

Inside Hoarding: What It Is, What It Isn't, and How to Help



About WIHA

- **Mission:** To improve the health and well-being of all people as we age by disseminating evidence-based programs and practices and by engaging in collaborative public health strategies in Wisconsin and beyond.
- <https://wihealthyaging.org>
- **Age Well Newsletter**



Milwaukee, WI

Beyond Overwhelmed

The Truth Behind
Hoarding Disorder



Carla Alejo, Director of Hoarding
Intervention and Treatment Program

What is Hoarding Disorder?

- Hoarding is a mental health condition brought on by different causes. Hoarding becomes a coping mechanism to deal with difficult emotions.
 - Most common way is due to trauma and unprocessed emotions
 - Autism spectrum inability to identify and process emotions
 - Can also have learned behaviors engrained by family and years of justifying beliefs.

Hoarding = Unhealthy Coping



When a life event happens long term outlooks and decision making is delayed. Only immediate tasks are tended to. This is survival mode.



Coping can take numerous forms. Some are obvious, but others are much more subtle. Virtually anything can turn into bad coping over time without balance. Coping is the only time to feel the relief of societal and life pressures.



If your coping starts to take up all your attention and time and stops you from enjoying life, then you begin to move into dangerous territory.



When you develop an obsession with anything which needs to constantly be satisfied, your coping mechanism is beginning to take over your life.

What are the indicators of Hoarding Disorder?

- 1. Excessive amount of items, which appear useless to most people.**
- 2. Rooms are significantly cluttered and the items prevent activities for which the space was designed.**
- 3. The individual feels significant despair or stress caused by the clutter.**
- 4. The person is overwhelmed and embarrassed by the clutter.**
- 5. The individual, family or community are affected by the clutter.**





The leading misconceptions and stigma?

Dirty, lazy, unintelligent, they choose to live like this, they don't try to remedy the situation or search for help. They can fix this problem alone.

What causes Hoarding Disorder?

Many different elements, Genetics, learned behaviors, co-occurring mental health issues, trauma, memory issues, attention issues, decision making.

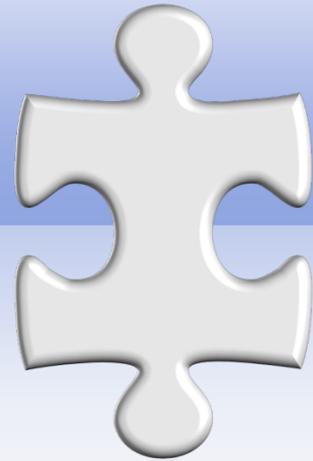
Hoarding Data

5%-7% of population
50% are at immediate risk of losing housing
20% have been evicted at least once



Emotional

- Those with hoarding disorder have issues with emotion processing.
- They can experience positive emotions by saving and acquiring and negative emotions when trying to get rid of items.
- Many have chronic and severe mental health issues that have not been addressed.



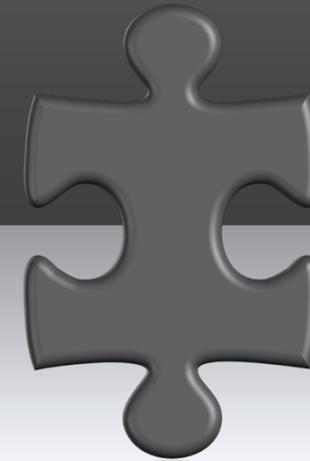
Physical

- Most people with hoarding disorder put their physical health to the wayside. Or use it as an excuse.
- The decline in physical health is then a barrier to address the hoarding.
- Their ability to maintain good physical wellbeing becomes extremely difficult.



Social/Spiritual

- Isolation for self preservation.
- Tension occurs between family and friends. Break downs in relationships makes it difficult to trust others.
- Many hoarding situations are triggered by the loss of a loved one. They question their spirituality and values.



Financial

- Majority fall into financial turmoil by spending money on unneeded items or not tending to bills.
- Some fall victim to financial abuse.
- Financial issues makes it hard to trust help.
- Most cannot afford the help that is needed to address the wellness factors.



Safety Environment

- The clutter causes many safety risks including falls, fire, and sanitary conditions.
- Community resource/agencies ultimately intervene due to unsafe conditions.

