7 Signs of a Shopping Addiction

by ERIC PATTERSON

Spending Frivolously? You May Have a Shopping Addiction

Addictions are dangerous. They usually start small before growing and festering into something larger and more hazardous. Given enough time, addictions can negatively impact every aspect of your life.

When people think about addictions, they usually imagine someone abusing alcohol, illicit drugs, or even prescription medications. In reality, addictions and addictive behaviors can form around a wide range of interests and actions. Even simple, everyday activities like shopping can progress and turn into a shopping addiction.

Defining Shopping Addiction and What Causes Compulsive Shopping

Finding a unified understanding of shopping addiction is tricky because the condition is not yet officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). This group maintains a comprehensive record of all accepted mental health conditions called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).

Shopping addiction is not listed in the DSM-5. Currently, the only addiction listed in the text NOT related to a substance of abuse is gambling disorder.

Even though this might seem like an unwillingness to note the problematic nature of shopping addictions, it is a positive step towards acknowledging that people's addictions can form from common behaviors.

Since there is not universal acceptance of shopping addiction, you may encounter various terms including:

- Shopping addiction
- Compulsive buying disorder
- Compulsive shopping
- Compulsive spending disorder

Someone dealing with the condition may be referred to as a "shopaholic."

Despite naming differences, shopping addiction will involve an obsessive focus on shopping or buying things, and an uncontrollable need to make purchases, even when doing so could create unwanted issues.

Although shopping addiction does not make its way into the official DSM-5 list, the condition affects many in the U.S. and across the world. Estimates indicate that between 2 percent and 16 percent of the general population have some issues with a shopping addiction. These numbers vary because of the uncertain guidelines researchers use in their surveys.

Signs of Shopping Addiction

Although shopping addiction will have many unique traits compared to substance use addictions, there will be many overlapping qualities. General signs of addiction include:

- Shopping more often or spending tremendous amounts of money than intended.
- Seeing the need to cut back or reduce shopping, but your attempts are unsuccessful.
- When you are not shopping, you feel a strong desire to be shopping.
- Shopping and overspending negatively impact your ability to perform your regular duties at home, work, or school.
- Continuing to shop even though it is damaging your relationships with family and friends.
- Devoting more time to shopping and spending less time engaging in recreational or social activities.
- Placing a greater focus on having money and getting more money to fund your shopping habits.

To gather more information about your shopping habits, you can ask yourself questions like:

- Do I shop because I am bored?
- Do I buy many useless items or things I don't need?
- Am I in incredible debt because of shopping?
- Do I shop to make myself feel better?
- Am I more interested in the act of buying something than actually using it?
- Do my friends and family always tell me to stop shopping or get angry with me when I shop?

Remember, not every item from the lists above will apply to you or your relationship with shopping. Having only one or two signs of addiction will indicate a problem with shopping.

Avoid Denial

Another important consideration when reviewing the lists is the notion you may minimize or ignore specific behaviors related to shopping. You may deny that anything is wrong, and the other people in your life are the ones with issues.

This reaction is understandable but problematic.

For a more honest view of your shopping tendencies, consult with trusted supports in your life. By asking for their opinions regarding your shopping, you can gain a better insight into the quantity and severity of your symptoms.

Shopping Addiction, Mania, or Kleptomania

With any mental health concern, it is critical to accurately diagnosis and identifies the issue. Shopping addiction can be confused with other mental health conditions, which can lead to misdiagnosis and time wasted with inappropriate treatments.

The first condition mistaken for shopping addiction is mania. Mania or hypomania are parts of bipolar disorder, respectively.

During a manic or hypomanic episode, the individual will have high levels of energy, a decreased need for sleep, and a euphoric or irritable mood. People in the midst of these episodes also are likely to engage in risky behaviors like overspending money.

The excessive shopping will only take place during a manic or hypomanic episode, though, and these only last for about a week at a time. If the shopping is more persistent, it probably isn't bipolar-related.

The second mistaken condition is kleptomania. Kleptomania is an impulse-control disorder where the individual is compelled to steal merchandise from stores, even with the risk of being caught.

The prominent difference between a shopping addiction and kleptomania is the person with kleptomania does not

pay for any of these items. The act is related to the thrill of stealing, not the gratification of making a purchase.

Shopping as a Healthy Coping Skill

Indeed, not all shopping is wrong or problematic. Shopping is a perfectly normal and healthy coping skill enjoyed by many.

A coping skill is a behavior or thought that helps change your feelings from bad to good. All people have coping skills that range from excellent to poor.

So-called retail therapy is a fine coping skill as people can feel excitement and satisfaction from making a well-deserved purchase. Your spending and shopping time are not excessive, so the behavior continues to be positive.

Even better, shopping can become a social activity where you make plans, leave your home, and gather with friends or family. Maybe you decide to meet up for lunch, do some shopping, and share your thoughts and feelings. Here, the situation is less about the shopping and more about the socialization.

Positive coping skills are easy to identify because they are based on deferred gratification, which means that they can make you feel good now and feel good in the future. Shopping as a positive coping skill is a win/ win arrangement.

Shopping as an Unhealthy Coping Skill

Every positive, healthy coping skill can become unhealthy and harmful when taken to an extreme. Maybe shopping was once a great way to cope, but now things are changing.

