

1. Why do people shop compulsively?

There are as many reasons to overshop as there are overshoppers. Each one is a way of attempting to deal with thorny individual issues and unmet personal needs; each is based on what real overshoppers have told me over the years. Some of the most common are to soothe the self and improve a negative mood state, to counteract a negative self image and a lack of self acceptance, or to avoid dealing with something important in life. For some people, compulsive shopping is a response to stress, loss, or trauma, and an attempt to feel more in control. Sometimes people use compulsive shopping as a weapon, to express anger or seek revenge. Others shop compulsively to hold on to love, as in the compulsive gift giver, to project an image of wealth and power, to fit into our appearance-obsessed society, or because it's the lesser evil (without shopping, they might turn to something like drugs or alcohol). Finally, for some people, compulsive buying is an attempt to solve existential or spiritual dilemmas, a way to give meaning to life or to feel part of a larger whole.

2. Why are women more prone becoming "shopaholics?"

This is actually a misconception; shopping is not a woman's thing. A large-scale prevalence study, published in 2006, suggests that the truth is gender-neutral; in a random sample of over 2500 U.S. households, men and women were almost equally likely to be compulsive buyers and the results of a recent study in Britain suggest that more men than women are shopping on the internet, and coming to the internet to shop at a faster rate than women. ¶¶ Each gender applies a different calculus to the activity, though. Men adapt the activity of shopping to a work frame; women, in contrast, fit it to a leisure frame. Men and women also differ in how they shop and what they shop for, and they articulate very different attitudes about the process. Women—who tend to be other-oriented and relationship-centered—tend to buy clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics, objects related to appearance. Men—who tend to be self-oriented and activity-centered—often purchase high-tech electronic and sports equipment, primarily functional goods. The sexes not only buy different things, they relate differently to what they have. Several studies have suggested that women value more their emotional and symbolic possessions, while men favor functional and leisure items. Women also give more emotional and relationship-oriented *reasons* for valuing their possessions; men have a more functional, instrumental, activity-related rationale for their choices.

Historically, of course, shopping as we traditionally understand it—shopping for goods, shopping to buy—was one of the few areas of validation available to women, an extension of their gatherer role in primitive societies. While men went out to hunt, women concentrated on tasks and responsibilities based close to the hearth.

Over the centuries, the hunter/gatherer division of labor became value-laden, and the woman's place, now not only practically speaking but morally as well, was in the home. Carolyn Wesson, in *Women Who Shop Too Much*, describes this subjugation and the compensating mechanisms that grew up around it: "Until quite recently, women had to follow a set of rules as constricting as a whalebone corset. [They] had to go underground and express any negative feelings in acceptably feminine ways. When angry they grew quiet, withdrew sexually from the husbands, dreamed of revenge—and made clandestine trips to the local emporium"

The same tradition paints men as *consumers* and *collectors* but not *shoppers*. This sleight-of-name is personified by the commonly seen bumper sticker that reflects male acquisition: "He Who Has the Most Toys When He Dies Wins." This is the legacy of paternalism, imputing different values to two kinds of shopping, making the male action respectable and slightly refined—and not *calling* it shopping—while the female act appears self-indulgent and unimportant.

Call it what you will, the fact is that both genders are subject to serious abuses when it comes to buying behavior.

3. Is overshopping really an "addiction" or more of an emotional issue that can be resolved through personal awareness or therapy?

Our psychiatric and clinical perspectives suggest that compulsive buying could be a manifestation of four main types of psychopathology, either belonging to the obsessive-compulsive spectrum, impulsive control disorders, addictions, or depression. Those that view compulsive buying as an obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorder, point to the intrusive and uncontrollable thoughts and behaviors that are accompanied by negative mood states to buttress their argument. Others focus on the similarity between compulsive buying and impulse-control disorders or addictions and cite the three core addictive features: irresistible impulse, loss of control and continuing with excessive buying despite adverse consequences (Dittmar, 2005) which are often present in compulsive buyers. And, as far as depression is concerned, it is difficult to know whether extreme mood states are the cause or the consequence of compulsive buying. To be sure, for some individuals, shopaholic behavior is just one aspect of a generalized psychiatric impairment, whether that is related to obsessive-compulsive disorder, impulse control disorder, addiction, or depression, but for others, excessive buying does not seem to be accompanied by any associated psychiatric disorders. My experience is that almost all compulsive buyers can benefit from increased personal awareness, therapy, and/or educational coaching, all focused on the specific impulses, thoughts, feelings, underlying authentic needs and the tools, skills, and strategies that will enable them to take that increased personal awareness and use it to stop overshopping.

