



Addicted to Shopping

Signs you may be addicted to shopping

Being a shopaholic can mean more than just a maxed out credit card. It can cause massive emotional distress – and it's on the rise.

Most of us can admit to the odd impulse buy.

But for some people, buying things they don't need or can't really afford is a regular occurrence – and the consequences can be crippling.

As well as major financial cost, excessive buying can lead to depression and guilt, relationship problems and even legal issues.

"We know of cases that have been associated with ... suicide, people ended up in jail, multiple cases where there's been marriage breakdown," Flinders University researcher and psychologist Mike Kyrios says.

"It is a very serious and very understudied and under-appreciated disorder."

At what point does excessive shopping become a real problem?

While compulsive buying-shopping disorder was first described more than 100 years ago, a team of international experts including Professor Kyrios only recently developed a diagnostic framework for the condition.

Key features of compulsive buying-shopping disorder include:

- Excessive purchasing of items without using them for their intended purpose.
- Diminished control over buying or shopping.
- Buying or shopping to regulate internal states such as generating positive emotions or relieving negative mood.

Is compulsive buying a mental health disorder?

Yes, say Professor Kyrios and his colleagues.



“There are psychological issues around emotional deprivation, low self-esteem, personality, excitement seeking, inability to tolerate negative feelings, need for distraction, need to fill an inner void, emptiness or longing inside, dependency on reward, perfectionism, the need to control,” he says.

Other research suggests compulsive buying has psychiatric links with depression, impulse control disorders, eating disorders, alcohol and nicotine dependency, and anxiety.

“We think compulsive buying – because of the cravings, the highs, the other similarities in terms of the impulsivity – is very similar to other behavioural addictions such as gambling, OCD and hoarding,” Professor Kyrios says.

How common is shopping addiction?

Studies suggest compulsive buying impacts around 5 per cent of the population in developed economies – but that figure is likely to rise, Professor Kyrios says.

“In the past, to go shopping the shops had to be open,” he says.

“The internet allows you to shop online at night when your ability to control your thinking and your decision making might be compromised, and a lot of people will have had a few drinks.”

How to spot signs your shopping is out of control

Compulsive shopping support group leader Carol Martyn says common behaviours reported by her clients include:

- Hiding purchases/receipts or bank accounts.
- Downplaying purchases, for example “oh, this was on sale”, “I’ve always had this (item) in my wardrobe”.
- Pre-occupation of thoughts (“if only I have X I’ll feel better/smarter/happier”).
- Justifying behaviour (“this is a treat, I deserve this”).
- Replacing one addiction with another, for example people abstaining from drinking may switch to shopping.
- Shopping to feel good.
- Keeping up appearances; desire to present certain image to others.
- Revenge shopping (for example, after an argument with a partner).
- Shopping to please others (gift giving to have someone like them).



How can compulsive shopping be managed or treated?

Carol recommends seeking help from a psychologist or counsellor who specialises in addictive behaviour, as well as a financial counsellor.

Call Lifeskills Australia to make an appointment with our Addiction Counsellor and Financial Counsellor – 1800 870 080

Strategies to help control spending include:

- Unsubscribing from emails that trigger the urge to spend.
- Remove credit card details online.
- Keep a shopping diary to track purchases.
- Remove devices from bedroom if online shopping happens at night.
- Avoid going online at night, particularly after drinking.
- Develop healthier ways to handle negative emotion such as mindfulness exercises.
- Make a list before you go to the store.