

A LINE ON LIFE

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"Deck the Malls with Bills of Folly...." *

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Many people complain about the dark side of the holiday season – the retail enterprises that urge us to buy more than we can afford. However, this overpowers **compulsive shoppers** even more, because they use buying to fill their feelings of emptiness. The holiday season is when consumers develop 40% of their annual debt.



Olivia Mellan is a recovering "shopaholic" and the author of *Overcoming Overspending* (Walker and Company, 1995). She says the winter holidays bring up old hurts, longing and sadness.

"Compulsive shoppers are trying to fill up the hole of not being good enough. I try to help people find more satisfying ways to nurture themselves."

Her book includes a quiz to see if you have a shopping problem. Here are some sample questions.

- Do you buy things you want, whether or not you can afford them at the moment?
- Do you buy things to cheer yourself up or to reward yourself?
- If you have to say no to yourself, or put off buying something you really want, do you feel intensely deprived, angry or upset?

Psychological studies estimate that compulsive buying occurs in 5-10% of our population – about 15 million shoppers in the United States. Another 40 million more struggle with overspending. Shopaholics engage in "**self-medication**." They treat their feelings of low self-esteem and depression with the temporary "*lift*" they get from shopping.

Physician Susan L. McElroy found that antidepressant drugs helped 10 of 13 shopaholics to reduce their buying behavior. In contrast, only 2 of 9 patients were helped with psychotherapy. Beside depression, compulsive buyers have more anxiety, substance abuse, binge eating and impulse-control disorders than normal buyers.

Another physician, Gary A. Christenson – in his study of 25 compulsive shoppers – found that these buying binges usually occur in episodes separated by several days to a week. The urge typically lasts for about an hour. Most fought the urge to buy, but they were unsuccessful about 75% of the time. When they had this buying urge, shoppers rarely knew what they were going to buy when they went into a store.

If you buy things you never use to get yourself "out of the dumps," you may be a shopaholic.

After the purchase, almost all reported an immediate release of tension or a feeling of gratification. This was soon followed by feelings of guilt, anger, sadness or indifference. Half of the shoppers never removed their purchases from their packages. They return the purchases or dispose of them in other ways. Large debts are typical. Christenson's patients averaged between \$5,000 and \$6,500, with some as high as \$20,000. About half of the household income goes toward paying these debts.

Mellan views this automatic cycle as an **addiction**. The addictive cycle involves the overpowering urge, feeling marvelous while buying, the regret afterward, and the urge occurring again. To her, the urge is like a "tidal wave behind my head." It keeps on until she shops.

These involuntary cycles need to be stopped. Another mode of treatment is **Debtors Anonymous** meetings. It works in the same way as Alcoholics Anonymous' 12-step program of spiritual well being. One day at a time, the program encourages members to avoid new debts, keep a spending record, and balance their expenses to fit their income. Debtors Anonymous has expanded to over 400 groups in the United States.

Shopaholics are more likely to be women. Eric Hollander, MD (Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, New York City) believes that this is because women have lower levels of a brain chemical called **serotonin**. Low levels of serotonin lead women to compulsive shopping, kleptomania (compulsive stealing) or binge eating. In men, low serotonin is more likely to lead to violent behavior and risk taking.

If men shop compulsively, it symbolizes their *ideal self* – the way they would like to be. It temporarily boosts their low self-esteem. They are more likely to buy high-tech, electronic or sports equipment. In contrast, women are more likely to buy clothes, jewelry and cosmetics.

Mental health providers have trouble classifying this disorder. It is not even listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV (DSM-IV)*. (This is the major reference source for mental disorders in the United States.) If it were listed, it could be classified as either an **obsessive-compulsive disorder** or an **impulse-control disorder**.

McElroy suggests that compulsive shopping is similar to kleptomania and binge eating. They belong to impulse-control problems under the larger spectrum of compulsive-impulsive problems. Like kleptomania, compulsive shopping is kept secret – concealed in shame and guilt. These feelings peak during the holiday buying season.

Regardless of how compulsive shopping is classified, shopaholics can replace their painful emotions with feelings of well being. This means that you need to seek the help of a good therapist. Sources are listed under "Psychologists" or "Psychotherapists" in the Yellow Pages of your phone book. So if you get an intense urge to buy, treat yourself to some help by purchasing the services of a good therapist!

Adapted from Jeannine Mjoseth's "What triggers our penchant for overzealous shopping," [*The APA Monitor*](#), December, 1997, page 13.