

When shopping becomes a disorder

Toronto, ON (Dec. 20, 2010) – At this time of year, frenzied holiday shopping is a staple, but when does it become a problem?

“For a compulsive shopper, there are certain higher risk times for behaviours to get out of control... Christmas is definitely one of those times. Knowing and preparing for this in advance can help, if one is prone,” says Dr. Peggy Richter, director of the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and related disorders clinic at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre.

Shopping is, for most people, pleasurable. There are many references to the phrase “retail therapy” and quick pick me ups are common for both men and women.

“The problem is when it becomes excessive and one starts to develop buyers remorse,” says Dr. Richter, also an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at University of Toronto. “With our consumer driven society, it’s difficult to separate how much is driven by actual psychiatric illness versus what is a social push to buy more and more. Some people may be trying to fill a void, but for others it could just be the pleasure of walking through stores or finding just the right thing. It’s not about how much you spend necessarily... one can be a compulsive shopper at the dollar store.”

The following are hints as to when it may become a problem:

- Spending too much money, accumulating significant debts over time and problems meeting monthly expenses
- Making shopping a priority over other things you consider good for you, like social activities and exercise
- Building shopping time into your day; something you have to plan just to do it, rather than shopping because you need something
- When loved ones say it’s a problem

Dr. Richter can speak to what people can do, such as:

- Identify patterns in your behavior and try to change them
- Know high risk times if you are prone to this and prepare yourself
- Shop with a list, and shop only with cash
- Target underlying stress such as lack of sleep, family issues, etc.; instead do things like exercise, sleep more, spend time with people you enjoy
- Don’t shop unless you really need something
- See a psychologist or psychiatrist who has some familiarity with this to help target patterns of thinking (distortions in what gives you pleasure)
- For severe cases, medication is also available

There has been a burgeoning interest in compulsive buying over the past decade; part of this is seeing compulsive shopping as part of the spectrum of obsessive compulsive disorders. Currently, compulsive buying isn’t a named disorder however, there has been much written with proposed criteria to say someone has this condition and based on that, professionals do often diagnose it. As well, there is now a proposal in upcoming psychiatry literature to make it a formal diagnosis.

One of the key brain transmitters, dopamine, is an important substance to reward systems in the brain, so it may be that for people prone to this, there could be a higher release of dopamine. American studies cite about six per cent of their population are compulsive shoppers; there are no reliable Canadian studies to indicate its prevalence.

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