Dear Alice,

My mother is addicted to TV home shopping. Are there any sites on the web that would provide some information on the diagnosis of this type of addiction?

Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Billboards, commercials, and on-line banners all invite us to spend money on things we probably don't really need. It would seem our society is filled with shopaholics - people shopping 'til they drop and having a great time doing it. While many people are able to manage their consumer impulses in a healthy way, there are some, like your mother, who are actually addicted to shopping.

Shopping addiction is also known as compulsive shopping, compulsive buying, or compulsive spending, and this condition also has a scientific term: oniomania. It has historically been overlooked as a true disorder (it's not currently listed as one in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)). Some estimate that about six to seven percent of the population compulsively buys. Symptoms of this behavior tend to start between the ages of 20 and 30, but often aren't identified as compulsive buying until later. There are still questions about how to classify people who shop and buy excessively - whether the behavior is a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or an impulse-control disorder, like binge eating disorder or kleptomania.

In any case, there are a number of signs to look out for in identifying whether or not your mother truly is having trouble controlling her TV shopping:

- Does she experience a sense of excitement and an elevated mood while shopping?
- Do people close to her express concern for the amount of time she spends shopping, or the amount of money she spends?
- Does she find herself shopping, even though she doesn't want to or has vowed not to?
- Does her buying cause debt or financial difficulties?
Compulsive shoppers usually experience a feeling of exhilaration, even euphoria, while shopping, and followed by guilt, anger, or sadness. These emotions are also often marked by negative social, work-related, and/or financial issues. Items purchased by compulsive buyers are often left in their original packaging, unused, piling up in closets and other hidden corners. Some perpetually return items or get rid of them in some other way. Many times, the buyer in question will report more positive feelings with the buying behavior itself rather than the actual item purchased.

It has also been found that compulsive shopping does not typically a singular diagnosis; it's most commonly associated with anxiety and depression. Cognitive behavioral therapy, where issues with self-regulation and depression can be addressed at the same time as behavior modification, has shown the most promise as far as treatments are concerned. If your mother continually browses the merchandise on TV, but doesn't actually buy that much, there may be some other explanations. She may be avoiding tasks, feelings, or responsibilities that she would rather not attend to, or may be seeking a sense of companionship if she spends long hours alone all the time.

Consider talking with your mother about your concerns. Tell her what you've noticed, and why it worries you. For example, "Mom, I've noticed you've ordered a lot of gadgets on TV lately. I'm worried because I know you have a limited budget, and you seem to be having difficulty managing your money." It's certainly possible that your mother will deny shopping excessively. Try to be sensitive to the fact that she probably feels embarrassed, and perhaps guilty, about her behavior. Continue to offer support by checking out resources and helping her find assistance. You may want to suggest some self-help strategies, such as getting involved with other activities, limiting shopping only when with others and/or only taking a limited amount of funds, or getting rid of all credit cards except for one which is only to be used for emergencies.

You and your mother are more likely to find help in the form of in-person assistance than on the Internet. There are self-help groups all over the country for compulsive shoppers, as well as therapists and counselors who can help. Consider speaking with a health care provider about a referral, or try the American Psychological Association [2], American Psychiatric Association [3], National Association of Social Workers, Inc. [4], university hospital or community mental health clinics, or sliding scale not-for-profit therapy centers. You might also contact an organization like Debtors Anonymous [5]. If your mother's shopping has caused severe credit debt or other financial difficulties, contacting an organization with professional financial counselors who can help her develop a plan for paying back the money she owes might prove helpful.

Best of luck to you,

Alice!

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