Wellness Factors affected by Hoarding

Community Impact

Public Health Issue

Hoarding is one of the leading causes of eviction besides non-payment of rent. Homelessness due to HD is costly and a continuous cycle. Housing code violations.

Housing

Hoarding issues affect not only the individual's safety but the direct health and safety risks of others. Safety issues can cost a lot to rectify and at times are life threatening.

Safety

Hoarding issues many times fall into costly legal grounds. These issues can overload systems and drain an individual's and an agency's resources.

Legal

The time and cost of hoarding to the social service system is overwhelming. Child and older adult protective services get involved due to neglect and abuse.

Social Service

Cost and time for city, state and federal housing authorities is in the millions. Repeat visits from health departments, inspectors and social service agencies add to the cost

Cost

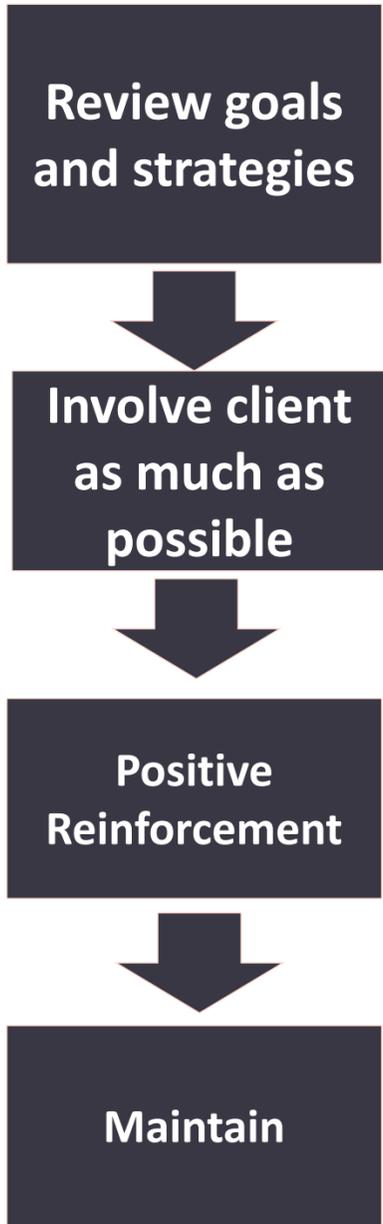
Organizations also feel the stigma of treating the disorder. The lack of professionals who are comfortable diagnosing HD creates an inability to find funding. Organizations tend to have budget driven treatments, not client driven treatments.

Treatment

Practical Advice

- Educate yourself and others on HD
- See a mental health provider and attend support groups
- Make a simple written plan, establish realistic goals
- Have a plan for barriers
- Schedule in self-care
- Work on Executive Dysfunction and decision-making skills
- Get organized.
- Put like items together
- Put items in designated area
- Create rules to what you keep. *time *amount
- Don't look back

Clean Up or Harm Reduction



Help the person keep on task to accomplish one goal at time. Set realistic timelines.

Discuss what items are garbage, recyclables and donations. Offer assistance to remove items.

Be prepared with resources.

Express concern rather than telling them what to do. Provide support and reassurance.



