

Losing, Hiding or Hoarding Objects and Items

Why does it happen?

Always consider first:

Does the person have an unmet need that they are trying to communicate to you?

How the person's health could contribute to losing, hiding and/or hoarding

- Physical changes in the person's brain could result in the parts of their brain that should regulate their understanding of where items belong or what possessions they own deteriorating or no longer functioning.
- Due to the person's dementia, their short-term memory may be very limited or non-existent, therefore they lose items when they cannot recall where they put them.
- The person may have an undiagnosed health condition (physical or mental) that is causing them to express themselves in this way.
- The person may be experiencing hallucinations, paranoia or delusions as a result of their dementia or another mental health condition and may be hiding items because they believe they will be stolen.
- The person may not be able to explain that they are experiencing the side-effect(s) of medicine(s), which may lead to hiding medicines.
- The person may have undiagnosed pain that they are trying to alert you to.

How the Person's Feelings and Emotions Could Contribute to Losing, Hiding and/or Hoarding

- The person may feel a lack of control or security in their life, and may feel comforted by surrounding themselves with possessions.
- The person may be feeling frightened or threatened, maybe from memories they are recalling of an earlier part of their life that was distressing for them. Strong feelings of fear could lead to a person wanting to keep their possessions safe, potentially stripping their room of any items on display and putting these items into cupboards, drawers, bags or anywhere else that the person feels will keep those items safe.
- The person may be feeling confused, angry, upset or bored.
- The combination of the person's learning disability and their dementia may be causing them additional stress, anxiety or uncontrollable emotions that they can only express through hiding or hoarding possessions.



How the Person's Daily Life Could Contribute to Losing, Hiding and/or Hoarding

- The person's environment, even if it was previously familiar to them, may now feel hostile due to the person's dementia – For example, the person may not recognise where they are, and cannot recall where items are kept, leading to the person losing things.
- The person may become afraid of having empty spaces around them (for example if their bedroom is quite sparsely decorated/furnished) and may want to fill those spaces to feel more cosy and create a feeling of reducing the physical size of the room if that is intimidating to the person. Think of this as a sort of environmental safety blanket for the person.





How the Person's Daily Life Could Contribute to Losing, Hiding and/or Hoarding

- The person may perceive that other people are trying to take things that are important to them (for example taking clothing for washing/mending or because it needs to be replaced) and they want to hide these items to prevent them being taken.
- The person may want something belonging to someone else because it reminds them of something they owned, or they think they owned, previously.
- The person may no longer be comfortable with their routine.

Ways to Support the Person

Staff Approach

- Do not reprimand the person if they have lost or hidden something that is needed – the person may not realise that they have done something that is causing inconvenience, or the person may have a good reason for hiding something (even if you don't know what this reason is).
- Avoid getting frustrated or annoyed because you are spending time hunting for items/objects – irritation will not achieve anything and may make the person more insecure, as well as impacting upon the trust and confidence the person has in you.
- Excessively questioning the person when an item (that you think may have been lost or hidden) cannot be found is unlikely to be helpful – persistent questioning may further confuse or upset the person. Try to search for items in a logical way, involving the person if they want to be involved, and if you are able to discover regular hiding places, discreetly check these first and ensure colleagues know where these places are.
- If something is lost that the person is anxious about, reassure the person in a calm and understanding way.
- Remember that a person with dementia may still want to hide surprise items, like birthday presents for friends – ensure that you support the person to do this, knowing where those items are so that they can be brought out when needed.

Think about Unmet Needs

- How comfortable is the person? For example, are they happy in their clothing and with their personal appearance not hungry or thirsty? If the person isn't comfortable in these ways, they may try to hide or hoard clothing, cosmetics, food or drinks that they feel may alleviate the need(s) they have that aren't being met. If items like food or drinks are being hoarded, you will need to be alert to perishable items and discreetly throw away anything that is no longer consumable.
- Does the person have free access to occupation and activity – For example, is the person being supported to engage in their hobbies and interests when they want to, or access new meaningful activities that engage them physically and/or mentally to prevent boredom? Hiding and hoarding of the person's own possessions, or someone else's, may be linked to boredom because the person is trying to find something to do with their time and energy.
- Review how well you are supporting the person with their choice and control – do they have every opportunity they could have to exercise their choice and control, or are they feeling like they are having to fight for everything?
- Think about the emotional support that the person has, or might need - is there something missing that could lead the person to feel insecure? Remember that losing, hiding or hoarding can all cause emotional distress for the person - if you think the person you are supporting is experiencing emotional distress, work on a plan to alleviate this.

Understanding the Person's Health Needs

- Rule out any undiagnosed physical or mental health conditions or undiagnosed pain.
- Ensure that the person's eyesight and hearing is checked regularly.
- Review medicines regularly.
- Review the *Treatments* module in the Wellbeing for Life toolkit for ideas of non-pharmacological interventions that may help to support the person.



Changing Daily Life

- Reflect on whether the person's environment is supportive for them? Do they have access to the items they need, and freedom to do as they wish with their own possessions (provided this doesn't compromise their safety)? Sometimes restrictive practices result in a person hiding or hoarding as a way of regaining some control over their life.
- Don't automatically try to tidy the person's room if they are hoarding items that belong to them - they may want the room to remain as they have left it, and you don't need to intervene unless the person's safety is compromised or you need to find something that is missing. Don't become fixated on tidiness if what the person really needs is a little untidiness to make them feel relaxed. You may also want to explore ideas like a hoarding box, drawer or cupboard with the person. This would be a safe and recognised place for the person to put items that they want to hoard.
- If certain items cannot be lost because of their importance, ensure you have a system for keeping these items safe to avoid unnecessary upset and time spent searching for them. If items like glasses are regularly lost, keep a second pair in a safe place.

Changing Daily Life

- If the person is hiding or hoarding other housemates belongings, support the return of these items to their owners and consider substituting any items that the person has formed a strong attachment to (For example: if the person likes a particular magazine or jumper, try to give the person their own version of this).
- If lots of people are living at one address it might be helpful to have name labels in every person's possessions, if other housemates are happy with this, to enable easier and swifter returning of items.
- Is the person's hiding or hoarding related to the possessions of a particular individual, or only happening when certain staff are on duty? If it is, consider the interpersonal relationships between the person, their peers and/or staff, and think about supporting the person in a way that minimises the contact that they have with someone who they have a negative association with.
- Consider if the person's routine is contributing to why certain items are being hidden – for example, the person may be hiding something they need to go out with to avoid going out. In these circumstances, explore with the person if changing their routine would end the compulsion they feel to hide certain item(s).

Finding Patterns and Problem Solving

- Think about the circumstances that lead up to the person losing, hiding or hoarding objects or items - Is the person regularly losing a particular item? Think about how you could make this item easier to find. Is the person regularly hiding an item that belongs to them? Think about why this might be? Does the item hold a special significance? Is it being put in a particularly significant place? If having this item hidden in this place isn't a problem, support the person to continue with what they want to do. It may be a temporary habit that they have developed that gives them some familiarity and comfort. Don't look to change what the person is trying to do unless it is necessary for their safety or because the item in question is needed and cannot remain hidden.
- Understand the person and their history – by researching their life story, you may find clues to explain and/or alleviate their losing, hiding or hoarding of objects or items.
- Think about every aspect of the person's communication, not just their hiding and hoarding - there may be hints as to any unmet needs the person has from their verbal communication, body language or gestures.





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