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,

Flashy billboards, catchy commercials, and online ads are designed to ignite a desire to want items that often aren't needed. While many people are able to manage their consumer impulses in a financially stable and healthy way, there are some people, such as your mother, who may shop compulsively. The scientific term oniomania describes the behaviors of compulsive shopping, compulsive buying, or compulsive spending. In the clinical setting, health care providers refer to this condition as a compulsive buying disorder (CBD), although it’s not currently listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). There are still questions about how to classify people who shop and buy excessively — as the behavior could be a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or an impulse-control disorder, such as binge eating disorder or kleptomania. However, there are resources and treatments you might explore if your mom is agreeable to seeking them out.

Compulsive shoppers usually experience a feeling of exhilaration and even euphoria while shopping but are quick to experience guilt, anger, or sadness after they’ve spent the money. Many times, the buyer in question will report more positive feelings with the buying process itself rather than the actual item purchased. These emotions may be marked by negative social, work-related, or financial issues as well. Items purchased by compulsive buyers are often left in their original packaging, unused, and piled up hidden areas of the home, such as closets. Some compulsive buyers may perpetually return items or get rid of them in some other way.

Researchers have identified four phases or steps common to those living with CBD. The first begins with the anticipation of shopping. This stage is characterized by intense preoccupations with shopping or acquiring a specific item. Next is preparation, where the person may plan out
how to acquire the item (what credit card to use, where to buy the item, what to wear to the store, etc.). The third step is shopping or the period of accumulation, when they start acquiring the items in an online shopping cart or physical cart in a store. During the third phase, the person is most likely to experience the feelings of euphoria or excitement. The fourth and final step is the actual purchase of the item(s). This marks a moment where the buyer may start to experience feelings of guilt and disappointment. It’s possible your mother has her own pattern of behaviors she usually follows, but this information may aid in findings ways to help your mother work through her buying habits.

If you’re unsure about whether your mother truly is having trouble controlling her shopping, there are a number of questions you can ask yourself:

- 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 to stop?
- Does her buying cause debt or financial difficulties?

It’s also possible that there may be some other underlying causes of your mother’s excessive shopping. 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. It’s worth noting that individuals with CBD often meet the DSM-5 criteria for other disorders such as mood, anxiety, substance use, eating, and impulse control disorders. Therefore, it’s key that CBD isn’t looked at as a singular diagnosis, but rather a piece of a puzzle specific to each individual. When it comes to treatment, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has shown the most promise in helping individuals with CBD. The use of medications, such as antidepressants, may be introduced alongside the CBT to help with the co-morbid disorders or simply address the compulsive buying behaviors.

To start off, you may consider talking with your mother about your concerns. You could start by telling her what you’ve noticed, and why it worries you. It's certainly possible that your mother will deny shopping excessively or not see it as a problem. You can continue to offer support by checking out resources and helping her find assistance. A great place to start looking for more information may be through organizations and support groups that specialize in compulsive shopping and spending disorders. Some examples include Debtors Anonymous [2], and Project Know [3]. It may also be helpful to encourage your mother to speak with a health care provider who may assess her situation and get her the support needed. Lastly, if your mother’s shopping has caused severe credit debt or other financial difficulties, doing research about professional financial counselors who may help her develop a plan for paying back the money she owes, such as the through resources provided by the Federal Trade Commission [4], might prove helpful. You may also want to suggest some self-help strategies, such as getting involved with other activities, limiting shopping only when with others and 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. It's key that she be the one taking the lead in any changes in behavior, and that you ask her consent before providing any advice or feedback.
Your recognition and concern for your mother’s shopping habits is priceless. Best of luck to you, Alice!

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