4. What tips can you recommend to people who consistently overshop or spend beyond their means?

1. Be a private eye around your buying behavior. **Identify the cues or triggers** that lead to overshopping or overspending, e.g. a bad day at work, a fight with a spouse, feeling lonely, bored, or in need of reward, free time, or the holidays perhaps. Look for patterns and connections. It's important to realize that shopping is an equal opportunity, all purpose mood changer, but works only temporarily. After a short while, your mood will often dip even below where it was before you shopped because now the guilt and the remorse are added to it.
2. **Look at the consequences** of your overshopping. In what areas of your life is it costing you? Financially? Emotionally? Socially? Occupationally? Spiritually?
3. **Choose** someone in your life to be a **Shopping Support Buddy** and brainstorm together about how that person will support you to stop overshopping.
4. Expect that **you may very likely feel worse before you feel better**, since the anesthetic qualities that the buying supplied are now gone.
5. **Write down everything you spend** and assign each expenditure a score, based on how necessary you deem it to be, from 0=entirely unnecessary, to 1/3=a little necessary, to 2/3=very necessary to 1, essential. At the end of the week, look at how many of your purchases you rated entirely or relatively unnecessary and then you'll see how much you could save if you were only buying things that were more necessary rather than less.
6. Make sure you **allocate some money each month for Heartsongs**, things that make your heart sing. Otherwise, you're putting yourself at risk for feelings of deprivation and a spending binge.
7. Consult one of the many online calculators that will help you to **see the high cost of credit card debt**.
8. **Take control of your cues** by avoiding them altogether, or limiting your exposure. If Bloomingdales is a cue, guess where you don't go?
9. Also **build in a pause** between your impulse to buy and your actual buying behavior. During the pause, ask yourself:
 - a. Why am I here?
 - b. How do I feel?
 - c. Do I need this?
 - d. What if I wait?
 - e. How will I pay for it?

f. Where will I put it?

10. **Use cash or a debit card**, without overdraft protection. Know what's in your checking account at all times.
11. Ask yourself: **What Am I Really Shopping For?**. What underlying emotional needs have triggered my impulse to overshop? Instead of shopping, **employ life-enhancing strategies to meet some of these authentic underlying needs**. If you shop because you're lonely, find another way to feel connected that builds self-esteem, not tears it down!

Remember: You can never get enough of what you don't really need.

12. Make a list of your best reasons to stop overshopping. Keep this **Why Not Shop?** list with you at all times.
13. **Develop some media literacy** by learning to recognize the language of persuasion and subject it to a reality test. Is happiness really just the next purchase away?
14. **Cultivate mindful awareness**. Learn to quiet your mind so you can listen within.
15. **Visualize a big green monster** on 57th Street, or wherever your particular high risk location is. If you get too close, he's going to eat you!
16. Shopping is not about *buying*, it's about *being*. Shopping is a way we search for ourselves and our place in the world. **Shop with a wide-angle lens**, and **search for** the kinds **ideas and experiences** that will cure your particular case of affluenza, luxury fever, or aspendicitis!

5. How many Americans do you think suffer from unhealthy shopping habits, and what might these habits entail? When do these habits become unhealthy?

Statistics published in the October 2006 Journal of Psychiatry tell us that about 5.8% of the U.S. population -- more than fifteen million Americans -- are compulsive buyers. A study published in the December 2008 issue of The Journal of Consumer Research suggests that compulsive buying may affect more consumers than previously demonstrated. This study suggests that as many as 8.9% of the population can be classified as compulsive buyers -- that's more than 25 million Americans.

