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Amanda: An Overshopper’s Recovery Story

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The Stopping Overshopping Group Treatment Program is a comprehensive 12-week experience that draws from psychodynamic psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, motivational interviewing, mindfulness, and acceptance and commitment therapy. This article follows one overshopper from the beginning of the group until 6 months after it ended. The article attempts to bring the structure and content of the model to life, to provide a rich sense of the group process, and to illustrate why this form of group therapy can be very effective in helping someone to stop overshopping and lead a fuller life in the process.

KEYWORDS compulsive buying, overshopping, group therapy, psychotherapy, shopaholic, shopping addiction, compulsive shopping

The following case illustration is an attempt to bring the structure and content of the Stopping Overshopping Group Treatment model (Benson & Eisenach, 2013) to life, and to provide a richer sense of the group process, and to illustrate why this form of group therapy can be very effective in helping someone stop overshopping and lead a fuller life in the process. The overshopper represented in this article, who has been briefly represented before (Benson, Peterson, Ertelt, & Arikian, 2011), has given me express permission to include her story herein. Names and details have been changed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of all persons.

It did not take a detective to figure out that the several hours Amanda spent every day shopping and thinking about shopping and the negative consequences this had on her life added up to a compulsive-buying disorder, but it happened to be her profession. Employed by the police department of a large Midwestern city, Amanda was in her mid-40s when she came to me
for help. She had been overbuying clothing as well as books and magazines for 6 long years—essentially, ever since she had begun serious weekend work on a novel. The book was to be light, a woman’s story of life in the big city. But it was slow going. Her frustrations with the writing process led her to cultivate procrastination, and eBay, with its unparalleled variety, 24/7 instant access, excellent prices, and auction-generated excitement, quickly became her procrastination method of choice.

Although her frustrations with writing precipitated Amanda’s overspending habit, they were not the only trigger. Her work with the police force was sometimes dangerous—she wore a bullet-proof vest on certain patrols—and other times, it was deadly dull. A television detective’s life is all drama and car chases; but real detectives spend hour upon hour quietly checking out false leads, searching blind alleys, and stopping fruitlessly at dead ends. Internet shopping wholly absorbed Amanda. It kept her from both worrying about the occasional risks and fretting over the endless hours of boredom.

Unlike most long-time overshoppers, Amanda had not yet found herself in debt. With a decent salary, no children, and a two-income family, she had been managing to pay for the cavalcade of packages that arrived regularly at her front door. However, the curiosity and analytic instinct that underlay her success as a detective told her several worrisome things about her own habit: “My mind isn’t focused much on my husband or our relationship; I’m lying to him about my shopping, and he’s expressing concern about my secretiveness and all the packages that arrive. And I’m dumbing myself down by my constant preoccupation with ‘stuff.’ I used to be passionate about social and environmental causes, and I’ve put all of that on the back burner.”

All of this I learned about Amanda without ever laying eyes on her—as is the case with roughly half the overshoppers I work with. She joined a 12-session telecoaching group I lead, structured along the strategic lines set out in To Buy or Not to Buy: Why We Overshop and How to Stop (Benson, 2008). In preparation for each call, members do substantial reading and introspective writing assignments in shopping journals; and between the calls, the group is in e-mail contact. Their communications with each other coalesce into an intense, powerful, and supportive gestalt.

During our third call, Amanda shared an important contour of her overshopping background, common to quite a few compulsive buyers. She had grown up comfortably, in an intact, upper middle-class family, but her parents had been Depression poor. Such parents often wish their offspring to know no want, to see abundance as an entitlement. But this can compromise the children’s development: They often do not learn to tolerate frustration or other negative feelings, or to work toward long-term goals. A particular memory of Amanda’s typified this pattern. When on one Christmas, she did not get the exact doll she coveted, her obvious disappointment evoked an extra gift from her self-deprecating mother: a paper coupon for “one more
gift.” She quickly redeemed it for the desired doll—reinforcing her notion that she could easily and almost immediately get whatever she wanted.

Decades later, Amanda shopped on the Internet daily, still believing, at some level, that she had a paper coupon redeemable for one more gift. When she first got up, she would browse on the computer on weekdays at work she would steal a few minutes for it during lunch or in the afternoon, and when she got home—always earlier than her husband—she would spend the better part of an hour on eBay. On weekends, when her novelistic hunt for words got tough—and it always seemed to—she would escape to eBay’s easier pickings. So the stream of packages continued. By this time, the garage and storage bin were crammed to the rafters with books and magazines, and Amanda’s closets, drawers, and guest room were stuffed to bursting with clothes, clothes, and more clothes. What had begun as a pleasant diversion had spiraled out of control.