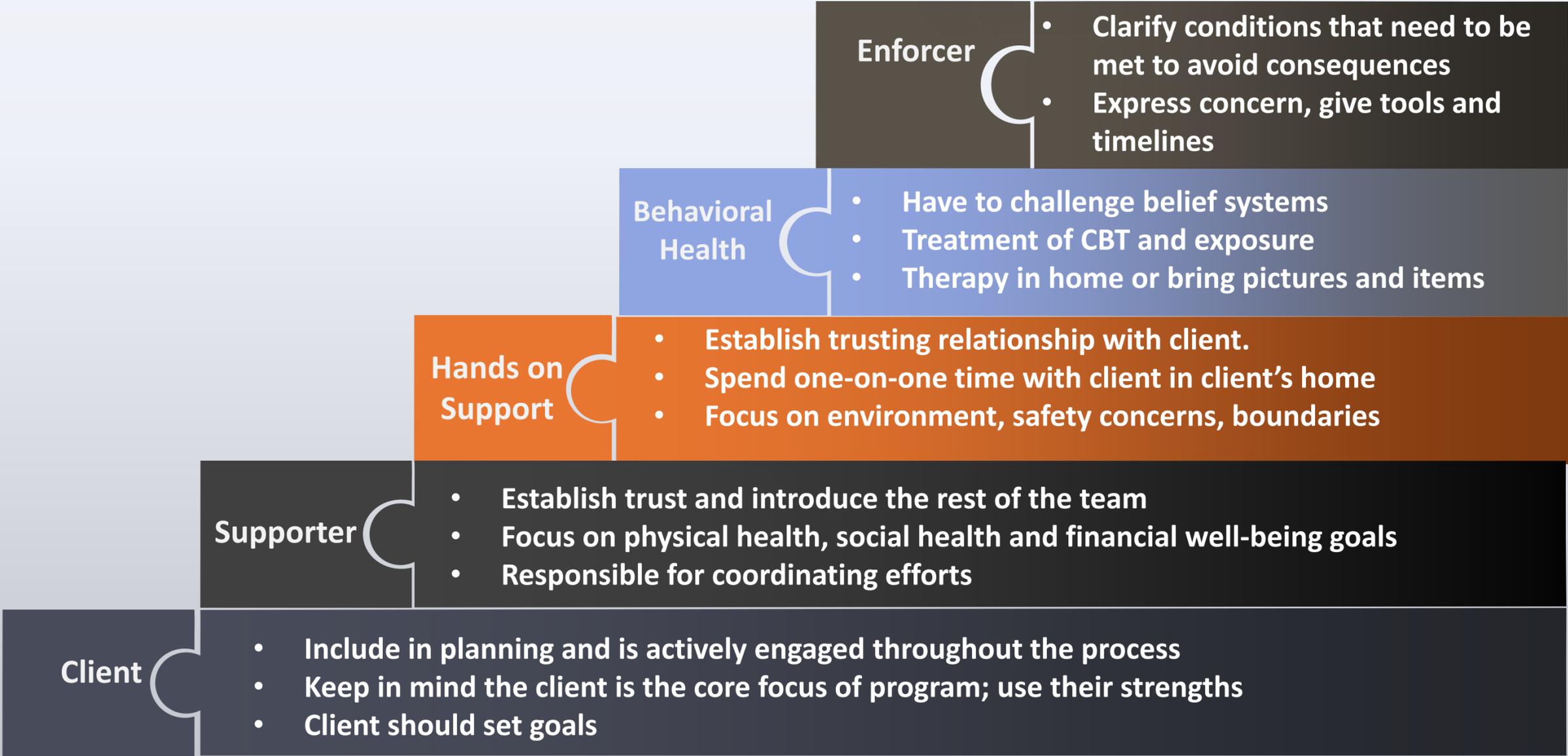
Review goals and strategies

Focus on Maintaining safety

S.P.A.C.E

Follow up

Integrated Approach



Review:

- Distinguish indicators of Hoarding Disorder and risks to the individual and community
- Establish how and why this negative coping was created
- Plan appropriate and realistic treatments. Prevent evictions, enhance safety, diminish isolation and empower mental health
- Help those with Hoarding Disorder



Resources

**Hoarding Intervention and Treatment Program
Hoarding Disorder Support Groups**

Catholic Charities

**Treatment for Hoarding Disorder: Therapist Guide
By Gail Steketee and Randy O. Frost**

Book

**Treatment for Hoarding Disorder: Workbook
By Gail Steketee and Randy O. Frost**

Workbook

**The hoarding handbook: A guide for human service professionals
By Christiana Bratiosis
Buried in Treasures by Tolin, Frost and Steketee**

Book

**www.iocdf.org
www.oup.com/ttw
Childrenofhoarders.com**

Websites



Questions:

Humans have a natural need to bond to each other, but if you can't because of trauma or isolation you will bond with something else that will give you a sense of relief.

You are never going to feel ready because ready is not a feeling it is a decision.

In order to change and grow you have to become comfortable with being uncomfortable

Feedback

- Survey upon exit of zoom
- Those who complete the eval and submit their email address will be entered to win a t-shirt!
 - Winner will be chosen by the end of this week



Next for Age Well Series

- March 10th @ 1 p.m.
- April 16th @ 11 a.m.
- May 19th @ 1 p.m.



How loneliness and social isolation increase dementia risk



Having infrequent interactions with others can produce the emotional pain of feeling lonely. Some people even feel lonely when they are around other people. While everyone enjoys solitude from time to time, feeling chronically lonely can be a risk factor for dementia. Join us with Dr. Susan McFadden for a webinar to review recent research on how loneliness and social isolation are experienced by older people and to describe creative ways local communities are responding to help older adults connect meaningfully and joyfully with others.