And we're not the only ones. The overshopping demographic widens almost daily, with recent research, studies, and reports of shopping addiction published in

Canada, Mexico, Brazil, most of the countries of Western Europe, Israel, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, India, United Arab Emirates, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and now even China.

6. What does shopping addiction treatment entail? 12 steps? Debt recovery?

Compulsive shopping is a disorder that our culture has largely seen fit to smile upon. Feelings of emptiness, low self-esteem, insecurity, boredom, loneliness – or the pursuit of ideal image–can cause people to buy compulsively. But managing these feelings and mood states by buying compulsively *can have extremely serious consequences and significantly erode quality of life.*

As with most other addictive, impulse control, or compulsive disorders, there is a wide range of treatment options: **drug treatment, individual, group, and couples therapy, counseling for compulsive buying, Debtors Anonymous, and Simplicity Circles** have all been employed; however, to date, there has been very little empirical research that tests the efficacy of particular treatment options.

Psychotropic medications, including antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and opioid antagonists have been used to treat compulsive buying, with varying effectiveness.

Group therapy for compulsive buyers has been reported since the late 1980s. At least five different forms of group therapy have been utilized with this population and one of the forms, cognitive behavior therapy for compulsive buying has been shown to be helpful. My own group treatment model is an amalgam of useful techniques from psychodynamic psychotherapy, cognitive behavior therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, motivational interviewing, acceptance and commitment therapy, and mindfulness.

Couples therapy for compulsive buying is an extremely important treatment modality, because couples act as a financial unit and generally blend income as well as spending. Money issues are an intrinsic part of marriage and are often a source of intense and pervasive friction that can seep into other aspects of the relationship. Couples therapy is indicated when the compulsive spending problem can't be dealt with adequately on an individual basis.

Counseling for compulsive buying, which is part of what my particular model entails, targets the specific problem and creates an action plan to stop the behavior. Targeted counseling for this problem alters the negative actions of compulsive buying and concurrently works toward healing the underlying emotions, although less emphasis is placed on exploring the emotional significance of compulsive buying than in traditional individual psychotherapy. The major premise of

counseling for compulsive buying is the idea that insight alone will not stop the behavior. All stages in the compulsive buying cycle must be identified: the triggers, the feelings, the dysfunctional thoughts, the behaviors, the consequences of the behavior, as well as the meaning of the compulsive buying. Creating and using a spending plan is a cornerstone of compulsive buying counseling.

Debtors Anonymous (D.A.) can be a powerful tool in recovery from compulsive buying, especially for compulsive buyers who have problems with debt. D.A. sees debting as a disease similar to alcoholism that can be cured with solvency, which means abstinence from any new debt. Since individuals are trying to control their lives with addictive debting, D.A. offers a regimented program of surrender and recovery, a program with a spiritual emphasis. Individual debtors work through the steps of the program with a sponsor, a more experienced member of the group, using newly acquired tools in conjunction with the steps.

Simplicity circles can be a helpful support to compulsive buyers, although the compulsive buying problems are not dealt with as directly as in the various therapies for compulsive buying or Debtors Anonymous. What simplicity circles do have to offer is a forum: a place to gather with others to discuss personal transformation and the satisfactions of living a simpler life. The caring atmosphere and the discussion of how to create a more fulfilling life is a healthy way to meet some of the principal needs that a compulsive buyer seeks to meet in shopping.

Compulsive buying treatment is still very much in a formative stage. Society, advertising, and the media all conspire against the cultivation of true wealth, which cannot be quantified in a financial balance sheet but must instead be felt and sensed: self-esteem, family, friendships, a sense of community, health, education, creative pursuits, communion with nature. It is inner poverty, both emotional and spiritual, that is at the core of most compulsive spending. The acquisition of truth wealth is crucial to recovery. The choice of what form or forms of treatment to use with a particular person is a complex decision that goes well beyond the scope of this overview.