The internet was not her only buying venue. The amount of brick-and-mortar shopping had been growing too. Again, seeds of her shopping problem had been planted in her past. Moving from the city to suburbia when she was 11 years old, long before Internet shopping existed, Amanda remembered wearing a princess dress to her new school that first day, her hair in long ringlets. The rest of the girls, in hip-hugger pants, stared scornfully at her, and she felt like an outcast. Before long, she had changed her look from pricey dresses, which she believed made her pretty and unusual, to designer jeans—from preppy to punk. That need to conform to fashion norms stayed with her: “I still feel badly when I’m not in sync with the fashion around me. I have to be properly color-coordinated to look acceptable.” Although a part of her realizes that she doesn’t base her interest in people on what they wear or how they look, her overshopping suggests that she does not trust others to see beyond the surface.

Because Amanda’s overshopping had not led her into debt, we focused on its other consequences. Clearly, her habit had significantly impacted the family’s physical space. But far more important was its effect on her marriage, which had taken place shortly before her first eBay purchase. Her husband’s perception of the seemingly endless stream of parcels, and her own refusal to be straight about them, were causing a good deal of marital strife. Exploring that strife during one of our calls, Amanda identified two seemingly contradictory impulses. On the one hand, overshopping was freedom from the absoluteness of wedlock, for although she felt she had made a good overall choice, a part of her balked at having locked in that choice. On the other hand, her habit masked a yearning for more emotional closeness with her husband, which was far less easily acquired than a new pair of boots.

Any habit performed compulsively—eating, not eating, having sex, shopping, drinking, or doing drugs—is at once a stimulant and an anesthetic; it is a fix so immediate that it cloaks or numbs other needs. Amanda described its kick this way: “I love the thrill of getting something for much
less than I’d pay in local stores. I get a high from shopping. My heart is pounding when I’m on the hunt.” But she had become more and more anxious about shopping’s hold on her: “I hate the control this habit has over me, and it feels like it’s getting worse. Why can’t I stop getting new things? It makes no sense. I’m out of control. I feel awful.”

She tried to stop more than once. She put herself on an Internet shopping budget—and promptly overspent it. She vowed to shop only in brick-and-mortar stores—and quickly broke the vow. She listened to a hypnosis CD and its sonorous suggestions not to Internet shop, but the effect was short-lived and held up only if she went to bed with headphones on, hardly an aphrodisiac. After a while, she grew desperate. “I keep saying, ‘this will be it,’ but I don’t stop. I’m not satisfied. I worry I’ll end up with financial problems. I’d like to feel satisfied with the things I have and save my money. I’d like to find a more productive way to reduce my dread of mental frustration. I’ve never experienced a habit I feel so powerless to control.”

When she sought therapeutic help, however, the barriers proved substantial. Sadly, compulsive buying is still “the smiled-upon addiction,” trivialized not only by the general public but also to an extent by the mental health establishment. She could not find a compulsive shopping support group in her city—or even in her state. She consulted a therapist available on her insurance plan, but Amanda experienced him as uninterested and unequipped to help her, and the therapy ended after just a few sessions.

The truth is that, although repair is generally possible for those of us with addictions, we can access it only when we are genuinely ready. Highly motivated to change and persistent to the point of doggedness, Amanda was courageous enough to look her demons straight in the eye. When I sent newsletter subscribers an e-mail announcing that a Stopping Overshopping telegroup would form shortly, Amanda signed up right away and came to the group primed for our work, filled with ideas; she had read everything relevant she could lay her hands on.

“Although I don’t smoke, I think I take an Internet shopping break the way someone else takes a cigarette break—except I don’t have to go outside to do it,” she told the group in our first session. Beginning to acknowledge how deeply she dreaded the mental and emotional frustrations of her workday job and of her weekend writing, she discovered, early on, that these negative feelings were triggering her shopping impulses. Amanda also came to see her obsessive acquisition of clothes as a resonance of other negative feelings, reinforced by our appearance-obsessed society: “If I’m wearing something I look dowdy in, that really affects me. When I wear something I look great in, I feel fantastic. I hate to admit it, but I know it’s true.”