Susan H. McFadden PhD, former Professor of Psychology at UW Oshkosh, co-founder of Fox Valley Memory Project (FVMP)

May 19, 2026

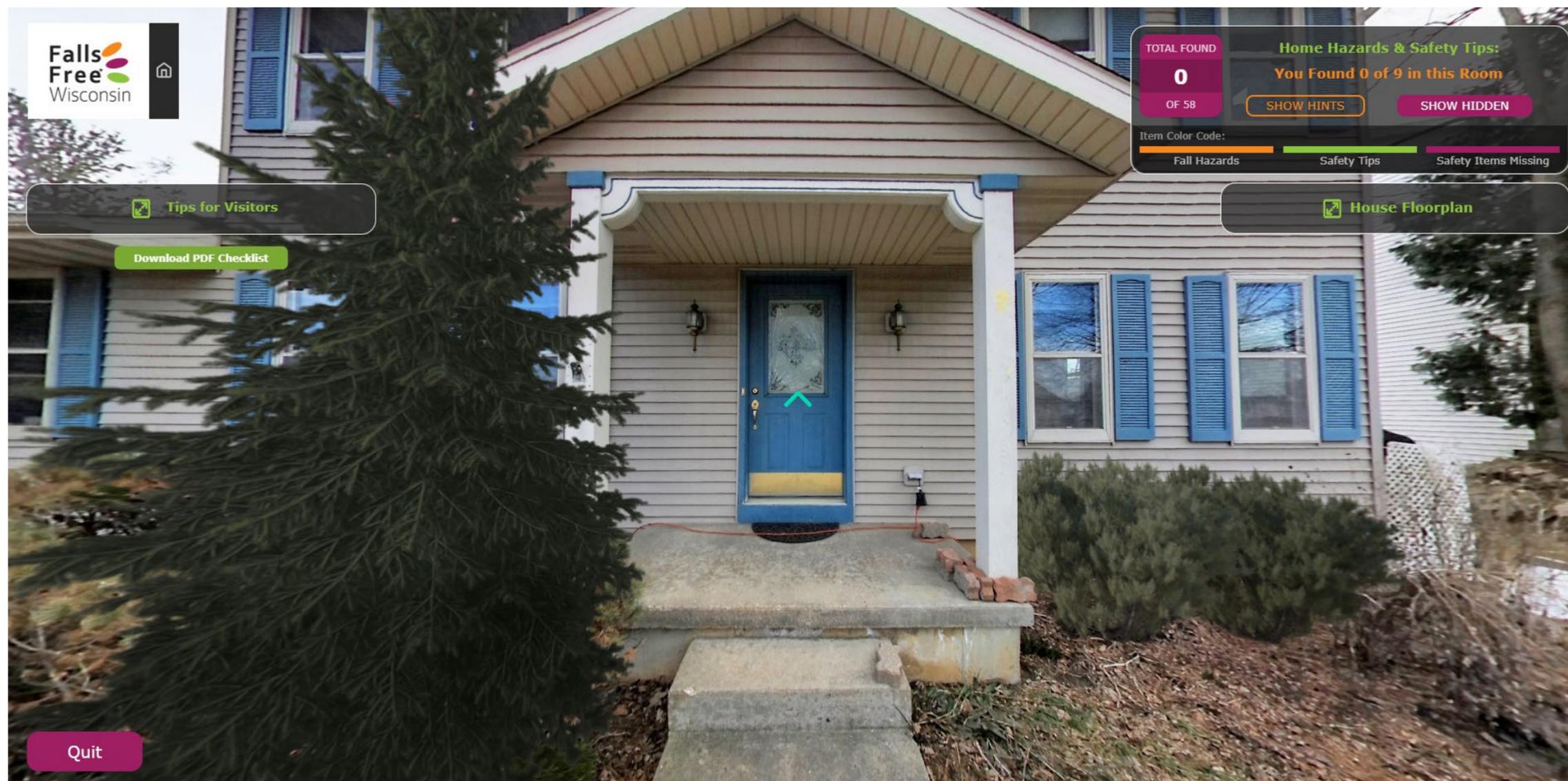
1-2pm CST

FREE WEBINAR

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