



JUNK BONDS:

For decades, Ange Aguirre had trouble letting go of stuff.

[FIELD GUIDE TO THE PACK RAT]

Closet Cases

Hard times can awaken the hoarder within. **By Elizabeth Svoboda**

FOR MORE THAN 30 years, Ange Aguirre rarely got rid of anything. From elementary school on, she squirreled away her possessions in boxes and corners, and when she married at 19, she took it all with her—from the third-grade math work sheets to the letter jacket to the teddy bear she'd been given the day she was born. "I was on my high school drill team, and I had every gift that was ever given to me during a football game," says Aguirre, now 39 and living near San Diego. "I had notes people had written to me when I was in the seventh grade."

Like layers of sediment, Aguirre's belongings piled higher and higher over time, teetering in unwieldy stacks and choking off access to closet shelves. But it wasn't until she and her husband were preparing to move across the country to California that she admitted her tendency to hoard was affecting her life. "We have eight children, and things were getting crowded with their toys and belongings," she says. "I

had to do something about it." But when she resolved to tackle the mountain of stuff, her attachment to cherished items got in the way of her judgment, making it almost physically painful to trash them. "They were something to hold on to when the days got tough, to bring me back to a good time in my life."

It's the most extreme sufferers of pack-rat-itis who make headlines—like Patrice Moore, who was buried alive in his New York City apartment in 2003 when his stacks of paper and magazines collapsed on top of him. (He survived after a stint in the intensive-care unit.)

But far more common is a less severe tendency to keep too much stuff around—not so much that your *National Geographic*s reach to the ceiling but enough that you put off hosting a dinner party because you can't find the top of your dining-room table. "Hoarding runs all the way from very mild to very extreme," says Randy Frost, a psychologist at Smith College and author of *Stuff*. "The key is whether it interferes with your life." It's an inclination that can be set in motion by the kind of economic uncertainty now convulsing the country.

Why is it that some people feel such a strong urge to hold onto things, while others shred, dump, and recycle with ease? Packratting may have some genetic basis: Children and other close relatives of hoarders are more likely to be hoarders themselves. Hoarding may be linked to a sequence of genes on chromosome 14 that's also found in families with obsessive-compulsive disorder—not surprising, since a large number of OCD patients feel the urge to hoard and save. While hoarding can be a symptom of OCD, "there are a lot of people who don't have any other OCD symptoms; they're just hoarders," Frost says.

Many hoarders suffer from depression and anxiety disorders, he adds—and, feeling down can worsen a tendency to accumulate too many things. "With depression, you often see people who have clutter problems, because they don't have the energy to get rid of stuff."

Extreme pack rats also show different brain activation patterns than non-pack rats. A UCLA study showed that hoard-

Unlike minimalists, packrats tend to develop emotionally fraught attachments to the things they own.

ers had lower-than-normal baseline levels of activity in an area of the limbic system called the cingulate gyrus, suggesting a deficit in emotional self-control. Researchers believe this may help explain the decision-making, attentional, and other cognitive problems of compulsive hoarders, accounting for the problems they have in deciding what to keep and what to throw away.

What really distinguishes pack rats from minimalists, though, is their tendency to develop emotionally fraught relationships with the things they own.

While hoarding is related to compulsive shopping, an addiction to acquiring things, hoarders are distinct from mallrats in that they bond so strongly to their existing possessions. "We often see an attachment to possessions that is quite remarkable," says Frost. But this attachment isn't just a materialistic obsession with stuff for stuff's sake. "Sometimes the objects are reminders of a significant event, and contribute to the person's sense of identity."

"If a person thinks, 'Having cookbooks makes me a cook,' then getting rid of one of those cookbooks gets in the way of their definition of who they are," explains Frost. A recent study indicated that people with hoarding problems were also more likely to report feeling distanced from their parents growing up. This may explain why some people develop "possession fever" and others don't: Things can stand in for the love they lacked early in life.

Hoarded objects can also become totems that testify to the existence of a treasured relationship. Jeanne Olson, a 42-year-old blogger, found exactly that when sorting through boxes of her mother's old belongings. "There's a certain amount of, if you don't keep that tea cozy, are you rejecting her? How do

you separate the person from the stuff?"

Squirreling things away may also be symptomatic of a high level of generalized anxiety about the world—a fundamental insecurity that can be triggered by events that spin us out of control, such as an illness or job loss. "We see the objects in our home as symbols of safety and comfort," Frost says. "This tendency seems to be exaggerated in people who hoard, because they think everything they own has this power."

Conquering a hoarding problem is possible, but it's important to start slow. Many pack rats equate their possessions with everything that's good in life, says Dena Rabinowitz, a Manhattan psychologist. Going cold turkey—emptying your shelves directly into the dumpster—is

bound to lead to regret, so set concrete boundaries for yourself that will allow you to de-clutter while still honoring your attachments to a limited extent.

Instead of keeping an entire box of old college essays, choose one or two that you're most proud of and throw out the rest; rather than saving a month's worth of newspapers, clip the articles that resonate with you and put them in a folder. "People say, 'Can't I have any nostalgic objects?' Well, of course you can," says Rabinowitz. "Moderation is healthy. Excess is not. If you have a shelf of mementos, that's great, but if you have a house full of them, that's excessive. And when you have excess, each item loses its meaning." When you're truly torn about whether to keep something, Frost and Rabinowitz recommend putting it in a sealed box for six months to a year. If you don't use it during that time, you can pitch it with little regret.

After procrastinating half a lifetime on purging her excess stuff, Aguirre finally reached her breaking point last fall. She told her family to leave the house for one day and began excavating her closet. "I'd been preparing for it for a week, and I stuck to it—I reduced the number of boxes I had in there by half," she says.

"I had to completely shut off my emotions and just start tossing. There were boxes I wouldn't even let myself look inside." While the initial weed-out was painful, Aguirre says the benefits of taking the minimalist plunge are becoming more evident with time—she's got extra closet space, for one—and she doesn't miss her sloughed-off possessions. "There's not a single thing I look back on now and say, 'Oh, shoot, I needed that.'"

ELIZABETH SVOBODA is a writer in San Jose.

HOW TO CONQUER YOUR STUFF

■ **HANDLE IT ONLY ONCE.** Don't set excess items aside and tell yourself you'll deal with them later. Decide right away whether you're going to display, discard, or save—and stick to your initial decision.

■ **BRING IN AN ARBITER.** If you know your emotional attachment to your stuff is likely to get the best of you, invite an impartial friend to clean-out day to help you make tough calls.

■ **DISCARD THE ITEM, KEEP THE MEMORY.** It's easier to let go of certain items if you take digital photos of them first. Alternatively, write a journal entry about the object, or have a conversation with a friend about its significance.

Copyright of Psychology Today is the property of Sussex Publishers Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.