All of this, of course, speaks to her struggle for self-acceptance. “I know I can look great in clothes,” Amanda wrote, “but my body doesn’t fit the ideal. I don’t believe I can fully love the way my body looks. More and more, I try not to focus on what I think the flaws are, and I don’t want to
pay for cosmetic procedures or have surgeries.” In our text for the group, working to counter the culture’s emphasis on model-like beauty ideals, I suggested that, instead of working endlessly to look like somebody else—or a younger, leaner, buffer, or sexier version—it is time to learn to love yourself the way you look and are. Amanda underlined the advice and scribbled in the margin, “Fat chance.” At least it was not all in caps and there was not an exclamation point in sight. I this took as a hopeful sign.

Reason is an important weapon in the struggle against addiction, so in an early session, I asked Amanda to fill out a decisional balance matrix, a simple piece of paper divided into eight boxes, in which she listed the short- and long-term benefits and short- and long-term costs of both stopping overshopping and continuing. Amanda summarized her matrix this way:

At this point, it’s scary to imagine my life without Internet overshopping. My addicted side is screaming: Don’t stop! Your life will feel flat and dull if you do. And it’s way too hard to be constantly vigilant about all this. I might have to admit that I can never again buy on the Internet, that one purchase will set the ball rolling, as it always has in the past. That turkey feels just too terrifyingly cold.

But the wiser side of me recognizes that compulsion warps everything, and I long to be free of it. If I stop overshopping, I can have a better marriage and a better opinion of myself. I’ll save time and money—quite a lot of both, I’d say. I’ll enjoy and appreciate more what I already have. And I’ll feel far less anxious, with no more need to hide, either at home or at work.

This kind of intellectual awareness gives the process of change a certain stability amid the emotional winds that buffet it. But even so, the process is a gradual and uneven one. A Chinese proverb observes, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” I embrace that wisdom, and ask each group member to commit, for each session, to a single step: to one realistic and measurable goal. Amanda’s first goal was to resist her morning eBay shopping and to notice her feelings rather than distract herself from them. To buttress her resistance, she taped the Stopping Overshopping Reminder Card, with its six simple questions—Why am I here? How do I feel? Do I need this? What if I wait? How will I pay? Where will I put it?—to her computer, where it was easy to answer them in writing. At the next session, Amanda reported on her goal.

I did it! I was really happy both that I stayed off eBay and that I could tolerate wanting to get on. The first couple of mornings were hell; it felt like I had the flu and at the same time, as though I’d become suddenly estranged from a close and delightful friend. But things got easier as the week wore on. By the last day, developing a little distance on the whole thing, my old mornings on eBay seemed faintly ridiculous. I mean,
imagine waking up, brushing your teeth, then walking out the door and into a store for a half hour of shopping!

Amanda had seen the film of *Sex and the City* with some coworkers that week and reflected on her response to it now, versus her response to the long-running television series.

I think I loved the TV version for its stories rather than its celebration of shopping gluttony. Still, I can’t help wondering if the show fed into my shopping habit. Watching it, you get the feeling that it’s fun to be frivolous. But seeing that same thing in the movie this week, I felt overstuffed, a little bit nauseated.

All of us—the other members of the group, Amanda, and I—saw this as a solid step forward.

The group seemed especially interested in those first mornings of hell. How, they wondered, could they muffle the screams of their addicted side? I recommended they read the useful collection *Hooked! Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume* (Kaza, 2005). Not only did Amanda read through *Hooked*, but she also listened to a CD on mindfulness meditation and gave us her thoughts in the next session:

Before we started this group, I always shied away from anything resembling meditation; it was connected in my head with lost weekends in bare rooms chanting unintelligible syllables. But it’s a lot simpler to get into than I thought—not something you have to change your whole way of living or thinking to do. And it’s been a revelation to me to realize that I can have uncomfortable feelings and not immediately do anything to get rid of them.

So, yes, I stayed off eBay every morning, again, this past week. I tried to stay off totally, but got on a few times in the evening, mostly to see if a pair of shoes I kept myself from bidding on 2 weeks ago had been re-listed. Luckily, they were gone! I feel more in control this week.

Amanda’s openness to new ideas was matched by her openness to new people. Her posts on the group e-mail were thoughtful, plentiful, and warm-spirited. “Since the Internet is my devil’s workshop,” she wrote, “I’ll use it as a forum to contemplate overspending while I’m trying not to do it.” In group, she was unfailingly helpful. One week, a group member had a significant overspending episode, failed to do the reading or writing assignments, and filled with shame and trepidation, came to the call 30 minutes late. Amanda lauded her bravery, implored her never again to think twice about getting on the call, and told her how important she was to the group. This marked a
turning point for the tardy group member, and it gave other group members the courage to report on their embarrassing difficulties. In a subsequent session, when Amanda flagellated herself about a slip she had had, the group rallied to her, and she was quickly able to get back on track. What goes around comes around.