You find yourself shopping more often, spending more money, meeting with friends less, and keeping to yourself more. Rather than buying at retail locations, you are continually looking at online shops obsessively scanning for the best deals.

Even though you used to engage in many coping skills to manage your feelings, you are only using shopping now. You are buying so many items, when they are delivered to the house, you have no memory of making the purchase and no interest in keeping the items.

Here, the positive coping skill of shopping has clearly crossed the line into a negative coping skill. Rather than shopping making you feel good in the short-term and the long-term, it is creating a strong but short “high” feeling followed by a longer period of shame and guilt.

With time, the high gets less intense, so you need to shop more to maintain the same level of satisfaction from the act. Your brain develops a tolerance to shopping just like someone develops a tolerance to alcohol.

Healthy coping skills are based on deferred gratification, but unhealthy coping skills are based on instant gratification. Negative copings skills are usually the easy option but never the best option.

The Addiction Cycle

Shopping addiction is a condition that usually begins on a small scale and develops into a genuine concern. Addictions grow because of the addiction cycle.

With shopping addiction, the cycle may look like this:

- Feel any number of unwanted emotions like:
    - Sadness/depression
    - Anger

    - Confusion
    - Anxiety
- Look for immediate relief because your feelings are uncomfortable
- Quickly process your coping skills and decide that shopping is the easiest/quickest option
- Shop to achieve some level of symptom relief
- Begin to feel guilty, ashamed, regretful, or embarrassed about spending that money
- These unwanted feelings circle back to the unwanted feelings from the first step
- The cycle repeats

Undesired Outcomes of Shopping Addiction

Like other addictions, shopping addiction will drastically impact each facet of your life and functioning. Given enough time, your addiction will continue to grow into an unmanageable monster.

Addictive substances like heroin or alcohol can impact your physical health while a shopping addiction with only affects your mental and social health directly. This does not mean your physical health is safe, though.

People with shopping addictions may focus less on self-care behaviors like eating well, exercising and getting restful sleep, which can lead to unwanted physical health complications. Just because you cannot die from a shopping overdose does not make it a safe addiction.

How to Overcome Shopping Addiction

Before saying more about available treatments for shopping addiction, there is some bad news to discuss.

Since shopping addiction is not a recognized mental health disorder, it is extremely unlikely you can find any insurance providers to pay for treatment. Any cost incurred from professional addiction treatments will have to be paid by you.

Don’t worry, though. Many providers can offer payment options to fit your budget including interest-free financing, sliding scales, and scholarships to help defer the cost of treatment.

Now for the good news: There are many helpful treatments for shopping addiction. Better yet, you can complete a lot of treatments at home with no or little cost.

Inpatient/Residential or Outpatient

Before you decide on any treatments, it is essential that you have a period of honest reflection where you acknowledge the true impact of shopping addiction in your life.

If you are completely powerless to stop, or even manage your addiction, trying at-home remedies will only result in failure, disappointment, and frustration. These people may require intense, inpatient/residential addiction treatments that involve living in the treatment center for a set duration.

People with less intense symptoms will require less intense treatments including outpatient care, which involves visiting a facility for daily, weekly, or monthly appointments to combat symptoms of shopping addiction.

Depending on your needs, individual, shopaholics anonymous or a support group, and family sessions can be just one hour per month or many hours each day.

Manage with Moderation

Shopping addiction poses a unique challenge compared to addictions involving alcohol and other drugs. With substance addictions, your goal is to end all use and begin a substance-free lifestyle.

This type of addiction is different because shopping is a necessary part of everyday life. Moderation, rather than abstinence, is the goal.

Target the Root

People interested in curbing their shopping addiction or compulsive spending habits might target the shopping behaviors directly to improve their condition. Though it makes sense to keep yourself from shopping, this direction could be futile, since the cycle of addiction does not begin with the behavior. It begins with the unwanted feelings.

Any level of shopping addiction treatment will focus on these feelings primarily to understand the origins of the shopping addiction. If these feelings can be managed with healthy coping skills, there will be no need to engage in unhealthy skills like shopping.

To start the process at home, ask yourself:

- How do I feel when I'm not shopping?
- How long have I felt this way?
- What makes my feelings more intense or frequent?
- Are their activities, people, or places that make me feel better or worse?

By answering these questions, you might learn about an underlying problem like depression or anxiety that fuels the need to shop in uncontrollable ways. This outlook means you can improve the shopping addiction by treating the underlying problem directly.

Finding Friendships

Rebuilding your social connections is another useful tool to lessen your shopping addiction.

You probably spent extensive periods lying to and isolating from your support system, which only breeds more shame and guilt. Now is the time to establish new and reconstruct your old networks.

Spending time with trusted friends is always a positive coping skill. Choose this as the time to end the lies and deception. Let your friends know what has been happening and how they can help. There is no need to challenge face addiction alone.

Medications

There are no medications prescribed specifically for shopping addiction, but you might find a prescription medication designed to address the underlying issue can decrease in the shopping.

Shopping addiction is a problem that continues to be misunderstood and too often ignored. By learning about the condition and seeking the best treatment for your symptoms, you can find relief and return to a life free from addiction.