To Buy or Not to Buy: Working with Compulsive Buyers

Compulsive buying continues to come out of the closet—and with our present, unremitting economic stresses, not a moment too soon. Though it was first described by Kraepelin as far back as 1915, only in the last 25 years has it received specific and persistent inquiry. Even if the study of compulsive buying is still in relative infancy compared with its psychological siblings—alcoholism, eating disorders, or drug abuse, for example—there’s abundant evidence that the disorder poses a serious and worsening problem in the United States, Western Europe, and a growing number of other places. Affecting somewhere between 3 and 12 percent of the population, compulsive buying has significant emotional, social, occupational, and financial consequences, many of them exacerbated by our deep economic uncertainty.

The course begins with a thorough introduction to “affluenza,” or compulsive buying disorder; we explore the culture of consumption that gives rise to it and the high price of materialism. We next look at the professional unease that’s not uncommon in working with overshoppers and then focus on etiology, assessment, diagnosis, comorbidity, and the function of the disorder. We survey the forms of treatment and treatment adjuncts known to be effective, and we focus on specific tools and strategies. Finally, we take a close look at two seminal questions: What is shopping? and What are we really shopping for?

The readings for each week are listed below and will be emailed to trainees for downloading.

Educational Objectives:

In this training, you’ll learn what compulsive buying is, how our culture supports it, what forms the disorder takes, how to assess and diagnose it, and what its various functions are. Additionally, you’ll learn when intervention is necessary and what forms of effective intervention and treatment are available (whether or not you choose to do the kind of focused, structured work that’s essential for guiding recovery). You’ll be introduced to important tools, techniques, and strategies for working with compulsive buyers; and you’ll learn to find appropriate treatment resources and know when and how to suggest treatment adjuncts. Finally, you’ll deconstruct the concept of shopping in order to help clients find out what they’re really shopping for and how to get that.

Session 1: Affluenza: Introduction to Compulsive Buying Disorder

In the first session, we explore what compulsive buying is, how it differs from normal buying, and how living in a culture of consumption affects it. We’ll look at its prevalence, how it’s diagnosed, and how it comes about. We’ll look at who becomes a compulsive buyer, at the question of gender, and at whether it’s best seen as a psychiatric disorder or a search for a better self. We’ll also survey the variety of functions that it serves in the life of the compulsive buyer and touch on what’s often our professional unease when working with compulsive buying clients.
Readings:


Session 2: What Works and Why: Forms of Treatment and Treatment Adjuncts

In this session we’ll survey the various forms of treatment and treatment adjuncts that are currently being used with oversoppers. We’ll review some of the treatment research and then focus on particular tools, skills, and strategies that are known to help people with compulsive buying disorder. And finally we’ll look at the issue of how, when, and whether to integrate specific compulsive buying interventions into ongoing psychotherapy.

Readings:


Session 3: The Birdseye View: Theoretical and Technical Perspectives

This session begins with the idea that compulsive shopping is but one form of a larger constellation of behaviors that have in common an intense desire to acquire, possess, or hoard objects. We’ll touch on some of these related behaviors and explore what often leads counselors and therapists to underinquire about someone’s shopping and buying behavior. We’ll explore two very different approaches to working with overspending clients and discuss how to help clients feel motivated to do the serious work that lies ahead.


Session 4: What is shopping? What are we really shopping for?

In this final session we explore shopping as search and discovery, not necessarily related to buying or having. We stretch out the landscape of shopping beyond goods and services, into experiences and ideas and look at research that suggests that when we choose experiences over things, we’re significantly happier. We close by revisiting the idea of authentic underlying needs propelling the shopping impulse and finding a way to meet those needs in ways that enhance, rather than erode life.