Amanda overbought books and magazines along with clothes. Her respect for education and her natural curiosity helped explain some of this, but toward the middle of our sessions, Amanda remembered another piece of the puzzle. She was sharing some of her frustration about writing:

> I can’t seem to get my work to have a voice, a signature style. When I first got serious about my novel, I’d buy everything in print that looked good, skim it, and then copy sentences I liked and use them as patterns. This helped me to feel capable of more stylish writing, and I hoped it would train my brain. I’ve continued to buy whatever writing looks interesting, but I haven’t done any pattern practice in years. Why not take it up again? Getting back to it might make me happier with my writing. Certainly, it’d be a much more creative alternative than Internet shopping when I get stuck.

Finding her own creative alternatives and dovetailing them with the group work was evident the week we focused on financial fitness. Here we looked at, among other things, the prohibitively high cost of credit card debt. Amanda had no debt at all. Yet without consciously realizing how beautifully it fit into the work we were doing, she lifted her own financial fog:

> Yesterday, out of the blue, I reviewed my PayPal account history, a record of my online purchases for the past 5.5 years. I was shocked! My purchases have nearly doubled every year; and in the first 5 months of 2009, I’ve already spent almost as much as I did for the whole of last year. That punched another fist through the wall of denial! Until this weekend, I’d never ‘gotten around’ to checking what I’ve spent. I’d thought my overspending was getting worse—but I was oddly surprised to see it, unequivocal in black and white. I’m still not Internet browsing this week—what a relief! Planning my shopping trips and limiting bricks-and-mortar browsing is making a difference too.

Advancing beyond the middle of the 12-session group, Amanda was making measurable progress. “Now that I’m less gripped by shopping,” she wrote in a post, “I’m feeling more positive about everything, including my job. Being out of control and keeping secrets had weighed on me more heavily than I’d realized.” Her goal for this week was to avoid all Internet shopping, and she was prepared to achieve it. If her motivation flagged, she told us, she would remind herself that she had bought no fewer than 22 items on eBay in the 2 months before the group. She knew exactly how much this
had cost, and she had articulated to herself just how unhappy she was about it. By now, she was skilled at seeing both sides of a purchase, intricately balancing benefits against costs. “If anything calls to me,” she posted, with characteristic, wry humor, “I’ll deliberate about whether or not to buy it until I’m bored to death with the subject.” And sure enough, she did not buy so much as a stocking.

As we moved on, Amanda picked up speed. She was making the available resources her own, harnessing them, leveraging them. One exercise in particular seemed to open doors for her. I asked group members to write the eulogy they would like to have earned at the end of their lives, to iterate the self they would like to be remembered as; then I invited them to assess the distance between that person and the one they see in the mirror. “Amanda was,” she wrote, “down-to-earth, straightforward, and able to put people at ease. She was always ready to laugh at herself, always willing to address a problem head on. Passionate about the causes she believed in, she was deeply involved with family, friends, and community. At peace with her inner and outer selves, she cared far more for things of the heart and spirit than material things.” Reading this aloud on the call, recognizing the distance between her would-be doppelganger and herself, Amanda was near tears.

With her typical doggedness, however, she set about shortening that distance. An excellent technique for fostering change, and for counteracting negative messages, involves articulating aloud (preferably into a mirror) a stance of self-acceptance. I call such affirmations metta-tags, from Buddha’s word for lovingkindness. The idea is simple: You utter what you wish to be or do as if that were already accomplished. You picture it vividly, and you continue saying it until you believe it. For Amanda, by verbalizing the embrace of positive change—“I care more about my marriage than anything I could ever find on eBay”—she experienced a powerful push in the direction of her goals. In the weeks after the eulogy exercise, Amanda told herself, several times a day, “I’m rekindling my love of nature.” And she began to. The helpful post of another group member moved that process along. “Amanda,” she wrote, “I think a great goal for you would be to put away money for a laptop. It’s a twofer. You can write outdoors, in nature, and you won’t be connected to the Internet.” Amanda loved the idea. “Three thanks,” she posted back, “for the laptop suggestion: for the two-birds-with-one-stone idea and for suggesting I save toward it rather than run right out and buy it.” And she added this to the group: “You all picked up on my need to spend time in the sun, so this week I’ll try an experiment. I’ll get out for a minimum of half an hour every day and see if it makes any difference.” She did … and it did.

