

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Compulsive Shopping \*

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Many people enjoy shopping. However, for some people shopping can cause problems. Imelda Marcos of the Philippines is famous for her thousands of pairs of shoes. There are also stories about Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Apparently, both of her husbands – President John F. Kennedy and Aristotle Onassis – were upset about her excessive spending on clothes. These women may have been compulsive shoppers.

**Compulsive shopping** is not a psychiatric label. It is not even mentioned in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV, 1994)* of the American Psychiatric Association. (This is the main reference for defining mental disorders in the United States.) Although this problem has generated considerable public interest, it has only recently received the attention of mental health researchers. They have found that compulsive shoppers – typically women – organize their daily schedules around a wide range of shopping episodes. Shopping could be at any type of store – a grocery, a consignment shop or a tiny boutique. Usually they do not buy large items like cars. They are more likely to buy smaller items – "*clothes, shoes, compact disks and records, jewelry, makeup and collectibles.*"

Along with his associates, Donald W. Black, a psychiatrist, studied 46 compulsive shoppers. Typically, the compulsive shopper is a 31-year-old woman, who has been shopping extravagantly for over a dozen years. Even though her behavior has caused both financial and marital problems, her attempts to stop have failed. Although no exact data is available, some surveys indicate that this behavior may affect 1-6% of the population.

Preferring to shop alone, compulsive shoppers typically make purchases for themselves. However, they may buy for others as well. The items are rarely needed. The items often accumulate, unused and often still wrapped, in the shopper's home. Other shoppers return the items, give them to friends or sell them.

Their shopping experience is arousing. (Some might even find the experience *sexually* arousing.) They describe their shopping as "*a total sensory experience.*" Various colors, sounds, lighting and smells in the stores might intensify this experience. During this "*buying spree,*" she feels good or "*high*" – even powerful. Some women indicate that the spree is caused by feelings of sadness. They see their shopping as a "*cure*" for their depressed feelings.

Their whole life seems to be wrapped up in planning to buy or the act of buying. For most, this absorption occurs throughout the year, but it may get worse on special holidays. Compulsive shoppers usually experience distress only when others complain about their behavior or when financial problems develop.

Researcher Susan McElroy lists behaviors and emotions connected with compulsive shopping:

- "*impulses or behaviors that seem irresistible, intrusive, or senseless,*
- "*spending more time shopping than intended,*
- "*emotional distress caused by their compulsions,*
- "*restricted social and occupational functioning,*
- "*lack of time for other activities, and*
- "*financial problems caused by unnecessary purchases.*"

Although the cause of this shopping is unknown, there are some theories. Some theorists perceive it as related to a **lack of a stable self-image**. The person feels empty inside and lacks self-esteem. If she lacks self-esteem, the accumulation of "*material status symbols*" may lead to a temporary feeling of being "*worthwhile*."

This behavior can also be viewed as an **obsessive-compulsive disorder**. (An **obsession** is a repeated thought that cannot be stopped voluntarily, while a **compulsion** is behavior that cannot be stopped.) The obsession is indicated by the planning and preoccupation with shopping, while the ritualized shopping behavior itself is the compulsion. This link is demonstrated in another way. Medications that are given to obsessive-compulsive persons also seem to be effective in treating compulsive shopping. If you – or someone you love – have this problem, it can be treated. Get professional help as soon as possible.

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\* Adapted from Donald W. Black's article, "Compulsive shopping treatable, once identified," *The Menninger Letter*, February, 1995, pages 4-5.