers filled with appliance cords that don't fit anything?
8. Do you have a container of rubber bands and caps for lost pens?
9. Is your closet filled with three clothing sizes, yet you have nothing to wear?
10. Do you still have your tax returns dated thirty years ago?
11. Do you have six cups or glasses filled with pens that no longer work?
12. Do you have stacks of cookbooks, but you don't cook?

If you answered yes to even two of these questions, you are probably a Junkaholic.

Junkaholic Categories

There are several types of junk collectors. We found these to be the most prevalent.

Do you fit into any of these categories?

Food Fanatics: have several full refrigerators and food stored in some of the strangest places that are either expired or rotting.

Garage Sale Grabbers: drag home everything left over at any garage sale. Most of the items are unusable, which is why they are left over.

Craft Collectors: have multiple unfinished projects lying around and beads and buttons by the carload. They begin a project, tire of it, and start another.

Binge Buyers: stay up late at night buying unnecessary items. They have piles of new things in unopened boxes. They can't resist a sale.

Paper Packers: have mountains of paper dating back thirty years. Even disposing of an empty envelope pains them.

Clothes Clingers: have kept their clothing, their children's clothing, and their parents' clothing, and have four different sizes of everything.

Sewing Savers: quilt and make baby bibs and doll clothes. They store two hundred pounds of material along with every sewing accessory made, and their collection of patterns is awe-inspiring.

Bag Bunkers: they are addicted to bags. They have bags stored in bags. Paper bags, cloth bags, vinyl bags, and plastic bags.

Fix it Fretters: have tables without legs, lamps without electrical cords, old sewing machines, and all sorts of broken things waiting to be fixed someday.

Book Bunkers: have bookshelves filled with dusty, unused books. Most are stained and missing pages, but to them, texts are sacred. And when the shelves are filled, they begin storing them in bags and boxes.

Movie Makers: hold onto old VHS movie tapes, shredded cassettes, and old records. There is always at least one old VCR camera in case they decide to make one more movie.

Mixture Messers: tend to have a little bit of everything, food, clothing, bags, and paper.

Animal Anchors: keep multiple cats, dogs, etc. The condition of these homes can be unhealthy.

Junkaholic Levels

Just as there are many categories of junkaholics, there are also different levels. Can you identify your level? We hope you have yet to reach level four or five.

Level One: Junk is not excessive, all doors are accessible, there are no odors, and the home is considered safe and sanitary.

Level Two: Junk inhabits two or more rooms—light odors, overflowing garbage cans, and light mildew in the kitchen and bathrooms. One exit is blocked. Some pet waste and puddles. Limited evidence of housekeeping.

Level Three: One bedroom or bathroom needs to be fixed. Excessive dust. Heavily soiled food preparation area, strong odors throughout the home, excessive pets, and visible junk outdoors.

Level Four: Sewer backup, hazardous electrical wiring, flea infestation, bed bugs present, rotten food on counters, and pet damage to the home.

Level Five: Rodent infestation, kitchen, and bathrooms unusable due to junk, human and animal feces, and unworking electrical and water service.

How Bad Is It?

Have you ever wondered how much junk you have? Take a tour of your home. Don't remove anything; just make a general inventory of your possessions.

As you go from room to room, use the Junk Assessment test on the next page to see how bad or good your junk situation is.

Write in the number at the top of the column that best describes your home, then add all the numbers in all the columns and total them to get your score.

If your score is 1-20, you are close to terminal. You should read this book as quickly as possible and get to dejunking now!

Scoring 20-29 makes you a terrible example, but you have hope. You can read the book slower and begin gathering your equipment.

With a score of 30-39, you are just an average over junked American; read the book at your leisure.

A total of 40-45 Wow! Feel good about yourself but read the book in case you see yourself slipping into junkdom.

Home Junk Test

The Top Nine	You Wouldn't Believe it	Plenty	Just What I Need	Total
	1	2	5	
Magazines Newspapers				
Clothing				
Plastic Containers				
Paper – Old Files, Etc.				
Books				
Broken Appliances				
Unfinished Crafts				
Plastic Containers				
Shoes				

Total

Chronic Junkaholic

One of the signs of evolving from a mild Junkaholic to a chronic Junkaholic is when you save (or even have the urge to save) disposables.

Most disposables are designed for one-time use. With great imagination, you can eke out another short-term job for them, but they should be disposed of for your health's sake.

Let's examine your behavior. Are you:

- Saving plastic hangers from new socks?
- Tempted to reuse a tea bag?
- Fishing plastic forks out of the garbage?
- Saving empty jewelry boxes?
- Stockpiling empty cologne bottles?
- Straightening used straws?
- Hanging on to disposable razors?
- Keeping package padding?
- Saving empty jelly jars and coffee cans?
- Have a cupboard full of old margarine containers?
- Keeping and using foil pie tins until they are wrinkled beyond recognition?

If you checked three or more, you must keep reading.