A couple of weeks later, she took a mini-vacation to visit one of her sisters; her parents were flying in as well. Such gatherings always involved movies and malls, and Amanda was keenly aware of the shopping risks. But
she armed herself with the Reminder Card, buffed up a few of the other techniques we practiced to keep temptation at arm’s length, and reread her own eulogy: “deeply involved with family… she cared far more for things of the heart and spirit than material things.” And during this vacation, aligning her actions with her values, she lavished all her attentions on her family, not on objects. When she returned to the group, delighted but a little stunned at her success, she said simply, “I had a lot more reasons to stay on the wagon this time.”

This success was one of several she could now look back on. She had spent only $33 on Internet shopping the previous month—a record low. And she was making real progress with her writing. One of the metta-tags she used regularly was, “I write easily; ideas come to me in a flash”—and her work was beginning to actualize! Most important of all was a change in outlook. Earlier, she had been anxious and negative, worrying about the worst and expecting it. “Now,” she said, “the glass tends to look at least half full.”

Of course, there were slips. One week, Amanda bought several becoming outfits for ice skating, an activity she enjoyed with her husband. It was overspending, and she knew it. Instead of precipitating an all-out spree, however—which can easily happen once you step across the line of disciplined self-denial—the event sobered her. “It’s not a bad thing to look good in clothes,” she wrote, “but I want to be in control.” So she set herself—and achieved—a goal of buying no clothes at all the following week.

Sometime later, after an argument with her husband, she got on the Internet “in a fog” and bought $75 of election souvenirs. “It was almost the end of the month,” she posted:

I’d bought hardly anything in weeks. I told myself:
You’ve been so good, this shopping thing isn’t really a problem for you anymore. You can easily afford whatever you’ll spend. You don’t need to scrutinize each purchase.’ Afterwards, I realized that this was exactly the time to scrutinize, to use the Reminder Card and other tools we’ve acquired. If I had, I’d have recognized what was triggering my urge and might just have had a good cry. That’s what would have felt right.

She also noted, wisely sidestepping the pitfall of absoluteness, that “my shopping goal was too strict. It’s OK to shop so long as it’s the result of a considered decision. I want to do mindful shopping, not no shopping.” And that’s where Amanda stood as we neared the end of the group. She was solidly controlling her shopping, not catastrophizing the occasional slip, and holding to an even, mindful course. In the penultimate session, she acknowledged, “I’m pretty much in control of the Internet now, but I’m still in danger of overspending in stores and overspending on cosmetics.”
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in point: “I’m considering getting Botox for my between-the-brow frowned lines,” she told us. “I’ve done it before, about a year and a half ago; since then, I’ve been living with the lines. I hate to spend money on them, but I’m thinking about it.” A group member asked her, “How do you think you’ll decide?” Amanda considered for a moment, then offered a firm, promising reply. “I’ll make a decisional balance matrix,” she said. “And I want to look back through Hooked. And I want to consider it in the context of my monthly savings goals.” With this thoughtful approach to a secondary overshopping danger, Amanda illustrated a common trajectory: Once the most pressing overshopping issue improves, you gain the confidence to tackle the next one.

In our final session, Amanda reported that she had not bought anything on the Internet since the election souvenirs. It was almost, she said, “like back in 2002, when shopping wasn’t a big deal.” She identified the most critical single agent of this change as the recognition “that my shopping behavior was not congruent with my values.” To her considerable surprise, it was two unfamiliar avenues—the eulogy exercise and meditation—that had gotten her there.

In a follow-up 6 months later, Amanda added this: “Getting control of the shopping thing has taken a huge weight off my shoulders, a load I didn’t realize I’d been carrying. I’m much less harried and hassled now, whether at work or in my writing. And I’ve made some important attitude adjustments. I’m happier in my job and I’m happier at home. I’ve opened up to my husband about what I think is missing between us and how I want to go about improving our connection. I’m still tweaking the novel, but it’s pretty much finished. My plan is to find an agent after the New Year.”

Life is about the journey, not the destination, and Amanda’s journey is ongoing. But her progress during the nearly 2 years since our group work began is impressive. She internalized a truth that every overshopper must learn—that you can never get enough of what you do not really need. She has replaced the compulsive acquisition of clothes and books with a more fulfilling quest. Working to deepen her marriage and hammering her book into shape, Amanda is meeting her life at the crossroads and directing her next steps by putting her best foot forward, not the one clad in expensive new shoes.

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